







## THE MARQUISE OF O— AND OTHER STORIES

HEINRICH VON KLEIST, born in 1777, came of an old Prussian military family but disliked military life and resigned his commission in 1799 to devote himself to studious pursuits. He turned to creative writing after undergoing an intellectual and personal crisis in 1801, and during the next ten years produced some of the most remarkable plays in German literature (notably the comedies *Amphitryon* and *Der zerbrochene Krug*, the tragedy *Penthesilea* and the problem drama *Prinz Friedrich von Homburg*) as well as eight masterly short stories and various minor writings.

Kleist had an unstable and almost schizophrenic personality; he was intensely ambitious yet unsure of his gifts. His works reflect his passionately uncompromising nature and his periodic fits of wild enthusiasm and morose melancholia. Episodes of great lyrical beauty alternate with scenes of the most frenzied brutality, and the highly emotional style predominating in his plays is often replaced in the stories by one of clinical detachment. Kleist committed suicide in 1811.

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HELNRICH VON KLEIST

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# **The Marquise of O— AND OTHER STORIES**

*Translated with an Introduction by*  
DAVID LUKE AND NIGEL REEVES

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# Introduction

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IN the spring of 1799 the 21-year-old Heinrich von Kleist wrote to his half-sister Ulrike that he found it ‘incomprehensible how a human being can live without a plan for his life (*Lebensplan*); the sense of security with which I employ my present time and the calm with which I look to the future make me profoundly aware of just what inestimable happiness my life-plan assures me’. But fear evidently lay behind this confidence, and indeed behind the very notion of a ‘life-plan’, for he continued: ‘Existing without a life-plan, without any firm purpose, constantly wavering between uncertain desires, constantly at variance with my duties, the plaything of chance, a puppet on the strings of fate – such an unworthy situation seems so contemptible to me and would make me so wretched that death would be preferable by far.’ Less than thirteen years later Kleist wrote to Ulrike that there was no remedy for him on earth, and within hours of his completing this letter two shots rang out from beside the Wannsee near Berlin. In a suicide pact for which he had long sought a willing partner Kleist had first shot dead Henriette Vogel, a 31-year-old woman suffering from incurable cancer, and had then blown out his own brains. During those thirteen years Kleist had written plays and stories of a kind quite unprecedented in German literature. The special interest of his best work, its peculiar inner tension, lies in its negative expression of the idea of the Enlightenment at the very point of their collapse as he personally experienced it. A typical intellectual product of the late eighteenth century, Kleist had started from certain unquestioned assumptions: that life can be planned, that its random element can be eliminated, that happiness can be achieved and assured if we go about it the right way, that man is educable and society perfectible, that the world is rationally ordered and that all things in principle can, and in due course will, be completely understood and explained. His creative writings expressed the state of mind that follows upon the loss of every article of this faith. They radically called in question the idealistic humanism which still inspired the mature works of Goethe and Schiller, the representative masterpieces of Weimar Classicism. Among his contemporaries Kleist met with little or no positive response. Goethe took a patronizing interest in him for a time, then snubbed and dropped him, writing him off as a pathological case, quite failing to recognize his genius and evidently sensing in him a threat to his own precariously-won Olympian balance. And yet it is precisely Kleist’s vulnerability and disequilibrium, his desperate challenge to established values and beliefs, that carry him further than Goethe or Schiller across the gap between the eighteenth century and our own age.

Bernd Heinrich Wilhelm von Kleist was born in Frankfurt an der Oder on 18 October 1777, the son of Joachim Friedrich von Kleist, a captain in the Prussian army, and his second wife Juliane Ulrike. The family belongs to the ancient nobility (*Uradel*) and has innumerable ramifications. Heinrich’s father died when he was only eleven, and his mother, though eighteen years younger than her husband, when he was fifteen. He was educated privately in Berlin by a Protestant minister and entered army service shortly before his mother’s death. This was a natural step since the family was, and continued to be, renowned in Prussian military circles. He soon experienced action during the Rhineland campaign against the armies of revolutionary France. But his heart lay elsewhere: he loved music, was a talented



clarinetist, and studied mathematics with enthusiasm. Convinced that the maximization of his personal happiness was not only possible but his duty as a rational man, and that this goal could not be reached under the oppressive and dehumanizing discipline of the Prussian army, he resigned his commission in 1799 and embarked on what was to be a planless, uncertain, unstable life, never achieving a career or even holding a firm post, estranged from all but a very few members of his family, travelling restlessly about a Europe racked by the Napoleonic Wars. For a time he studied physics, mathematics, history and Latin at the University of Frankfurt an der Oder. In 1800, on little more than an impulse, he entered into a 'suitable' conventional engagement with the daughter of the local garrison commandant, Wilhelmine von Zenge, but set off the same year on a journey through Leipzig and Dresden, ending in Würzburg where he underwent some kind of unspecified medical or surgical treatment which would make him, as he enigmatically wrote to her, 'worthy' of his fiancée. (This obscure episode has never been clarified; in any case Kleist later broke off the engagement to Wilhelmine with callous abruptness, and a certain amount of mystery surrounds his sexual life in general.) A further attempt to settle down in state service, this time in a civilian capacity, lasted only a few months. Early in 1801 the conflict between his basic psychological instability and his frenzied longing for security broke out in the form of a crucial intellectual experience. The rationalistic and optimistic beliefs which he had imbibed from Wieland and other fashionable writers reflecting the spirit of the European and German Enlightenment were shattered by his reading of Kant. 'Lately,' he wrote to Wilhelmine in March 1801, 'I became acquainted with the recent so-called Kantian philosophy.' What exactly he had read is not certain, but it was the Kantian epistemological theory that seems above all to have disturbed him. Kant had demarcated the limits of human knowledge not in order to undermine confidence in man's rational faculty or strengthen the case for atheism: on the contrary he had intended to clarify the true foundations for religious belief, to show what was properly beyond empirical exploration and therefore a matter of faith, not of knowledge. But Kant's distinction between the unknowability of things in themselves as *noumena* and our cognitive operations with things as they appear (*phenomena*) seemed to Kleist to make a mockery of the ideal of self-cultivation, of man's progress towards the complete possession of truth. If Kant was right, then appearance and reality, Kleist thought, were for ever confounded, nothing was predictable, there was no ascertainable single right answer or right way; human nature, our own selves, were a riddle, everything that had seemed straightforward became ambiguous and baffling. To Wilhelmine he wrote: '... we cannot determine whether what we call truth really is truth, or merely seems so to us'; and to Ulrike: 'The thought that here on earth we know nothing of the truth, absolutely nothing... has shaken me in the very sanctuary of my soul – my *only* purpose, my *supreme* purpose has collapsed; I have none left.' Yet it was precisely this breakdown of all his hopes, this very personal crisis of intellectual despair, that turned him into a creative writer.

