

The fragment in the Sturm und Drang: Goethe, Coleridge and Herder

Coleridge's 'Kubla Khan' is often regarded as the classic example of a Romantic fragment in English literature. The prefatory note he attached to the poem when it was first published in 1816, nearly twenty years after the supposed event took place, tells a story about the partial composition of the poem under the influence of an 'anodyne', which was interrupted by the notorious 'person on business from Porlock'.¹ The poem which follows is thus presented to the reader as a fragment and its fragmentariness is part of the meaning the reader is offered. This meaning is independent of the conclusions we draw from the subsequent debate over whether or not the story told in the prefatory note is an authentic account of an event that actually took place. Although the poem may have begun its life as an accidental fragment the form in which it was first published attaches it to a European Romantic tradition which saw the fragment – the awkwardly termed 'planned fragment'² – as a uniquely adequate aesthetic response to the transcendental. The 'person on business from Porlock' who interrupts the poetic vision is used to represent the banal, utilitarian world to which the vision of Kubla Khan's world is an antithesis and which this vision aspires to transcend, while the 'anodyne' provides the mysterious link between human suffering ('a slight disposition') and the flights of imagination on which the poet can be borne.³

A myriad of possible sources have been proposed for almost every phrase in the poem, beginning with Purchas, who is mentioned by Coleridge himself, but there has been relatively little discussion of what one might call the orchestration of the poem's fragmentariness. There is however one piece of particular relevance that appears not to have figured in the extensive source-searching around 'Kubla Khan', and that is Goethe's 'Dritte Wallfahrt nach Erwins Grabe im Juli 1775' ('Third Pilgrimage to Erwin's Grave in July 1775'),⁴ which was published some forty years earlier and also depicts the interruption of a poetic reverie. It consists for the most part of a prose poem written in the first-person, taking the form of a

¹ *Collected Works*, ed. Kathleen Coburn, Bollingen 75 (Routledge, Princeton UP: London, Princeton, 1969-) vol. 16, 1.1, p. 512.

² Awkward because the term begs all sorts of questions about intentionality.

³ K. M. Wheeler gives a particularly sophisticated account of the roles or personae that are here brought into play: *The Creative Mind in Coleridge's Poetry* (Heinemann: London, 1981), pp. 17-41.

⁴ Johann Wolfgang Goethe, *Der junge Goethe in seiner Zeit*, ed. Karl Eibl et al. (Insel: Frankfurt, Leipzig, 1998), vol. 2, pp. 454-56, from which subsequent quotations are taken. A rough translation appears at the end of this essay.

sequence of secular prayers which begin with a eulogy of Strasbourg Cathedral (itself incomplete, a fragment, and validated by Goethe as such in his earlier essay ‘Von deutscher Baukunst’) together with its supposed architect, Erwin von Steinbach. However, near the end, this outpouring of subjective feeling is interrupted. Three asterisks mark the threshold to a different narrative situation, and there follows a brief, sober paragraph in the third person and in the past tense in which the reader is told that the devotions of the writer who was the ‘I’ of the main section were interrupted by the arrival of a friend called Lenz.

There is an autobiographical background to this, for the meeting between these two figures is a literary version of that between Goethe himself and his fellow-author Jakob Michael Reinhold Lenz. A note written by Lenz to Karoline Herder on July 13, 1775, gives us a glimpse of the scene from another point of view when Lenz says that he cannot write at greater length because he must hurry to meet Goethe, who has already been waiting half an hour for him at the top of the cathedral tower.⁵ The incident stems from Goethe’s third visit – or pilgrimage, as he liked to think of it – to Strasbourg Cathedral on his return from a tour of Switzerland, now on the threshold to his homeland and the love he had left behind, and he builds into his text reminiscences of the forces of nature that had impressed him on this trip. And in its form the text adopts – and then abandons – the device of using as a framework the kind of pilgrimage liturgy that Goethe had recently encountered on his travels. It is thus divided into sections, the stations of the pilgrimage, but these are secularised, corresponding to the stages of the climb up the cathedral tower, and the goal of the pilgrimage is the monument to a secular saint, an artist. Later sections contrast the genuine devotee of art with the philistine masses, and the arrival of Lenz leads to reflections on the nature of artistic creativity, but in an abstract, universalising language that is in sharp contrast to the earlier stammering enthusiasm: ‘die Empfindung gieng in Gespräche über, unter welchen die übrigen Stationen vollendet wurden’.⁶

Both ‘Dritte Wallfahrt’ and ‘Kubla Khan’ are about creativity, and they present a vision of an ideal location within which a sublime human artefact is set, drawing the reader into a realm of poetic imagination. They use language in an associative way that makes the literal meaning of the sequence of ideas hard to follow, contrasting with the matter-of-fact language

⁵ Jakob Michael Reinhold Lenz, *Werke und Briefe in drei Bänden*, ed. Sigrid Damm (Insel: Leipzig, 1987), vol. 3, p. 323.

