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DEADLY POTIONS: KLEIST AND WAGNER

IN THE AFTERNOON of 20th November 1811 Heinrich von Kleist and his companion, Henriette Vogel, who was suffering from cancer, put up at an inn at Potsdam, where they spent the night. The next day they went for a walk and, according to Adam Müller's account, had 'coffee brought to them in a quiet bay by the lake, sat down in the hollow formed by the uprooting of a tree, and asked the serving-girl who had accompanied them to bring another cup'. When the girl had gone about fifty paces, she heard two reports. Kleist had shot Henriette, who had flinched a little at the last moment, in the chest, and then himself, through the mouth. He had not made use of a second pistol, lying ready, but had coolly reloaded the first.

The scandal of this double suicide aroused a far greater stir than did the loss of one of the century's great authors. Kleist was known to so few people that even his best friend had to tell her son, 'By the way, he was a writer.' In literary circles, on the other hand, it was not long before people were drawing comparisons between his writing and his final act, and deciding they were very much alike. Kleist's death was as singular as his work, runs a letter to the publisher Cotta. Friedrich Schlegel writes to his brother: 'You will have read about Kleist's strange murder story in the newspapers. So it was not only in his poetical works, but also in his life that he took *madness* for genius and confused the two.' Achim von Arnim reports the latest rumour to the brothers Grimm: in the last volume of his stories there is 'a tale much like . . . his death'. He was referring to *The Betrothal in Santo Domingo*, in which the hero takes his own life, after shooting his lover in the chest: 'since the wretched man had placed the pistol in his mouth, his skull was utterly shattered

and pieces of it were plastered on the walls'. The similarity was certainly striking. There were others in Kleist's dramas—Penthesilea ends by killing her lover and then herself; in his first play, *The House of Schroffenstein*, a young couple find death together in a cave, as Juliet had done in the vaults of the Capulets.

Yet life follows books not as a lackey but like a contrary child, that does not want to be told what to do. It comes, but pulling faces behind their backs. The end of Kleist's life appears like a none-too-delicate parody of his work. Nothing is quite right. These were not lovers, welcoming death in a first night of rapture, as in *Schroffenstein*; they were a pair of conspirators, two prisoners in a fortress planning a break-out together. During their last night they write letters and sing songs, instead of consecrating themselves to love. The cavern of the final act, in which their corpses are discovered, has shrunk to a dip in the ground, and the mysterious potion of the play reduced to several bottles of wine and those 'sixteen cups of coffee' reported—with indignant respect—even by *The Times* of London.

Despite the bathos, this scandalous deed soon found imitators—although, fortunately, naive ones, who forgot to load the pistols. Yet even without the moral danger of Kleist's example to desperate couples, the verdict on his suicide would not have wavered. It was an iniquitous deed and an unforgivable sin. Even the best-intentioned, thought Pfuël, the companion of his youth, found something damnable in this double murder, double responsibility. Some understanding was expressed in letters between friends, but the public reaction to Kleist's demise was outrage. A lone contemporary, writing an entry in the Brockhaus Encyclopædia, remarked that Kleist's last unhappy deed should be mourned and pitied, rather than frigidly condemned. But even that was going too far: a reply appeared in 1817, calling the author a worthless scribbler, inspiring the deepest contempt, who deserved not so much the corrective quill as 'the *rod*, which he has presumably hardly outgrown'.

Sixty years later, the verdict of Cosima Wagner was a good deal milder. Kleist would surely have been cured of his suicidal leanings, if only he had known the teachings of Buddha and Schopenhauer. The diary records her husband's agreement.

Richard Wagner, who had not allowed even Schopenhauer to incline him to quietism, had been familiar with the themes that haunted Kleist long before he translated the *Liebestod* into the chromatic sighing and urging of music. How incurably love and the longing for death had grown together is made clear in the well-known letter he wrote to Liszt, laying out the plan of his new opera. 'Since I myself have never experienced the true happiness of love', Wagner wrote in December 1854, 'I intend to erect another monument to this most beautiful of all dreams, in which, from beginning to end, this love will for once be truly satiated: in my head I have sketched a *Tristan and Isolde*, the simplest but most full-blooded musical conception; and in the "black flag" hoist at the end, I will wrap myself—to die.' At the moment of conception, the embryo's development is already sealed: love's bliss and death are Siamese twins, that cannot be torn apart. Love comes through 'death's wide-open doors'. Tristan and Isolde die so as to love one another, and love so as to die. Aim and cause coincide, end and origin fuse, symbolically, as a potion; the strange, lethal philtre that first sends blood coursing through the veins of an almost frozen plot.