In the years that followed Kleist travelled through Germany, lived for a while in Switzerland where he entertained Rousseauistic ideas of settling down on the land as a simple peasant, and even tried to join the French army in the hope of being killed during Napoleon's planned invasion of England. Meanwhile his first play, *The Schrockenstein Family*, a grotesque tragedy of errors thematically indebted to *Romeo and Juliet*, had appeared anonymously in February 1803, and he had begun work on *The Broken Pitcher*, one of the few really successful

German comedies. In 1803 he also wrote at least part of a grandly conceived second tragedy *Robert Guiscard*, but burned the manuscript in a fit of discouragement. In 1805 a second attempt to join the Prussian civil service failed after a few months of preparatory studies. In January 1807 he was arrested by the French on suspicion of being a spy when trying to enter occupied Berlin without a passport, and spent nearly six months in a French prison. Here he wrote much of one of his finest works, the tragedy *Penthesilea* – stark, strange and ecstatic, breaking utterly with the established classicistic conception of Greek serenity and balance, and recapturing instead the Dionysian savagery of Euripides' *Bacchae* which in part inspired this play. In Kleist's version of the story of the tragic passion of the warrior Amazon queen for Achilles, love is shown to be ambiguously allied with hatred, a relentless elemental drive in which tenderness and the lust to destroy and devour are profoundly fused.

During his imprisonment Kleist's friend Rühle von Liliestern had found a publisher for his comedy or tragi-comedy *Amphitryon*, perhaps the subtlest of all the many dramatic treatments of this ancient tale, partly based on Molière's version but reducing the latter, by comparison to the level of elegant and unimportant farce. Then, upon his return from France, as if from the dead, his first completed short story, *The Earthquake in Chile*, appeared in a periodical under the title of *Jerónimo and Josefa*. In Dresden Kleist now founded a journal of his own in collaboration with the philosopher Adam Müller: they called it *Phoebus* and published in it *The Broken Pitcher*, *The Marquise of O—*, excerpts from *Penthesilea* and part of *Michael Kohlhaas*. But the venture was a financial failure and ended in a bitter quarrel between the two editors. Nor was the performance of *The Broken Pitcher* at the Weimar court theatre, under Goethe's auspices, any more successful: Goethe's production of it was a travesty and precipitated his final breach with Kleist. In 1809 it seemed possible that at least the disastrous political situation would improve and that Austria would be able to stem the tide of Napoleonic conquest. Since the crushing defeat of Prussia at Jena in 1806, Kleist had increasingly turned to fanatical patriotic fervour as a source of literary inspiration and for a sense of purpose in life; he wrote a number of political poems and tracts and notably, in 1808, *The Battle with Hermann (Die Hermannsschlacht)*, a gruesome dramatic celebration of the Teutonic chieftain's victory over the Roman legions in A.D. 9. But in July 1809 Austria was decisively defeated at Wagram; after visiting the scene of part of the campaign Kleist fled to the safety of Prague, where he fell seriously ill. After his recovery he returned to Berlin, and 1810 was perhaps the year of his greatest recognition as a writer during his lifetime. *Kätchen of Heilbronn*, a play designed to gratify the current popular taste for Gothick romance and chivalry, was performed in Vienna, and the first volume of his collected stories appeared, containing *Michael Kohlhaas*, *The Marquise of O—* and *The Earthquake in Chile*. At the same time Kleist became founder-editor of one of Germany's first daily newspapers, the *Berliner Abendblätter*, which began very promisingly in October and in which he published two more of his stories, *The Beggarwoman of Locarno* and *St Cecilia*. These, together with *The Betrothal in Santo Domingo* (which had already been printed in another periodical), *The Foundling* and *The Duel*, then made up the second volume of collected stories which followed in 1811.

But Kleist's relatively good fortune did not last. The initial popularity of the *Abendblätter* had been due much less to his own literary contributions than to articles on current affairs and above all, of course, to the sensational crime reports which during the first weeks were supplied to Kleist by the city chief of police. The government was embarrassed by some of

the political comments and ordered strict censorship of the paper; its sales declined sharply and it closed down in March 1811, leaving Kleist in desperate financial straits. The small unofficial pension he had enjoyed from Queen Luise had ceased with her death, his own private means were long since exhausted, and his applications to rejoin the civil service or the army met, not surprisingly, with a cool reception. His most mature and balanced, yet still deeply enigmatic play, *Prince Friedrich of Homburg*, was completed in September 1811 and dedicated to Princess Amalie Marie Anne, wife of Prince William of Prussia, the King's brother. But this work, though thoroughly patriotic in sentiment, found no favour with the royal family. Kleist's psychological realism, already shockingly manifested in *Penthesilea*, had led him to include in it a scene in which the young hero, unlike any proper hero, Prussian officer or gentleman, collapses into elemental panic at the prospect of his imminent execution and begs for his life at any price, like Claudio in Shakespeare's *Measure for Measure*. This breach of convention was found intolerable and the play was not published until ten years after Kleist's death, which followed soon after. The suicide pact with Henriette Vogel was executed on 22 November 1811, and on 28 December *The Times* carried the following report:

The attention of the people of Berlin has lately been very much occupied by the tragical adventure of M. Kleist, the celebrated Prussian poet, and Madame Vogel. The reports which were at first circulated with regard to the cause of this unfortunate affair, have been strongly contradicted by the family of the lady; and it has been particularly denied that love was in any respect the cause of it. Madame Vogel, it is said, had suffered long under an incurable disorder; her physicians had declared her death inevitable; she herself formed a resolution to put a period to her existence. M. Kleist, the poet, and a friend of her family, had also long determined to kill himself. These two unhappy beings having confidentially communicated to each other their horrible resolution, resolved to carry it into effect at the same time. They repaired to the Inn at Wilhelm-stadt, between Berlin and Potsdam, on the border of the *Sacred Lake* [sic]. For one night and one day they were preparing themselves for death, by putting up prayers, singing, *drinking a number of bottles of wine and rum*, and last of all by taking about sixteen cups of coffee. They wrote a letter to M. Vogel, to announce to him the resolution they had taken, and to beg him to come as speedily as possible, for the purpose of seeing their remains interred. The letter was sent to Berlin by express. This done, they repaired to the banks of the *Sacred Lake*, where they sat down opposite each other. M. Kleist took a loaded pistol, and shot Madame Vogel through the heart, who fell back dead; he then re-loaded the pistol, and shot himself through the head. Soon after M. Vogel arrived, and found them both dead. The public are far from admiring, or even of approving, this act of insanity. An apology for this suicide, by M. Peghuilhen, Counsellor at War, has excited unanimously indignation among all who have the principles either of religion or morality...