⁶ P. 436: ‘feeling gave way to discussions, during which the remaining stations were completed.’

used to present the intrusion from the outside world in Goethe's epilogue and Coleridge's Preface, an intrusion that leaves the poetic text a fragment. Goethe reflects indirectly on this experimental use of language in the comment he makes on his earlier essay, 'Von deutscher Baukunst', which could equally apply to 'Dritte Wallfahrt': 'Wunderlich war's von einem Gebäude geheimnißvoll reden, Thatsachen in Räzel hüllen, und von Maasverhältnissen poetisch lallen!'⁷ These terms all suggest a hidden meaning that transcends the normal, discursive use of language, and which must necessarily do so, for the experience is 'unaussprechlich, und unausgesprochen'.⁸

Moreover, these texts are not just fragments: they are suffused with fragmentariness. Each of the sections of 'Dritte Wallfahrt' is a separate piece of writing corresponding to a particular station on this secular pilgrimage, but there is no explanation of the link between them or of the different perspectives that each adopts. And within each section this non-discursive language is full of apostrophes and exclamations, as if reflecting individual moments of inspired enthusiasm, so that there is even something fragmentary about the individual sentences, whose connection to each other is implicit.

'Kubla Khan' is similarly presented as a fragment, but it also contains fragments. The logical connection between one idea and the next in the poem is not explicit, and the reader is left wondering exactly what the significance of a particular motif is. In particular there is a caesura after the incomplete vision of Xanadu, and the last eighteen lines of the poem turn without explanation to an apparently completely different scene, the poet's vision of the damsel with a dulcimer singing of Mount Abora. On reflection the reader may make a connection between the two halves of the poem and may be able to link this song that the 'I' longs to recover with the earlier vision of Xanadu and, beyond that, with the Preface's account of a vision lost. However, this is a task for the reader's intuition or imagination.

The two texts also appear within larger collections of texts, even though most modern editions of both are organised either according to genre or to chronology of composition and thus hinder us from reading them in their original contexts. 'Kubla Khan' was first published together with a companion-piece, 'The Pains of Sleep', which shares the same Preface, and

⁷ P. 455: 'It was strange to talk in a secret language about a building, to conceal facts in riddles and to babble poetically about proportions.'

⁸ P. 455: 'unspeakable, unspoken.'

‘Christabel’, which itself has been claimed as a planned fragment. ‘Dritte Wallfahrt’ was published in a collection of eight apparently disparate jottings, added as a kind of appendix to a friend’s translation of Mercier’s *Du Théâtre* and given the casual title *Aus Goethes Brieftasche (From Goethe’s Wallet)*. They include, beside ‘Dritte Wallfahrt’, an introduction, a commentary on the French sculptor Falconet, and five poems about art and love. None of these has any apparent connection with Mercier’s critique of neo-classical tragedy, nor do they have much connection with each other, but here are to be found, in their most sophisticated, but necessarily unsystematic, formulation, the aesthetic principles of the Sturm und Drang expressed in a provocatively disjointed, fragmented way that deliberately ignores the conventions of discursive prose. By contrast with the tradition of systematic writing about aesthetics, Goethe calls these pieces ‘Bemerkungen und Grillen des Augenblicks’.⁹ It is in fact the discontinuity and disparity of the texts that is central to the argument Goethe develops in the introduction, namely that the coherence of a true work of art does not depend on an imposed formal structure but on a deeper coherence, what he calls its ‘innere Form’ (‘inner form’ or ‘inward form’). Developing an argument that he had found in Herder’s *Über die neuere deutsche Literatur. Fragmente (Fragments on Recent German Literature)*, Goethe claims that every depicted object has a form that is proper to it and inherent in it, which allows it to appear most naturally and most fully as itself, and this is what the artist must discover, and not impose on it a preconceived framework, such as the three unities of the neo-classical tragedy.¹⁰

Both ‘Kubla Khan’ and ‘Dritte Wallfahrt’, therefore, are conceived in accordance with the principle of fragmentariness. In both cases it is used in order to represent a visionary world which is contrasted with the everyday, but what particularly links them is the use of the same device in order to manage this contrast, the interruption of the vision by the arrival of another person who dispels it: the subjective perspective of the vision itself, together with its ecstatic language, is juxtaposed with a perspective which presents an external view of the person having the vision, and does so using the more prosaic, discursive language of the everyday, allowing the third-person form to come to the fore.