Mixing one's drinks

'Endless grieving's only balm, oblivion's healing draught: this drink I do not fear!' In the fifth scene of the first Act, one of the most famous encounters in the history of musical drama, Tristan takes the chalice which Isolde offers him: poison, they both believe; in fact, an elixir of love. Wagner found the magic drink in a well-known source, Gottfried von Strassburg's epic poem *Tristan and Isolde*. There, the elixir goes down the wrong throat as Tristan drinks it, rather than King Mark. In Wagner, it goes down the right throat but two drinks get mixed. What he took from Gottfried are remnants of the magical potion and remnants of the mix-up, both of which could be dropped without loss once the drama has shifted inward. Wagner's Isolde loves Tristan from the first moment and saves his life, although she knows he has killed her betrothed, Morold. She learns how to hate him when he returns as marriage-broker, to bring her to old King Mark. As the ship nears the Cornish coast, she orders a seemingly unmoved Tristan to come to her, and demands his atonement. In a great storm of emotion, ready for joint death, Isolde orders Brangäne to fetch her mother's draft of poison. Brangäne has not the heart to do so, and of her own accord fills the cup

with an elixir of love, enabling the couple's painfully suppressed feelings to burst forth.

Why does Brangäne not offer a harmless dram instead of the poison? Perhaps she guesses her mistress's most secret wish—anyway, her transposition of the potions is never further explained. In Wagner, the detail is relegated in favour of psychological exploration—he prunes back, shifting all stage-props aside, and leaves only what is emotionally charged and inwardly ablaze. One of these props, however, was not present in Gottfried at all, but becomes the most important—the deadly potion that mysteriously flows into the philtre of love. It is true that Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*, which inspired Wagner's funeral symphony of that name, contains both death and sleeping potions, but the couple do not join in drinking them, nor do these unstop their love; and above all, they are genuine drops of Lethe, not suppositions. In Wagner's version, the real poison remains locked in the casket; Tristan and Isolde drink a phantom draught, a placebo of death. Doubly effective—magically and psychologically—it is just because it is an imaginary poison that the elixir of love sweeps their long-repressed passions to the surface, so violently that Gottfried's philtre seems a harmless tincture of rhino-horn, by comparison.

Thomas Mann felt that this new vision of the magical aphrodisiac was the poetic idea of a great psychologist. Tristan and Isolde drain the cup in the belief that they must die of it; only then, and thereby, can they confess their love. The question at stake is not which flagon is missing, in the end, from Isolde's travel-kit, but the liberation of the couple's souls through their joint commitment to death. In reality, writes Thomas Mann, the lovers could be drinking pure water; it is only their belief that they have drunk death that releases them spiritually from the moral law of the day.

This gets closer to the literal truth than Mann knew. The lovers' drink not only could have been pure water: in the source text, it was exactly that—pure water. And the placebo of death, which sets love free, was indeed the poetic idea of a great psychologist: except that it came—as the whole scene did—not from Gottfried, nor Shakespeare, nor Wagner, but from the writer whose suicide could not be publicly mourned without attracting the wrath of the guardians of morality.

The zealot who condemned the article in the Brockhaus was not only wrong about Kleist's rank as a writer; he was also mistaken in supposing that its author had scarcely outgrown the rod. The lonely defender of the suicide was a mature forty-year-old: Adolf Wagner, uncle of the creator of *Tristan*. This now forgotten translator, philologist and scholar was Richard Wagner's first and most formative teacher. In the spring of 1828 Richard had gone to live with his uncle, in Leipzig. Adolf—a friend of Tieck, who knew Fichte and corresponded with Jean Paul—introduced his nephew to the world of literature on their daily walks together. Wagner recalls in *My Life* that his uncle's large library excited him to fever-pitch. That Kleist was not on occasion discussed, and read, with such a tutor, is as improbable as Cato's students never hearing mention of Carthage. Adolf Wagner was the epitome of a scholar but, were it not for his nephew, nothing more of him—apart from the silver cup dedicated to him by Goethe for his chief work, *Parnasso Italiano*—would have come down to posterity, save the first encyclopædia article on the writer still waiting at the foot of the German Parnassus.