The eight canonical stories, those published in the two-volume book edition of 1810–11, vary in length from the two or three pages of *The Beggarwoman of Locarno* to *Michael Kohlhaas*, which has the dimensions of a short novel. Kleist also filled up the pages of the *Berliner Abendblätter* with some miscellaneous anecdotes of lesser importance; in addition there is some reason to believe that he did in fact write a full-length novel (as he states in a letter of July 1811) though this has never come to light. It may have been destroyed by Kleist himself, or suppressed by his family with other revealing personal papers which were

rumoured to be still secretly extant in this century but were finally lost during the Second World War. The present edition of the stories departs slightly from Kleist's own arrangement of them in the book edition, since it aims to approximate to the chronological order of their composition, or partial composition, so far as this is known. As we have noted, most of them first appeared in one or another short-lived periodical, exceptions being *The Foundling* and *The Duel* which were published in the book edition for the first time. The text of *St Cecilia or The Power of Music* in the same volume is an extended and improved version of the original story which had come out earlier. The preliminary fragment of *Michael Kohlhaas*, probably conceived in 1805, and printed in the November 1808 number of *Phoebus*, ran to only a quarter of its final length. Apart from this more complicated case there seems to be no good reason for assigning to any of the stories a date of composition in whole or in part significantly earlier than that of their first publication. On this basis, the first (or first completed) stories were *The Earthquake in Chile* and *The Marquise of O—*. The former was probably written in 1806 or early in 1807, appearing in September of that year in Cotta's *Morgenblatt*; the latter, on which Kleist was probably working during his imprisonment in France, appeared in *Phoebus* in February 1808.

These two stories make an interesting stylistic contrast, although they might both be said to deal with a basically similar theme which is also that of the other stories and of most of the plays. Virtually all his important work reveals Kleist's epistemological obsession, his preoccupation with the tragic or potentially tragic deceptiveness of appearances in the world and in human nature. He constantly presents situations and characters which are disturbingly paradoxical and intractable to rational analysis; they point towards the 'absurdity' of life, as Albert Camus was to call it nearly a century and a half later, and it is therefore not surprising that in his treatment of them he can range between the tragic and the comic modes.

*The Earthquake in Chile*, in some ways the most remarkable of all the stories, is starkly tragic and raises, by implication at least, the deepest theological and existential questions, leaving them of course unanswered. It is constructed with consummate artistry and also serves as a particularly good example of the laconic self-effacement which is Kleist's typical stance as a narrator. In general his method is to abstain from comment on the events he chronicles, and indeed from almost any kind of explicit communication with the reader; where value-judgements occur in the course of the narrative they can usually be seen to be incidental and relative, arising from a kind of momentary dramatic identification with the particular character in an immediate situation, rather than representing the author-narrator's overall viewpoint. Kleist here simply puts before us a sequence of events, based on the historical fact of an earthquake which destroyed Santiago on 13 May 1647; he had some knowledge of the details of this disaster, though it is not clear from what source. But uppermost in his mind must have been the famous earthquake of 1755 which not only shattered Lisbon but severely shook the optimistic theodicy of the Enlightenment. His story about the Chilean earthquake offers no explanation of why it has occurred, or rather it suggests a number of different possible explanations which cancel each other out. We are left with the impression that the author is no better placed to interpret his story to us than the reader or even the characters themselves. This 'deadpan' narrative effect is one of the factors that give Kleist's work a more modern flavour than that of most of his contemporaries, and has led to its being compared with that of Kafka, who, it is known, greatly admired his stories.

Strictly speaking, Kleist does not maintain a wholly neutral attitude in his story of Jerónimo and Josefa but seems to invite our sympathy for the lovers and compassion for their fate. The paradoxes nevertheless remain. A young girl, forced into a convent against her will, cannot renounce her lover, becomes pregnant by him, and eventually collapses in labour pains on the steps of the cathedral during a solemn festival. She is condemned to death for fornication and sacrilege, and an enormous crowd makes elaborate preparations, in a spirit of sanctimonious vindictiveness, to watch her execution. A matter of minutes before what they describe as divine justice can take its course, Josefa's life is spared by the earthquake, which at the same time kills thousands of other innocent people. The earthquake also saves her imprisoned lover Jerónimo only seconds before he is about to hang himself in despair, shattering the walls of his prison and terrifying him into a renewed desire for mere physical survival. It destroys both the just and the unjust, those who like the Abbess have been merciful to the young couple and those who have condemned them. The common disaster brings out in human nature both the best – heroic courage and self-sacrifice, mutual help and compassion, and the worst – the frenzied search for a scapegoat and the religious zeal that serves as a pretext for sickening cruelty. In the central section of the story the lovers are reunited, along with other survivors, in the countryside outside the stricken city, and in this idyllic interlude the eye of the storm as it were, hope temporarily revives – the fabric of corrupt civilization has collapsed and what Rousseau regarded as the natural goodness of mankind has apparently been restored. But in the conclusion, with dreadful irony, Jerónimo and Josefa perish after all: returning to the only church in the city left standing to give thanks to God for their deliverance, they hear their sin denounced from the pulpit and are then recognized and lynched by a fanatical mob, only their child surviving when the wrong baby has been savagely killed instead. If the earthquake has been an 'act of God', then human reason can make very little of God's deeds, unless on the hypothesis that he is an omnipotent and highly sophisticated devil. In two letters written in 1806 Kleist expresses the hope that, contrary to evidence, the world is not governed by an evil spirit, but simply by one who is not understood. At least *The Earthquake in Chile* renders impossible any theodicy to which the concepts of mystery and paradox are not central. The world as experienced here by human beings is theologically ambiguous, as is the world of real life; in this sense the story is radically truthful. It is no accident that it presents the church and the clergy in so unfavourable a light; at this level of questioning, the answers offered by conventional and institutional religion cannot avail.

*The Marquise of O*— operates in a very different literary vein. The mystery with which it deals is domestic and psychological rather than cosmic. In it Kleist refers to what he was fond of calling *die gebrechliche Einrichtung der Welt*, the faulty or imperfect or unstable structure or ordering of the world, the flaw in the scheme of things: but here he modulates this concept in a non-tragic direction. *Gebrechlich* strictly means 'fragile', which the earth's crust in *The Earthquake in Chile* literally is. In the *Marquise of O*—, the phrase *gebrechliche Einrichtung der Welt* occurs at the end, when the world's 'inherent imperfection' is invoked as a reason for the conciliatory conclusion of the story (P. 113); but at another crucial point (P. 93) a significant variant of the idea is offered: the heroine thinks of the 'order of the world' as not only 'inexplicable' (*unerklärlich*) but also 'great and sacred' (*gross und heilig*), and we are told that she 'wholly submits' to it, intellectually at least. She has still to learn the full facts of her

particular situation, and to face her own feelings; when this more personal acceptance is in due course achieved the story reaches its foreseeably happy ending. It would be a mistake to take either the story or its ending too solemnly: as in the case of *Amphitryon*, Kleist's treatment hovers ambiguously between the serious and the comic. The contemporary setting of *The Marquise of O*— and the relative realism of its numerous and extensive dialogues (especially those in direct speech – an untypical feature) are consistent with an at least partly humorous intention; the style is pitched in an altogether lower key than that of most of the other stories. Although it must be conceded that the Marquise has in a certain sense been raped and that rape is not an unserious matter, it is worth noting that at no point is she threatened with anything more grave than a certain amount of social scandal and at worst a breach with her aristocratic family, of whom she is in any case financially independent. The basic idea – and here again *Amphitryon* is a parallel – has a long, ribald ancestry. Like that of rape by impersonation (Jupiter–Amphitryon–Alcmene) the theme of a woman made pregnant without her knowledge (while asleep or drunk or in a swoon) has wide currency in world literature and occurs for example in the following anecdote from Montaigne's essay *Of Drunkenness* (here quoted in Florio's translation):