⁹ P. 449: ‘comments and fancies of the moment.’

¹⁰ For a fuller discussion see David Hill, ‘The Inner Form of *Aus Goethes Brieftasche*,’ in *Goethe at 250: The London Symposium. Goethe mit 250: Londoner Symposium*, ed. T. J. Reed et al. (Iudicium: Munich, 2000), pp. 109-20.

The striking resemblance between the two texts in the way that they use this defining motif provokes a series of further questions about the nature of the link between them: is one dependent on, or in some way influenced by, the other? or do both derive features from a common source? The answers to both questions are straightforward only in the sense that we do not know the answers to them. There seems to be no positive evidence that Coleridge knew 'Dritte Wallfahrt', but he may have done. He was exceptionally well informed on German debates on aesthetics and he certainly knew Goethe's earlier piece on Strasbourg Cathedral, 'Von deutscher Baukunst', referred to in 'Dritte Wallfahrt', because he wrote passages that are, as the editor of his *Notebooks* observes, 'drawn unmistakably from Goethe's essay'.¹¹ More generally, Coleridge was the principal mediator of German culture to England in the early nineteenth century and was very well read in German literature and thought. In any case it is never easy to be sure what may or may not have been known by this 'library-cormorant', whose borrowings 'so honeycomb his work as to form virtually a mode of composition'.¹² One might perhaps have expected to find a specific reference to 'Dritte Wallfahrt' in Coleridge's writings if it impressed him deeply enough to inspire 'Kubla Khan', but there are quite as many reasons why that might not be the case. The answer to the second question is similarly inconclusive: the extensive search for the 'sources' of 'Kubla Khan' has focused largely on the motifs within the poem itself, and no model has been proposed for the way in which he uses the 'person on business from Porlock' that might also have influenced Goethe.

If we leave aside the well trodden path of seeking sources for 'Kubla Khan', the similarities between the two texts raise the more fundamental question whether Goethe's 'Dritte Wallfahrt' should be considered in the context of the Romantic fragment.

¹¹ Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *The Notebooks*, ed. Kathleen Coburn, Bollinger 50 (Pantheon: New York, 1957-2002), vol. 3, p. 4498N. See also A. C. Dunstan, 'The German influence on Coleridge,' *Modern Language Review*, 17 (1922), 272-81 and 18 (1923), 183-201, esp. 18, 193f. 'Aus Goethes Brieftasche' was placed immediately after 'Von deutscher Baukunst' in a supplementary fourth volume to the third edition of *Des Herrn Göthe sämtliche Werke* (Himburg: Berlin, 1779)

¹² Thomas McFarland, *Coleridge and the Pantheist Tradition* (Clarendon: Oxford, 1969), p. 28, referring in particular to Coleridge's letter to John Thelwell of Nov. 19, 1976. Coleridge's distinction between organic and mechanic form is virtually the same as the distinction between inner and outer form that Goethe introduced into German debates in 'Aus Goethes Brieftasche', but according to Foakes (Coleridge, *Collected Works*, vol. 5.1, p. 348, N.8) this formulation derives in the first instance from A. W. Schlegel's lectures on Shakespeare, *Über dramatische Kunst und Litteratur*. See also McFarland, pp. 256-61, and Rosemary Ashton, *The Life of Samuel Taylor Coleridge: A Critical Biography*, Blackwell Critical Biographies, 5 (Blackwell: Oxford, 1996), p. 273. In any case Goethe's distinction can be traced back to Shaftesbury and even to a longer hermetic tradition.

Relatively little has been written about *Aus Goethes Brieftasche*, but there have indeed been many attempts to construct a history of German literature that have aligned the Sturm und Drang, of which it is a key text, with Romanticism. A tradition of nationalist inflected German literary criticism, including such influential figures as Herman Nohl, Heinz Kindermann and H.A. Korff,¹³ liked to see in German Romanticism the eruption of an irrationalist vitalism ushered in by a uniquely German movement, the Sturm und Drang headed by the young Goethe and Herder. It is true that both the Sturm und Drang and the first generation of Romantic writers in Germany can be located within a broad cultural history of emergent individualism and that they shared a scepticism towards the systematic, totalising grasp of the world claimed by the over-intellectualised rationalism of the Enlightenment. They shared doubts as to whether discursive language, the language of reasonable common sense, was capable of grasping truth in its wholeness. They could no longer dismiss the visionary as fantastical nonsense. But to lump the Sturm und Drang together with Romanticism is to run the risk of making it seem like an incomplete forerunner of Romanticism and to lose sight of its many connections with the Enlightenment. Above all this loss of focus produces a loss of interpretative force: both 'Dritte Wallfahrt' and 'Kubla Khan' contrast the visionary and the everyday and give special validity and authority to the former, but the similar gestures that they use are deployed in order to say something rather different in each case about the nature of reality.