Intimate with Kleist

Thanks to his uncle, Richard Wagner knew Kleist from his youth; doubtless better than he knew the early Romantics, whose cavils at the day and hymns to the night, according to researchers, resonate so ominously in *Tristan*—‘*comme de longs échos qui de loin se confondent*’, as Baudelaire puts it in his article on *Tannhäuser*. Celebration of night and the voluptuous swoon of *Liebestod* were both to be found in a dramatist far closer to Wagner in stature, temperament and character than these. In Kleist, as in Novalis, sacred night holds in its keeping the raptures of love and union in death. The Romantics are notably absent from Wagner's library in Dresden, but it does contain the three-volume Kleist edition of 1826. In the library at Wahnfried, Wagner's house at Bayreuth, one can examine the metrical marks Wagner made in Kleist's *Broken Pitcher*. Passing references in Cosima's diaries and Wagner's writing make clear that nothing of Kleist was alien to him. ‘In the evening, something from Kleist's posthumous works (political catechism)’, notes Cosima in August 1871, after a war in which Wagner, like Kleist before him, had lapsed into propaganda pieces against France—both were failures as opportunist ideologues in Paris. A drama by Kleist about Frederick the Great, he tells Cosima, could have become a pendant to *Hamlet*. Wagner criticizes the *Hermannsschlacht* for heartlessness, justifiably enough

when one thinks of Hermann's wife letting the Roman be eaten by a bear (just, as it were, the heartless fate with which a laughing Siegfried threatens Mime). He defends *Kätchen von Heilbronn* against Cosima; of *The Earthquake in Chile*, he regrets only that the idyllic middle interlude is not fully worked out—see *Tannhäuser*. He calls *The Prince of Homburg* a wonderful stage-piece; if German actors can no longer cope with it, they should refrain from Shakespeare, too (Kleist is repeatedly associated with the only man Wagner regarded as a kindred spirit). Writing to Bülow, he cannot find praise enough for 'the Princess of Homburg'—a title that attracts a puzzled, parenthetical question mark from his editors: Wagner seems to be alluding to the feminine character of the dreamer-hero. Nietzsche said that 'in his later days' Wagner became 'thoroughly *feminini generis*'; but even as a youth he had already confessed to his mother an all-too-womanly changeability.

It was also Nietzsche who seems to have been the first to notice how strongly reminiscent of Kleist some elements in Wagner were—above all, the hermaphroditic figure of the hysterical-heroic woman. In Kleist's *Penthesilea*, wrote Alfred Polgar in 1926, 'death and love draw their magic potion from the same source, which acquires dramatic shape here long before *Tristan*'. Of all Kleist's work, *Penthesilea* has drawn the most frequent comparisons with *Tristan*. The parallel, indeed, virtually imposes itself, between the play's gasping breath, oscillations of desire for love and death, maenad rage of a queen, and what Wagner said of *Tristan*: that his aim had been for once to abandon himself completely, to portray the consuming love 'which devours the man'.

In reality, of course, it was the other way round—Wagner was the one who was stimulated by *Penthesilea*. The fate of Achilles—hunted down, torn to the ground and pulled to pieces by Penthesilea's pack of hounds—has clearly coloured Sieglinde's fears for her brother: 'Clansmen and dogs clamour after him; hot on the trail howls the pack'—'Hounds bare their fangs for flesh'—'Jaws clamp your feet, you fall'. The company of Amazons, too—offspring of gods, wild armoured horsewomen flying 'like the storm wind'—are unmistakably an advance party of Wagner's Valkyries. In Brünnhilde's outburst against Siegfried in the *Götterdämmerung*—'Teach me such vengeance as never raged!'—rings the delirious love-hatred of Penthesilea that finally engulfs Achilles.

Cannibalism apart, Penthesilea has her tender moments. These, again, link her to Wagner's Isolde. Both have a better sister, a devoted helpmeet: Isolde has Brangäne, Penthesilea her friend Prothoe, whose first word to her is 'beloved'—in both dramas, a suspect intimacy quivers between Amazon and maid. Both Prothoe and Brangäne attempt, with varying success, to restrain the fury of their mistresses. In their arms, Isolde and Penthesilea come to themselves one last time, before they go mad. In the closing tableaux, both pairs of women are at last united: Prothoe 'seizes hold' of Penthesilea as she 'falls on her knees before the corpse'—'Isolde sinks . . . in Brangäne's arms, gently onto Tristan's corpse'.