A widdow Country-woman, reputed very chaste and honest, suspecting herself to be with childe, told her neighbours, that had she a husband, she should verily thinke she were with childe. But the occasion of this suspition encreasing more and more, and perceiving herselfe so big-bellied, that she could no longer conceale it, she resolved to make the Parish-priest acquainted with it, whom she entreated to publish in the Church, that whosoever hee were, that was guilty of the fact, and would avow it, she would freely forgive him, and if he were so pleased, take him to her husband. A certaine swaine or hyne-boy of hers, emboldned by this proclamation, declared, how that having one holliday found her well-tipped with wine, and so sound asleep by the chimnie side, lying so fit, and ready for him, that without awaking her he had the full use of her body. Whom she accepted for her husband, and both live together at this day.

Kleist may well have read this pleasing little tale in France where he probably wrote *The Marquise of O*—; he himself claimed (in a note appended to the table of contents in the periodical where it first appeared) that his story was founded on fact, on events which he had fictionally transposed 'from the north to the south', i.e. to Italy, presumably from Germany. What matters, however, is that Kleist as narrator of course knows from the outset who is responsible for this virtuous young widow's condition *intéressante*, and that from an early point in the story he allows the reader to share this knowledge. Like several of his works (*The Duel* among the stories and *The Broken Pitcher* and *Amphitryon* among the plays), *The Marquise of O*— has something of the character of a detective-story, a 'who-dunnit', thus betokening yet again his preoccupation with the problem of truth. All these four works revolve entirely around the seeming misconduct of a virtuous young woman. *The Broken Pitcher* is scarcely more than a straightforward farce in which the accidental breaking of a valuable ornamental jug is ingeniously made to symbolize the suspected loss of a simple young girl's virginity, and the fat rogue of a village judge is involved in the ludicrous situation of trying a case in which he knows he is himself the culprit. *Amphitryon* ends satisfactorily with the vindication of the heroine's moral if not technical innocence (of which



the audience is of course aware all along) and her husband's acquiescence in the prospect of becoming the putative father of Hercules as his reward for having unwittingly conceded the *jus primae noctis* to Jupiter; but Kleist also emphasizes Alcmene's confusion and anguish and subtly exploits the theme's serious potential. His procedure in *The Marquise of O—* is essentially similar. What has happened? During the storming by Russian forces of a citadel commanded by the heroine's father, she has fallen into the hands of some ruffianly enemy troops who attempt to rape her; she is rescued from them by the young Russian officer Count F—, but he himself, in the heat of battle, yields to the sudden temptation offered by her fainting-fit. Kleist at first withholds this last fact from the reader by teasingly inserting a *das* into the middle of a sentence, but we are almost at once supplied with two clues to it: the Count's unexplained embarrassment when asked to identify the would-be perpetrators of the outrage, and secondly his cry, as he falls apparently mortally wounded in another battle, of 'Giulietta, this bullet avenges you' – using what we are told is the Marquise's first name. The narrative presently refers to her unaccountable symptoms of early pregnancy, and then immediately to F—'s extraordinary first visit to her family's house, when with inexplicable insistence he urged her to marry him at once: inexplicable, that is, to the Marquise and her relatives, but the reader by now at the latest shares the Count's and the narrator's knowledge of the true facts. If the slowness of everyone else to grasp them, and the extraordinary consternation and fuss that follow their eventual disclosure, seem excessive to the present-day reader, he must bear in mind the standards and prejudices of North German aristocratic families such as Kleist's own – the code by which what this gentleman has done to this lady is not only unspeakable but literally unthinkable. What is not wholly clear is whether, and if so to what extent, Kleist consciously intended to put the melodramatic behaviour of Giulietta and her family in an ironic, parodistic light. If he did not, then the story does not really come off as a work of art; if he did, then it has a subtlety comparable with that of *Amphitryon*. In either case, however, it is a text of considerable psychological interest. One curious feature is Kleist's depiction of the extreme rage of the father at his daughter's supposed fall from virtue and the more or less explicitly incestuous element in the scene of their reconciliation. The motif of a father's jealous and protective love for his daughter and her passionate devotion to him, brought into currency by Rousseau's *La Nouvelle Héloïse*, was in Kleist's time a literary topos in German drama (cf. Lessing's *Emilia Galotti*, Lenz's *The Soldiers*, H. L. Wagner's *The Infanticide*, Schiller's *Luise Miller*; post-Kleistian parallels are Hebbel's *Maria Magdalena* and Hauptmann's *Rosa Berndt*). In *The Marquise of O—* Kleist accentuates this commonplace theme, parodistically perhaps, to a point verging on the grotesque. Then there is Giulietta's dramatic polarization of her lover or assailant into 'angel' and 'devil'; this too might be dismissed as a literary cliché, but it seems to be something more. Giulietta's whole relationship to the Count is an enigma to her, which she can only gradually resolve. The Count himself is enigmatic, with a dark and irrational streak in his nature. He rescues Giulietta from his troops, only to use her himself a moment later as a prize of war – we are reminded of the paradoxical association of love and violence in *Penthesilea*. Above all, Count F— carries with him, as we learn in what is certainly the oddest passage in the story (p. 82), a memory of having once as a child, on a perverse impulse, hurled mud at a beautiful white swan, an act of 'defilement' which he unconsciously identifies with his violation of the chastity of Giulietta. Emotionally disturbed as he was, Kleist clearly had some strangely modern insight

into erotic psychology; in the final scene of *Penthesilea* he had even unwittingly anticipated, by a certain choice of metaphor, Freud's theory that slips of the tongue can express repudiated unconscious drives. Needless to say, *The Marquise of O*— was no less incomprehensible than *Penthesilea* to his contemporaries, who found both works deeply shocking and offensive to good taste, or at best ludicrous.