More recent scholars have drawn attention to the prevalence of the planned fragment amongst earlier writers in the eighteenth century, including Swift, Richardson, Sterne, Diderot, Lessing, Wieland and Lichtenberg, and Matthew Bell has argued that, contrary to Schlegel's claim, fragmentariness is as characteristic of the Enlightenment as it is of Romanticism, and specifically because of the strong currents of empiricism which it reflects.¹⁴ What we now lack, I would suggest, is sufficient differentiation of the poetics and the epistemology of the fragment in each of these cases. Of these earlier authors the one with the most clearly

¹³ See Gerhard Sauder, 'The Sturm und Drang and the Periodization of the Eighteenth Century' in *Literature of the Sturm und Drang*, The Camden House History of German Literature, vol. 6, ed. David Hill (Camden House: Rochester, 2003), pp. 309-31, esp. pp.317f.

¹⁴ Matthew Bell, 'The Idea of Fragmentariness in German Literature and Philosophy, 1760-1800,' *Modern Language Review* 89 (1994), 372-92. See also Marshall Brown, *Preromanticism* (Stanford UP: Stanford, California, 1991); Elizabeth Wanning Harries, *The Unfinished Manner: Essays on the Fragment in the Later Eighteenth Century* (Virginia UP: Charlottesville, 1994); Marjorie Levinson, *The Romantic Fragment Poem: A Critique of a Form* (University of North Carolina Press: Chapel Hill, NC, 1986); Thomas McFarland, *Romanticism and the Forms of Ruin: Wordsworth, Coleridge, and Modalities of Fragmentation* (Princeton UP: Princeton, NJ, 1981); Christopher A. Strathman, *Romantic Poetry and the Fragmentary Imperative. Schlegel, Byron, Joyce, Blanchot* (State University of New York Press, 2006).

demonstrable effect on the first generation of Romantics in Germany – and indeed on Coleridge – was Lessing. Despite their different emphases, Schlegel and Coleridge were both attracted to something speculative and open in Lessing’s work, a feature most evident in his late theological writings where he makes it clear that absolute truth is inaccessible, so that every statement we are capable of making about God is of necessity partial and fragmentary.¹⁵

Views such as these were by no means unique in the third quarter of the eighteenth century in Germany, but by the 1770s the circles in which they emerged were already under attack by a younger generation of writers, the short-lived grouping known as the Sturm und Drang, who deserve particular consideration because their radicalism produced certain continuities with the Romanticism of some twenty-five years later. It was the authors of this younger generation who were the first German writers to explore the aesthetic consequences of questioning the kinds of truth that common-sense reason, clarity and order could access. There are genuinely unfinished works, such as Goethe’s *Faust*, but few enactments of fragmentation of the type of ‘Dritte Wallfahrt’, as there are indeed few Romantic fragments quite like ‘Kubla Khan’, but many of the writings of Hamann and Herder are in the form of fragments, and – what I want to focus on here – there is a kind of fragmentation that is characteristic of the Sturm und Drang style of writing and might be called its stylistic signature. Turning their backs on the conventions of French neo-classicism and embracing everything that seemed Shakespearian, particularly if it broke the conventions of theatrical decorum, the Sturm und Drang wrote dramas which exploded the action into a multitude of separate scenes, often violently contrasting in tone. In his *Götz von Berlichingen* Goethe discards the unities of place and time, using some fifty-six scene-changes to sweep his audience across the length and breadth of southern Germany over a period of several years. The scenes do not lead into each other, as they do in the French classical tragedy: they present quite different characters in a different time and place, mixing the different strands of the action and switching between private and public worlds. The effect is of a patchwork of fragmentary scenes whose connection with the whole has to be reconstructed by the audience. The complicated plot reveals a portrait of sixteenth-century Germany in all its diversity, illuminated by momentary scenes.

¹⁵ See Charlie Louth, “‘Transzendente Linien:’ Coleridge and Friedrich Schlegel als Lessing-Leser,” in *Zwischen Aufklärung und Romantik. Neue Perspektiven der Forschung. Festschrift für Roger Paulin*, ed. Konrad Feilchenfeldt et al., Publications of the Institute of Germanic Studies, 89 (Königshausen & Neumann; Würzburg, 2006), pp. 150-64

Prose narrative was less characteristic of the Sturm und Drang, but Goethe's epoch-defining novel *Die Leiden des jungen Werthers* (*The Sorrows of Young Werther*) uses the epistolary form to similar effect to create moments of intensity, devastating flashes of insight into the soul of an individual, again often contrasting in tone. Until the very end of the novel there is no explanatory bridge linking the letters: each one is a single outburst isolated from the next and locatable in the first instance only by the date at the top of it.