*Michael Kohlhaas* is not only by far the longest story in the collection but also probably the best known or at least the most discussed. As already mentioned, about one quarter of it was first published in November 1808 in *Phoebus*; it is not clear when that fragment was written. The story in its general outline was founded on fact: Kleist's chief source seems to have been an excerpt from an earlier chronicle published in 1731 which tells how in the middle of the sixteenth century a horse-dealer named Hans (not Michael) Kohlhaas from Kohlhaasenbrück, a village near Berlin and just on the Brandenburg side of the frontier with Saxony, had two of his horses wrongfully detained and ill-treated while travelling to Dresden; how his legal action for damages failed owing to corrupt intervention; how he then took the law into his own hands, hired an armed band and, bent on vengeance, pursued the Junker von Tronka, burning down his castle and also part of Wittenberg; and how this private war grew in scale despite an attempt by Martin Luther to reason with Kohlhaas and persuade him to desist. The chronicle also mentions *inter alia* the political complications, the involvement of the Elector of Brandenburg and the eventual execution of Kohlhaas in Berlin on the Monday after Palm Sunday. The main events of the *Phoebus* fragment may be summarized as follows: Michael Kohlhaas is a prosperous and honourable man with a strongly developed sense of justice and fair dealing. It is this very passion for justice that will turn him (Kleist states the characteristic central paradox in his first paragraph) 'into a robber and a murderer', and make him 'one of the most honourable as well as one of the most terrible men of his age'. Kleist keeps to the outline of his source, but makes Kohlhaas's grievance the more poignant by having his wife, Lisbeth, die from an injury sustained when she is warded off by a bodyguard as she vainly tries to present to the Elector personally her husband's petition, hitherto suppressed by corrupt courtiers. Lisbeth's intervention is Kohlhaas's last step within the bounds of legality; he has already mortgaged his property to raise money for his resort to violence. Immediately after he has buried his wife, he assembles the first of his followers and rides off to attack Tronka Castle. The *Phoebus* fragment of 1808 breaks off at this point (page [138](#) of our text). The remainder was not written, or at least not finished, until the summer of 1810. In these further seventy-five pages Kleist greatly complicates the material. If he had followed the story's natural line of development and adhered more closely to his main source, he would have narrated only the following events: Kohlhaas and his men storm Tronka Castle and destroy it, but the Junker Wenzel himself manages to escape to Wittenberg. Kohlhaas now begins to issue proclamations of an increasingly paranoid character, declaring himself to be the representative of the Archangel Michael and to have formed a new 'world government', calling upon all good Christians to support his just cause against Tronka, and demanding that the latter be handed over to him for chastisement. The pay he offers, together with the prospect of further gain from plunder, naturally attracts an increasing number of followers. He sets fire to Wittenberg three times, defeating or evading the ever more formidable military expeditions sent against him, and also attacks Leipzig, which he thinks the Junker has been taken, although he is in fact still in Wittenberg under



heavy guard. At this point Luther intervenes with a public proclamation addressed to Kohlhaas, condemning his course of action. The horse-dealer, who deeply reveres Luther, returns secretly to Wittenberg and presents himself to the theologian. Society, he argues, has set him outside the law by refusing him the law's protection; he is therefore justified and compelled to use force. His quarrel with the Junker has already cost him his wife and it is too late to stop now. Luther, as his spiritual father, urges him (as his dying wife had done) to forgive his enemy, and when Kohlhaas remains obdurate on this point, refuses him absolution. He consents, however, to negotiate on his behalf with the Elector of Saxony who, it appears, has improperly been kept in ignorance of Kohlhaas's justified legal claims. When Kohlhaas has left, Luther writes to the Elector, pointing out that the horse-dealer has in fact been wronged and virtually outlawed, and that in view of the increasingly strong public feeling on his side there is danger of a general revolt. He advises the Elector not to treat him as a rebel but to allow his case to be reopened in Dresden, granting him for this purpose safe-conduct to the Saxon capital and an amnesty in respect of his deeds of violence. The Elector discusses this now extremely embarrassing situation with his advisers, who include Wenzel von Tronka's cousins, Hinz and Kunz, both high officials at the court, and eventually decides to issue a proclamation to Kohlhaas in the sense advised by Luther. On reading it Kohlhaas disbands all his men in accordance with the Elector's stipulation, proceeds to Dresden and reopens his case against Junker Wenzel, applying to the court as before for his punishment, for damages and for restitution of all losses, including restoration of the horses to their former healthy condition. The Junker is released from Wittenberg and received in Dresden by his cousins, who are furious with him for making their family a laughing-stock. To make matters worse, it turns out after some investigation that the two horses are still alive but in so neglected a state that they have already been handed over to a knacker, who is ordered to bring them to Dresden. Hearing that the emaciated animals are on public display in the market square, Wenzel and Kunz von Tronka hasten to the scene; Kohlhaas is summoned to identify the horses as his, but the Tronka servants refuse to touch creatures in such a disgraceful condition and a riot breaks out. This grotesque incident turns public sentiment against the horse-dealer, and he is now willing to settle out of court for a simple payment of compensation. But chance, or rather the natural entropy of events in a corrupt human world, again operates against him, for a number of his officially dispersed followers led by a certain brutal and unscrupulous Johann Nagelschmidt (who is mentioned in Kleist's source) have started to plunder the countryside under cover of Kohlhaas's name and cause. Kohlhaas at once publicly dissociates himself from Nagelschmidt, but the Tronka family see their advantage: the amnesty is in danger of collapsing, time is on their side, and they begin to prolong the case by vexatious special pleadings. Kohlhaas notices that the number of lansquenets set to guard his house have increased and realizes that he has in effect been made a prisoner. To test this – for it is clear by now that he is obsessed by a desire to unmask official hypocrisy and politic dissimulation – he attempts to leave on a social visit but is prevented by a series of transparent pretexts. Nagelschmidt now writes to him suggesting that he should resume command of the band, and offering to engineer his escape. Unknown to Kohlhaas, this letter has been intercepted and read by the authorities. Since he now despairs of the amnesty and the whole affair, and intends to abandon his claims and emigrate, he writes back accepting Nagelschmidt's offer and thus falls into the trap which the Tronka party

have persuaded the Elector to lay for him. His letter to Nagelschmidt is published in order to discredit him, he is put on trial for conspiracy, makes no defence and is condemned to death by burning and quartering. He has, however, a friend at the Electoral court in Berlin, who has now at last succeeded in bringing the whole inside story of the affair to the notice of the Elector of Brandenburg. The latter intervenes; he dismisses the corrupt official who, as a relative of the Tronka family, had prevented Kohlhaas's previous submissions from reaching him, and motivated partly by a desire to show his political strength as a potential ally of Poland, which is threatening Saxony with war, he makes the following demands: Kohlhaas, a Brandenburg citizen, is to be transferred immediately to Berlin, where a Saxon attorney may present the case against him for his acts of violence in Saxony on which he will be tried according to Brandenburg law; and a Brandenburg attorney is to be allowed to come to Dresden to ensure that the Saxon court deals properly with Kohlhaas's own case against Wenzel von Tronka. The Saxon Elector reluctantly agrees to the extradition of the horse-dealer but decides to appeal to the Holy Roman Emperor, who is not bound by any Saxon amnesty whether broken or unbroken; the Emperor is petitioned to send a representative to Berlin who will prosecute Kohlhaas for breach of the Imperial peace. All this is done, and the Berlin court duly pronounces sentence of death by beheading on Kohlhaas. He accepts this with equanimity on hearing that his claims against Tronka are also to be met in full. At the place of execution he finds the Elector of Brandenburg waiting, together with the Imperial prosecutor and other officials; his two fine black horses, the mistreatment of which set the whole terrible train of events in motion and which run through the tale as a sort of *leitmotif*, are presented to him fully restored to health; the Junker, he is informed, has been sentenced in Dresden to two years' imprisonment. He declares himself fully satisfied and ready in his turn to make reparation to the Emperor for having taken the law into his own hands. Thereupon he is beheaded; both sides have made their point.

This, at least, is the story as Kleist might have completed it: the story of an individual grievance developing, with fascinating and dreadful realism, through ever-increasing complexities until it becomes a major affair of state and is then brought to a paradoxical but impressively logical resolution. It is thought that the Kohlhaas chronicle was originally suggested to Kleist as the theme for a drama; it has obvious theatrical potential, and this was in fact well exploited recently by James Saunders in his brilliant stage adaptation of the story under the title *Hans Kohlhaas*, which was produced at the Questors Theatre in London in 1971 and also broadcast as a radio play (it has also been produced in Germany). Mr Saunders uses the sequence of events outlined above, with no essential alteration, merely filling out some of the details and accommodating the present-day taste for Brechtian distancing effects. The result had great force and unity. Unfortunately, however, Kleist was not content to finish *Michael Kohlhaas* on those lines, but introduced a bizarre and fantastic sub-plot which seriously damages the artistic structure of an already long and complex narrative. This added material, which Mr Saunders wisely omitted, contains the episode of the gypsy-woman and her mysterious prophecy about the fate of the ruling dynasty of Saxony, which she writes on a piece of paper and gives to Kohlhaas as a kind of talisman which he can use to bargain for his life with the Saxon Elector. The latter learns at the time of the horse-dealer's extradition to Brandenburg that it is he who is in possession of this fateful secret, and desperately tries every means to have him rescued or pardoned or somehow to retrieve from him the piece of

paper which Kohlhaas carries with him everywhere; but Kohlhaas goes to his death rather than surrender it. The Elector, as he sees it, has cheated him by solemnly promising him amnesty and then violating it in connection with the Nagelschmidt affair. Warned by the gypsy-woman, who also turns out inexplicably to be a kind of *Doppelgängerin* of his dead wife, that the Elector intends to recover the paper from his body after his execution and that for this purpose he will be standing incognito beside the scaffold, he removes it from around his neck just before putting his head on the block, tantalizingly reads it to himself in full view of the man whom he knows to be the Saxon Elector, and then swallows it so that it is lost forever.

There are several artistic objections to this digressive subplot. For one thing, Kohlhaas's final action destroys the sense of reconciliation at the close. Despite having at last, on Luther's authority, received absolution and taken the sacrament, he dies gratifying a thirst for revenge, like Piachi in *The Foundling*. Moreover, the fact that the old gypsy-woman has furnished him with this last and only weapon of vengeance against the Elector, and general, added fuel to his vindictiveness, makes nonsense of the supposed identification of her with his deceased wife who had died begging him to forgive his enemies. It might be argued that Kleist intends all along to stress the obsessive, irrational element in Kohlhaas's nature and to suggest, especially in the final scene, a psychologically realistic obscurity in the distinction between justice and vengeance – an illustration in advance, as it were, of the truth of Nietzsche's punning aphorism to the effect that *ich bin gerecht* (I am just) really means *ich bin gerächt* (I am avenged). On the other hand it seems that Kleist was certainly motivated by an artistically extraneous desire to discredit Saxony. As we have seen, he had at about the time of completing *Michael Kohlhaas* become a fervent spokesman of the patriotic campaign of hatred against Napoleon. A few years earlier Saxony had joined the Confederation of the Rhine, the group of German states allied to France and enjoying Napoleonic protection; this had been in 1806, not long after the disastrous defeat of Prussia at Jena. Accordingly, in *The Battle with Hermann*, the King (as he now was) of Saxony had under a transparent allegoric disguise been represented as a traitor to the German cause. In 1810, filled with hopes of Prussian resurgence, Kleist found it appropriate to invent in *Michael Kohlhaas* the notion of a prophecy foretelling the fall of Saxony and the future prosperity of Brandenburg-Prussia; he could thus underline the latter's historic mission and greatness, which he was to celebrate again in *Prince Friedrich of Homburg*.

His reasons for adding the gypsy episode may also have included a literary intention, misguided in this case, of deliberately creating mystery. *Michael Kohlhaas* has the dramatic urgency of the best of Kleist's other stories, but none of their economy of means. Its ever increasing and ever more confusing complications suggest that the narrator wishes to lose both himself and the reader in an impenetrable world, in a maze of detail and coincidence. The mystifying affair of the old woman was to have been, perhaps, the culmination of this process, raising it to a supernatural level. Not only the Holy Roman Emperor, but God himself, or Fate, is brought into play. Whereas, for example, *The Earthquake in Chile* implicitly raises theological questions and, as will be seen, certain other stories (*The Beggarwoman of Locarno*, *St Cecilia*, *The Foundling*) introduce or suggest a dimension of the more-than-natural, they all do so with great subtlety and tact. In *Michael Kohlhaas* the 'real' and the 'fantastic' are not compellingly fused but clumsily mixed. Close inspection of the episode of the gypsy

prophecy shows it to have been cobbled on to the rest of the text with considerable carelessness. As already mentioned, the *Phoebus* fragment stops precisely at the point where Kohlhaas, after his wife's funeral, rides off to attack Tronka Castle. In the book version he accidentally meets the Elector of Saxony while he is being escorted to Berlin and, not recognizing him, tells how he acquired the mysterious piece of paper kept in a lead lock which he has worn round his neck ever since. It was, he says, on the very day after his wife had been buried, and while he was on his way with armed followers to Tronka Castle, that he encountered simultaneously the Electors of Saxony and of Brandenburg, who were conferring in Jüterbock. He goes on to relate how, in the evening, the two princes had mingled with the crowd in friendly conversation, and how he, having paused at an inn with his men, stood idly watching them speak to the old gypsy-woman, in an incident roughly following the pattern of the meeting of Macbeth and Banquo with the three witches. Brandenburg frivolously asks the woman to make a prophecy about himself and receives an auspicious answer; Saxony does the same but the woman, instead of replying, writes her answer on a piece of paper and hands it to Kohlhaas. All this happens in public, in circumstances in which the horse-dealer although not near enough to the two Electors to hear their conversation with the gypsy obviously has easy access to them, and they are after all the ultimate judges in his dispute with the Tronka family. He gives in his account, however, no explanation of why he did not at least attempt to petition them for justice, nor does he even mention that it occurred to him to do so. It seems that he merely stood looking on, even exchanging a genial remark with the gypsy-woman when she approached him, as if the death of his wife and the events leading up to it had never happened. Thus the sub-plot, at its point of juncture with the main line of the Kohlhaas story, involves a gross improbability of behaviour on the part of Kohlhaas himself. This reinforces the reader's impression that the whole thing is an artistically unfortunate afterthought; a further explanation may be that Kleist wanted to appeal to the popular taste at this peak period of German Romanticism, for folkloristic, fairytale-like material. He had done the same thing in *Kätchen of Heilbronn* which for that very reason, although arguably the weakest of his plays, was the only one to be produced with some degree of success in his lifetime. But Kleist was 'romantic' and irrationalistic in too profound a sense to have needed to make such concessions to literary convention.