And if one picks out the two most characteristic styles that were adopted by the poetry of the Sturm und Drang, the Pindaric ode and the folk-poem, the same principles apply. Pindar was regarded by Adam Smith as the model of what he calls 'the loose and broken manner'¹⁶ and the Pindaric ode, as adopted by Klopstock and then Goethe, was a poem structured not by ordered exposition, or even by rhyme and metre, but by a sequence of outbursts whose connection again has to be reconstructed by the imagination of the reader. And Goethe's poems in the folk idiom typically consist of a sequence of moments in a story, each encapsulated in one stanza, with no explicit link the neighbouring ones.

If we look in the Sturm und Drang for a formal explication of the meanings of this style of fragmentary writing we do so in vain because there is nothing that could properly be called a 'philosophy of the Sturm und Drang': indeed the idea of such a philosophy was alien since it would have represented the subordination of the intensity of the moment to an imposed system. At most one can say that these authors share a view of human beings alienated from the world around them, unable or scarcely able to recover the kind of harmony and wholeness they can see in nature. Any apparent homogeneity of the world is false, imposed, artificial, intellectual, a symptom of alienation. Harmony and wholeness, on the other hand, if we could recover them, would by contrast be characterised by fragmentary utterances of deep intensity.

The nearest to a coherent statement of this position is provided by the young Herder in an essay, 'Über Ossian und die Lieder alter Völker' ('On Ossian and the Songs of Ancient Peoples'), that is in fact a fragmentary series of extracts from one side of a correspondence

¹⁶ 'All passions especially admiration express themselves in a very loose and broken manner, catching at whatever seems connected with the Subject of the Passion, which as it seems important itself so it makes every thing which is connected with it seem to be so also': 'Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles Lettres,' *Glasgow Edition of the Works and Correspondence*, ed. J. C. Bryce (Liberty Fund: Indianapolis, 1982), vol. 4, p. 117.

about folk-poetry. In this essay Herder idealises the natural directness and authentic spontaneity of primitive forms of communication:

Sie wissen aus Reisebeschreibungen, wie stark und fest sich immer die Wilden ausdrücken. Immer die Sache, die sie sagen wollen, sinnlich, klar, lebendig anschauend: den Zweck, zu dem sie reden, unmittelbar und genau fühlend: nicht durch Schattenbegriffe, Halbideen und symbolischen Letternverstand ... durch alle dies nicht zerstreuet: noch minder durch Künsteleien, sklavische Erwartungen, furchtsamschleichende Politik, und verwirrende Prämeditation verdorben – über alle diese Schwächungen des Geistes seligunwissend, erfassen sie den ganzen Gedanken mit dem ganzen Worte, und dies mit jenem. Sie schweigen entweder, oder reden im Moment des Interesse mit einer unvorbedachten Vestigkeit, Sicherheit und Schönheit, die alle wohlstudierte Europäer allezeit haben bewundern müßen, und – müßen bleiben laßen.¹⁷

Rather in the manner of Rousseau, Herder criticised the artificiality of contemporary learned discourse, which reflected the alienation of modern civilisation from nature and the alienation of the individual from his own experience. Language had become abstract, calculating, learned, and modern man had lost touch with the immediacy of reality, which could only be grasped by emotion, imagination and action.

As Howard Gaskill has shown,¹⁸ this was not an original idea in 1771. Some twenty years earlier Adam Smith had associated excessive clarity and connectedness with shallowness of feeling and absence of inspiration: ‘The higher the Rapture, the more broken is the expression.’¹⁹ This point was applied to what was felt to be the peculiar force of primitive literature in the sacred poetry of the Hebrews (Robert Lowth) and in Ossian, whose style

¹⁷ *Herders sämtliche Werke*, ed. Bernhard Suphan (Weidmann: Berlin, 1877-1913), vol. 5, pp. 181f.: ‘You know from travellers’ accounts how vigorously and clearly savages always express themselves. Always with a sharp, vivid eye on the thing they want to say, using their senses, feeling the purpose of their utterance immediately and exactly, not distracted by shadowy concepts, half-ideas, and symbolic letter-understanding ...; still less corrupted by artifices, slavish expectations, timid creeping politics, and confusing pre-meditation – blissfully ignorant of all these debilitations of the mind, they comprehend the thought as a whole with the whole word, and the word with the thought. Either they are silent, or they speak at the moment of involvement with an unpremeditated soundness, sureness and beauty, which learned Europeans of all times could not but admire – and were bound to leave untouched’ (*German aesthetic and literary criticism: Winckelmann, Lessing, Hamann, Herder, Schiller, Goethe*, ed. H. B. Nisbet [Cambridge UP: Cambridge, 1985], p. 158).