If the weighty realism of *Michael Kohlhaas* is stylistically and structurally marred by an ill-considered excursion into the region of the fantastic and the uncanny, this is not to say that in certain other works he did not cross or approach its frontier with greater success. *The Beggarwoman of Locarno* is a case in point. We may note in this connection the peculiar nature of convincingly uncanny or eerie effects in literature. They are borderline effects, depending for their force on what is not said rather than what is said, on suggestion, insinuation and reserve rather than on whimsical elaboration. They require realism and rationality as the background and starting-point, precisely because they consist in the confounding of reason. But reason and realism must be there to be confounded. This point was made by Freud in one of his most interesting papers, *The Uncanny* (Das Unheimliche, 1919). Using as his chief example a story (*The Sandman*) by Kleist's near-contemporary E.T.A. Hoffmann, he attempted to interpret psychologically that type of experience or situation which we commonly describe as 'uncanny' and the literary effect that corresponds to it. Essentially, as he shows, an uncanny phenomenon is something quite 'impossible' which intrudes into the 'real' world of

common sense: the recrudescence (or apparent recrudescence) of a primitive magical world which the adult rational consciousness has taught itself to repudiate. It is in this sense impossible, for instance, that the dead should still be alive, that one and the same person or thing should simultaneously be in two different places or should both exist and not exist. Thus, the strictly uncanny effect cannot be achieved in a work of literature which is wholly fantastic, such as a straightforward fairy-story; there must be a realistic background or frame of reference, the norms of which are at one point inexplicably breached by the re-emergence into it of the impossible, repudiated world. It follows that the ghost-story is the uncanny story *par excellence*. *The Beggarwoman of Locarno* is a ghost-story, a miniature masterpiece of the uncanny genre, wholly succeeding in the area in which *Michael Kohlhaas* has failed, and surpassing anything that had been or was to be achieved by Hoffmann or any of the other writers commonly classified as Romantics, not excepting *The Sandman*, which is itself an outstanding exception. If *Michael Kohlhaas* achieves dramatic effect by sheer cumulative power and urgent flow, *The Beggarwoman of Locarno* does so by brilliant concentration and organization. In one of his most penetrating essays in literary analysis, Emil Staiger has shown that this brief story is an integrated microcosm of interacting functional parts, an intellectual whole exactly similar in principle to one of Kleist's long complex sentences with its multiplicity of subordinated, functionally interrelated elements. As at the level of grammatical structure, so at that of narrative composition, the organizing mind of the dramatist is reflected: what goes before prepares what is to come, what comes recalls what has gone before. Unobtrusively, without recourse to any conventional devices of atmospheric description, tension and suspense are generated, an explosive climax carefully prepared. Details are included for the significance they later take on: at the beginning of the story, for example, when the Marquis roughly tells the old beggarwoman to spare him the sight of her by crossing the room to lie down again behind the stove, the direction in which she is to move across the room is mentioned, implying apparently no more than an irritable gesture of the Marquis's hand; and this, as we later discover, is the very direction in which her ghost will move, night after night, from one corner of the room to the other. But not only the mind of the dramatist is betokened by this story – it is also the Kleistian mind which incessantly seeks, like Kohlhaas, to impose a rational pattern on a world which in reality moves by a different dynamic. In this particular case the eeriness is increased by the fact that the Marquis, when he becomes aware of the haunting, nevertheless does not seem to remember the comparatively trivial incident of his inhospitable behaviour to the old woman who is now avenging herself so strangely. He does not identify the audible but invisible ghost, and his rational intellect, despite mounting evidence, refuses to acknowledge its incomprehensible reality. The climax comes when, at his third and final attempt to establish the truth, he is accompanied by his dog, a creature whose perceptions are not limited by human rational consciousness. As Staiger points out, Kleist highlights this dramatic turning-point by dropping the hypotactic sentence-structure and also by moving into the historic-present tense (this stylistic device cannot be satisfactorily reproduced in English). The dog, as soon as it hears the ghost, also sees it, and backs away from it in obvious terror, across the room, towards the corner in which the woman had died. The Marquis, though panic-stricken, still remains uncomprehending, but his reason gives way and he destroys both the house and himself. He follows the remorseless logic of an obsession, falling victim to a world which in a

unaccountable way refuses to forget what his subconscious mind refuses to remember. On the analysis there seems to be not only a particular subtlety in Kleist's art, but also an especially close correlation between his art and his self-destructive psychological make-up.

In *St Cecilia*, as in *The Beggarwoman of Locarno*, his management of the 'uncanny' element is again very much more skilful than in *Michael Kohlhaas*. The irruption of the inexplicable into an otherwise explicable world is here again very far from seeming to be a mere whimsical and stylistically alien digression: instead, it is once more the precise centre and appalling *pointe* of the whole tale. *St Cecilia or The Power of Music* (to give it its full title) is described by the author as 'a legend': it tells of a miracle supposedly performed by St Cecilia, the patron saint of music and also of a Catholic convent which existed (in the story, though apparently not in historical fact) in Aachen in the sixteenth century. The convent is threatened with destruction by a mob of Protestant iconoclasts; the riot is planned to start during the solemn Mass on the day of Corpus Christi, and the ringleaders are four brothers who with numerous followers have mingled with the congregation at the service which the Abbess, despite knowledge of the danger, insists on holding. An ancient and impressive setting of the Mass by an unknown Italian composer is performed in circumstances which turn out later to have been very mysterious. The performance unexpectedly strikes the four brothers into a state of strange religious madness: they begin fervently crossing and prostrating themselves, their companions are dumbfounded and the riot does not take place. The condition and behaviour of the young men compel the civil authorities to consign them to the lunatic asylum in Aachen where they remain for the rest of their lives; they spend their days gazing with rapt attention at a crucifix and never uttering a word. But at midnight they start to their feet and for one hour precisely they chant 'in a hideous voice' something that resembles the setting they have heard of the *Gloria in excelsis* from the Mass. The performance is, however, less like singing than like the howling of wild animals or of damned souls in hell; the impression of those who witness it is that the brothers are diabolically possessed, and Kleist's depiction certainly hints that they have been reduced to a state of automatism, when they rise 'with a simultaneous movement' as midnight strikes. Kleist seems, moreover, to be quite well aware that the condition of the four young men could be regarded merely as a psychological phenomenon and that religious madness of one sort or another is a clinically attested fact. He is known to have been interested in psychopathology and to have visited madhouses to look at their inmates. It is highly probable that in his conception of this particular story he had been influenced by an account written by the poet Matthias Claudius of four patients at an institution in Hamburg: these were, Claudius reports, four brothers who spent most of their time in silence, except that whenever the bell was tolled to signify that someone in the asylum had died, they would sing part of a dirge and had thus come to be known as the 'death cocks' (*Totenhähne*). Since this account resembles the *St Cecilia* story in several particulars there can be little doubt that Kleist was acquainted with it and in general with the fact that compulsive singing is a feature of the religious madness syndrome, evidently related to glossolalia or echolalia. But he also appears to have known that such 'singing' can in some cases be weird, cacophonous and terrifying. The report by Claudius was doubtless a source for his story, but an even more curious and striking parallel case occurred in England at the end of January 1973 and was widely reported in the press. The following extracts are from the *Daily Telegraph* of 2 February 1973:

Two young men and a woman, members of an American-based religious cult which encourages its followers to put themselves into a hypnotic trance, were in the psychiatric unit of Great Yarmouth hospital last night.

They were taken from a house in Stafford Road after neighbours, frightened by continuous wailing and chanting for three days, called in police and local church leaders...

The Rev. Stanley Miller... identified the chanting as a perverted form of glossolalia – term for ‘speaking in tongues’, the mind having no control of what is said... It was the continuous chanting of one phrase, ‘Baby Jesus’, which frightened neighbours in the terrace.

Mr Miller added that when he saw the two women and three men in the house on Wednesday night they were in such an advanced state of trance as to be possessed by the devil. ‘Their eyes were closed and what they were doing was manifestly evil. The chanting was spine-chilling’...

*The Times* reported a neighbour as saying: ‘The chanting was something I never want to hear again. It was spine-chilling and could be heard fifty yards from the house.’ Similarly, the chanting of the four brothers in Kleist’s tale, when they begin it after their return from the church, wakes the neighbours who rush to the inn in horror to see what is going on.

In *St Cecilia* Kleist is taking us two ways into the realm of the uncanny: first there is the phenomenon of the madness itself, the psychotic manifestation in which, as Freud would say, the repudiated or repressed material re-emerges or returns to the supposedly rational surface of life. But secondly – and this appears to be the point that Kleist particularly wanted to emphasize – this sudden and seemingly pathological conversion of four anti-Catholic militiamen takes place in circumstances that cannot be wholly accounted for without supposing some sort of supernatural intervention. Only one of the nuns in the convent knows how to play and conduct the mysterious Italian Mass which, on the Abbess’s instructions, is to be performed. This particular nun, Sister Antonia, is on the morning of the festival lying mortally sick in her cell; nevertheless, she appears at the last moment, seats herself at the organ and conducts the music with triumphant and devastating effect. But witnesses later testify that Sister Antonia had never left her cell or even regained consciousness, dying the same evening. The conclusion seems to be that St Cecilia herself has impersonated Sister Antonia in order to save her convent and punish the ‘blasphemers’.

In the elaborated extension of the story for the book version, Kleist arranges the events in a manner that seems specifically designed to highlight the mysterious central occurrence, namely the direct intervention of the saint. The final version begins with two paragraphs of narration which take the reader only as far as the moment during the Corpus Christi Mass when, contrary to expectation, the sacred music proceeds without interruption. This narrative then breaks off, ending merely with a reference to the convent’s further half-century of prosperity until its secularization at the end of the Thirty Years War. The third paragraph takes up the tale six years after that Corpus Christi Day, introducing a new character who is not mentioned in the original version, and whose introduction increases the story’s dramatic poignancy: the mother of the four young men, having heard no news of them for all these years, comes to Aachen to make inquiries and to her horror discovers them in the madhouse, oblivious to everything but their strange monotonous life of religious contemplation and

repetitive cacophonous chanting. She is told nothing about the connection between the madness and the intended iconoclastic riot, which has long been forgotten by most of Aachen. This omission of the explanatory connection creates a dramatic suspense which in the long fourth paragraph Kleist proceeds to resolve, using the device of retrospective ('flashback') narration. The mother visits a further new character, the cloth-merchant Veit Gotthelf, former friend of the brothers, and his account takes us back to the point at which the second paragraph ended. During the Mass on Corpus Christi Day six years before, he and the other would-be iconoclasts had been awaiting the signal to disrupt the service, which one of the brothers was to have given. But no signal was given: instead, the brothers had suddenly bowed their heads as the music began and sunk to their knees in an attitude of the utmost devotion. After the service their followers had dispersed in bewilderment; later, having vainly waited for the brothers, Veit Gotthelf and some friends went back to the convent church and there found them still kneeling in prayer. Then follows the vivid description of their strange and terrifying behaviour at the inn that night and their eventual consignment to the asylum. But Veit Gotthelf's narrative still leaves one link missing: what is the explanation of the immediate and astonishing effect of the liturgical music on the four young disbelievers? The process of detection is not yet complete, Kleist's story is still circling around its own central mystery, namely the apparent celestial intervention. The disclosure of this is reserved deliberately until the penultimate fifth paragraph, in which the mother hears a second flashback account from the Abbess herself. This tells of the inexplicable double location of Sister Antonia, and of the official recognition of the whole occurrence as a miracle; the Abbess states in conclusion that she has only just received a letter from the Pope confirming this recognition. Having stopped just short of the central point three times we thus finally reach it and Kleist adds: 'here this legend ends'. The double title *St Cecilia or The Power of Music* seems deliberately to leave open the question of whether the sudden conversion of the brothers is to be explained in terms of supernatural intervention or merely of psychopathology; the final narrative of the Abbess, with its evidence of Sister Antonia's incapacitation, seems to decide in favour of the former hypothesis; on the other hand, by the designation 'legend', the narrator seems to disclaim responsibility for the truth of what the Abbess states. Thus an ambiguous balance is achieved. Again, the 'miracle' is described with characteristic paradox as 'both terrible and glorious' – as in *The Earthquake in Chile*, the divine action has a double aspect. The wrath of God or of St Cecilia smites the brothers into a state in some ways resembling demonic possession, though in other ways it is a state of contentment, and we are told that they eventually die a peaceful death after once more howling the *Gloria in excelsis*.

One other detail seems relevant in this context. Ever since the day on which it saved the convent, the score of the anonymous Italian setting of the Mass has been kept in the Abbess's room. The mother of the four converts looks at it when she is there, and is told that this was the music performed on the fateful morning; she then notices with a feeling of dread that it happens to be standing open at the *Gloria*. The sentence describing her reaction suggests an association between music, cryptography, magic spells and 'terrible spirits': 'She gazed at the unknown magical signs, with which some terrible spirit seemed to be marking out its mysterious sphere...' The theme of the sinister and fatal fascination of music was one that also attracted E. T. A. Hoffmann, and it was to be given its fullest elaboration by another of



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