¹⁸ Howard Gaskill, ‘Ossian, Herder and the Idea of Folk Song,’ in *Literature of the Sturm und Drang*, pp. 103-105.

¹⁹ *Glasgow Edition of the Works and Correspondence*, vol. 4, pp. 139f.

was characterised by Hugh Blair as ‘always rapid and vehement; in narration concise even to abruptness, and leaving several circumstances to be supplied by the reader’s imagination’.²⁰ The historical importance of Herder is that he integrated it into a holistic cultural analysis and developed it into a literary programme which celebrated as natural and true the unmediated direct expression of the individual moment, emphasising the importance of physical sensation:

Alle Gesänge solcher wilden Völker weben um daseiende Gegenstände,
Handlungen, Begebenheiten, um eine lebendige Welt! Wie reich und vielfach sind
da nun Umstände, gegenwärtige Züge, Theilvorfälle! Und alle hat das Auge
gesehen! Die Seele stellet sie sich vor! Das setzt Sprünge und Würfe! Es ist kein
anderer Zusammenhang unter den Theilen des Gesanges, als unter den Bäumen
und Gebüsch im Walde, unter den Felsen und Grotten in der Einöde, als unter
den Scenen der Begebenheit selbst.²¹

The phrase ‘Sprünge und Würfe’ (‘leaps and gaps and sudden transitions’) became the key defining phrase of the writing of the Sturm und Drang, the fragmentation it implied an indicator of the authenticity of communication: each moment of expression was as wholly itself as an object in nature, a tree or a flower. The argument about inward form is another way of articulating the same idea: the particular form in which an idea, or the subject of a work of art, exists must derive directly from its inherent nature and cannot be imposed upon it by universalising ‘rules’.

Fragmentariness was therefore associated with nature, authenticity and wholeness of being. It was also associated with freedom. When Goethe criticised the neo-classical ‘rules’ in his praise of Shakespeare (‘Zum Schäkespears Tag’) he described them as shackling his imagination and preventing him from being his true self:

²⁰ *The Poems of Ossian and Related Works*, ed. Howard Gaskill (Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 1996), p. 354.

²¹ *Herders sämtliche Werke*, vol. 5, pp. 196f. ‘All the songs of these savage peoples move around objects, actions, events, around a living world! How rich and various are the details, incidents, immediate features! And the eye has seen it all, the mind has imagined it all! This implies leaps and gaps and sudden transitions. There is the same connection between the sections of these songs as there is between the trees and bushes of the forest; the same between the cliffs and grottoes of the wilderness as there is between the scenes of the event itself’ (*German aesthetic and literary criticism*, p. 158).

Es schien mir die Einheit des Orts so kerkermäßig ängstlich, die Einheiten der Handlung und der Zeit lästige Fesseln unsrer Einbildungskraft. Ich sprang in die freie Luft, und fühlte erst daß ich Hände und Füße hatte. Und jetzo da ich sahe wieviel Unrecht mir die Herrn der Regeln in ihrem Loch angetan haben, wie viel freie Seelen noch drinne sich krümmen, so wäre mir mein Herz geborsten wenn ich ihnen nicht Fehde angekündigt hätte, und nicht täglich suchte ihre Türne zusammen zu schlagen.²²

Some fifteen years before the French Revolution, of course, the language of freedom and oppression could have strong political overtones, as indeed did arguments about the natural self and freedom from external formalities. The literature of the Sturm und Drang is full of images of imprisonment and heroic, if often tragic, liberation, and their authors enjoyed nothing so much as to shock the establishment of their day. But the rigidly hierarchical absolutist Germany of the 1770s was not the France of 1789, and these remain no more than gestures towards the idea of freedom, expressions of youthful frustration, and, for all its rhetoric, the Sturm und Drang cannot be said to have had serious political ambitions. It was a kind of protest movement, a protest against the stultifying conventions and proprieties of German absolutism, and most specifically it was a protest against the dull and worthy writers of the Enlightenment who thought that order and clarity were capable of making inroads into the rigidified structures of society. Werther's emotional and imaginative fullness is contrasted not only with the unnatural conventionality of the court but also with the equally unnatural reasonableness of his middle-class rival, Albert.

The Sturm und Drang is both the culmination and the betrayal of the Enlightenment call to emancipation. However, its frame of reference remains the real, material world, the same world that was the concern of the Enlightenment. These writers had not read their Kant²³ or their Fichte, and even at the moments when their goal seems most existentially unattainable, when Klinger's Otto, in a moment of despair, calls himself the 'Wurm mit der Riesenseele',²⁴

²² *Der junge Goethe in seiner Zeit*, vol. 2, p. 362: 'The unity of place seemed to me an oppressive prison, the unities of action and time burdensome fetters on our imagination. I leapt free – and knew for the first time that I had hands and feet. And now when I saw what harm the keepers of the rules had done me in their dungeon, and how many free spirits there were still cowering there – my heart would have burst had I not declared war on them had I not tried daily to destroy their prison towers.'

²³ Lenz had heard lectures from the pre-Critical Kant in Königsberg, but there is limited evidence of any direct influence on Lenz's thinking.

²⁴ Friedrich Maximilian Klinger, *Werke. Historisch-kritische Gesamtausgabe*, ed. Sander L. Gilman et al., 6 vols so far (Niemeyer: Tübingen, 1978-), vol. 1, p. 49: 'worm with the soul of a giant'.

this is a reflection on the discrepancy between his aspirations and his self: there is no suggestion of transcendence, no suggestion that his aspirations have a deeper reality than his own subjectivity. In the words of Roy Pascal:

An essential characteristic of the literature of the Sturm und Drang is its realism, the concrete substantiality of its figures, scenes, and language... Yet this realism is not the opposite of imagination, of poetry, as is the realism of Diderot's or Lessing's plays. It is imaginative; it is poetic... We find the imagination restored to the function which they recognised it had in Homer or Shakespeare: not a means of escaping from reality, of beautifying reality, but a means of penetrating to its innermost truth and meaning.²⁵

At the same time, as he goes on:

Imagination ... does not point, for Herder and Goethe, to a transcendental realm of reality opposed to that of experiential 'appearance', it is not evidence of a dualism of Reason and Understanding such as Coleridge and the German Romantics postulated.²⁶

If the planned fragment as a literary form reflects a problematic relation between the speaker and the spoken, Herder and Goethe at this stage of their careers believed not so much that truth was in principle unsayable, rather that we are no longer – or not yet – capable of saying it. For all their similarities as fragmentary visions which rise above the world of the everyday, 'Dritte Wallfahrt' gives heightened access to an empirically existent world, *this* world, while 'Kubla Khan' reflects on an attempt to transcend this world and engage with a higher dimension of reality. We do not doubt that the things Goethe refers to, Strasbourg cathedral, the places he visited on his tour of Switzerland, the date in the title, actually exist in the real world, even though we are being offered a subjective response to them. The 'I' has a heightened sensibility, but it is a real 'I' belonging to the real world, it is the same person who later engages in conversation with Lenz. The verse of 'Kubla Khan', on the other hand, transports us into a different world, a world which does not seem to obey the same causal logic as the ordinary world of the Preface and whose subjectivity relates less straightforwardly back to 'the Author' of the Preface: hence in part the need for the artifice of

²⁵ *The German Sturm und Drang* (Manchester UP, Manchester, 1953), pp. 275-77.

²⁶ *The German Sturm und Drang*, p. 279.

the ‘anodyne’. The idea of creative and re-creative power is less problematic for Goethe, and he expresses no anxiety about being able to recover his vision. There is no fundamental break between it and the everyday, and, once Lenz arrives, he and Goethe engage in a friendly discussion which takes up in a more abstract, discursive language exactly the issues that had been the focus of the visionary section.

Goethe does not set up or long for an ontologically other world, as does, for example, Novalis, who absolutised the critique of Enlightenment modernity, turning it into a critique of the conditionality and contingency of this world as such: ‘Wir *suchen* überall das Unbedingte und *finden* immer nur Dinge’²⁷ The world around appears as a mass of contingencies, it is marked by its determinacy, its conditionality, but we can and must strive to reach beyond it, even if the transcendental ideal will of necessity remain beyond our grasp. For Novalis the fragment serves as a reminder that we are at a stage of incomplete knowledge, in a state of incomplete being, and is therefore a particularly adequate response to this incompleteness: it denies systematic coherence and postpones closure to an unrealisable future.

England in 1816 was a very different place from the Germany of Novalis and the young Friedrich Schlegel, but for all his differences, Coleridge too described himself as someone whose mind reaches longingly beyond individual contingencies in search of a transcendental totality:

I can *at times* feel strongly the beauties, you describe, in themselves, & for themselves – but more frequently *all things* appear little – all the knowledge, that can be acquired, child’s play – the universe itself – what an immense heap of *little* things? – I can contemplate nothing but parts, & parts are all *little* – ! – My mind feels as if it ached to behold & know something *great* – something *one & indivisible* – and it is only in the faith of this that rocks or waterfalls, mountains or caverns give me the sense of sublimity or majesty! – But in this faith *all things* counterfeit infinity!²⁸

What the early Goethe, Herder, Novalis and Coleridge all share is a validation of the visionary which is fuelled by scepticism towards the artificiality of the systems of knowledge

²⁷ *Schriften*, ed. Richard Samuel (Kohlhammer: Stuttgart, 1960-88), vol. 2. 1, p. 412: ‘Everywhere we seek the unconditional and all we find is conditional things.’

²⁸ *Collected Letters*, ed. Earl Taylor Griggs (Clarendon: Oxford, 1956-71), vol. 1-2, p. 349; sim. p. 354. See also in particular Coleridge’s letter to Joseph Cottle of March 7, 1815, vol. 3-4, p. 545.

and speech imposed by rationalism. They represent, Elias would argue,²⁹ phases in the critique of bourgeois modernity. The difference between them can be seen in their responses to Spinoza. Coleridge worried that if everything was an emanation of God then there was no distinct realm of the divine. Goethe and Herder embraced Spinoza for having shown that *this* world has in it all the divinity that one could long for.

²⁹ Norbert Elias, *Über den Prozeß der Zivilisation. Soziogenetische und psychogenetische Untersuchungen*, 2 vols. (Suhrkamp: Frankfurt, 1978⁶), vol. 1, pp. 1-64.

Johann Wolfgang Goethe, 'Third Pilgrimage to Erwin's Grave in July 1775'

Preparation

Standing once again at your grave and at the monument of eternal life in you that rises above your grave, Saint Erwin, I feel, thank God, that I am as I was, still as full of energy, still as moved by what is great, and, o bliss, more specifically, more exclusively moved by the truth than I used to be when, out of childlike devotion, I strove to honour something for which I had no feeling and, deceiving myself, painted over with premonitions of love an object that had no force and no truth for me. How many mists have fallen from my eyes, and yet you have not left my heart, all-enlivening love, you who dwell with truth, even though they say that you are shy of the light and escape into the mists.

Prayer

You are one and living, you were conceived and have evolved, you were not assembled or put together. Standing before you, as before the foaming power of the Rhine waterfall, as before the shining crown of the eternal snowy mountains, as before the sight of the cheerfully spread out lake and your cloud-covered cliffs and desolate valleys, grey Gotthard, as before every 'great thought of creation' – whatever creative force a soul has stirs within it. In literature it comes out stammering, in lines on a sketching paper it scribbles out adoration of the creator, everlasting life, an all-embracing, inextinguishable feeling of what is and was and ever shall be.

First Station

I want to write, for I have a good feeling in me and whenever I wrote other people who read it also had a good feeling in them if pure blood flowed through their veins and their eyes were clear. May you have a good feeling, my friends, as I do on this procession with the morning air blowing towards me over all the roofs of the city angled strangely below me.

Second Station

Higher up in the air, looking down, already looking across over the wonderful plains towards home, towards love, and yet full of the lasting feeling of the present moment.

I once wrote a piece full of a hidden inward intensity that few people read and that people were unable to understand literally and in which good souls simply saw sparks of what it is that makes them unspeakably, inexpressibly happy. Strange it was to talk of a building in a secret language, to veil facts in mysteries and to wax poetic over measurements! And yet things are no different now. So let it be my fate, as it is your fate, heavenwards striving tower, and yours too, wide world of God, to be gaped at and to be hung up like strips of wallpaper in the little brains of the philistines amongst all peoples.

Third Station

If I had you with me, creative artists, sensitive devotees, of whom I found so many on my little travels, and you too whom I did not find but who are nevertheless there. If this sheet reaches you, let it give you strength against the never ending flotsam and jetsam of worthless mediocrity, and if you should come to this place, think of me in love.

For thousands of people the world is a peep-show, the deceptive images pass by and disappear, the impressions remain shallow and isolated in their souls: that is why people so easily allow themselves to be led by the judgment of others, why they are willing to let their impressions be rearranged, distorted and re-evaluated for them.

At this point the writer's devotions were interrupted by the arrival of Lenz, feeling gave way to discussions, during which the remaining Stations were completed. At every step the conviction grew that the feeling of creativity in the artist is an urgent sense of relationships, of proportions and of what is appropriate, and that it is only these that allow an independent work to emerge, in the same way that other creatures are driven to develop according to their own individual natures.