Poisoned kisses

The love-hatred that only dies away with this finale implies that, here as there, death and love draw from the same spring. Love cannot flourish, because something of its opposite is mingled with it. Achilles and Penthesilea want to destroy each other as urgently as they want to couple. Something prevents them from loving each other as equals. In *The Betrothal in Santo Domingo*, Kleist represents the conflict as race war; in his youthful *Schroffenstein* as a family feud on Shakespearean lines. A Schroffenstein may love anyone, save only the enemy from the fraternal branch. That Wagner, too, wanted to make the adulterous love of Tristan and Isolde yet more impossible than in the original can be seen from his heightening of one of Gottfried's motifs. In Wagner's Morold, whom Tristan kills, is no longer merely Isolde's uncle, but her future husband. His murderer, then, should not become her lover, twice or three times over, after her solemn vows of revenge. One draught is enough for them to fall into each other's arms, if with what convulsions, and in that bell-jar atmosphere, striking sparks and thick enough to cut and stab oneself in: while over all hangs that trinity of concupiscence, religion and cruelty found everywhere in Kleist, and whose reflection in Wagner would fill Baudelaire with enthusiasm.

It would not have escaped Wagner that Kleist also dealt with love at odds with the world in the variant Thomas Mann took for his story, *The Blood of the Walsungs*: that love of one's own flesh and blood, the eroticism of incest. In Kleist's *Marquise of O* . . . we are shown only one love scene: long, 'hot, thirsty' kisses are exchanged—between daughter and father. In his *Foundling*, the devil's son falls upon his mother. Wagner had

already broached the theme in *Rienzi*. In *The Valkyries*, sister becomes her brother's bride—to the outrage of Arthur Schopenhauer who, at the stage-direction, 'The curtain falls quickly' at the end of the first Act of *The Valkyries*, scribbled in the margin of the copy of *The Ring* Wagner had sent him as a mark of esteem, an indignant: 'High time!'; at another point, 'A slap in the face of morality!'; and, at Siegmund and Sieglinde's duet: 'This is infamy'.

Wagner was put out for years to come by the lack of any encouraging word from the philosopher. It is characteristic that he consoled himself that 'This is how Goethe treated Kleist', as he told Cosima. For a moment one can see how close he felt to the man for whom his uncle, despite the silver cup, had not shied away from altercation.

Sin of his youth

As a youth in Leipzig, with Adolf, he had dodged grammar school and brooded in secret over his first work, the Gothic drama, *Leubald and Adelaide*. A tragedy with twenty-four corpses, *Leubald* is more than just a juvenile curiosity, on two accounts. It was through this play that Richard found his true calling. When it flopped—even Adolf was appalled—Wagner concluded that it had done so for one lapse alone: there was no music. It was solely in order to rescue his *Leubald* that he borrowed a text on composition from the lending library, and secretly took up music lessons again. 'Oh! I am no composer', he complained to Cosima as late as 1870, 'I only wanted to learn enough to put *Leubald and Adelaide* to music; and so it is still, only the plots have changed.' But then again, not changed so very greatly; and this is the second reason why *Leubald* can still teach us so much. In this youthful work, sources still bubble naively to the surface that later will be capped, and sink down to the depths.

The first inspiration for *Leubald*—the only one Wagner mentions in his autobiography—was Shakespeare. But careful reading of the play has shown that he was not alone. As well as *Hamlet* and other Shakespearean dramas, Wagner's biographer, Robert Gutman, writes that *Leubald* also borrows from Kleist's *Schroffenstein*. He notes, too, that certain verses from *Leubald* could be smuggled into a performance of *Tristan* without most people noticing; and then drops this sin of the composer's youth, without realizing that he has turned his back on a discovery that lay right in front of him.

For Wagner was not finished with *The House of Schroffenstein* once he had written *Leubald*, and even there they entered more deeply than Gutman's half-sentence suggests. The Schroffenstein family is divided into two lines. Ottokar, Kleist's Romeo, loves the enemy of his branch, the heroine, Agnes. In *Leubald* Wagner follows even the most tortuous steps of Kleist's plot; not only its diffuse murderous frenzy and the climax of the stabbed couple, but also the incarceration, the flight, the gathering of foes in a forest cave. With the same insouciance that Wagner calls his heroine Adelaide, following Beethoven, he keeps his 'Agnes' from Kleist, merely shifting the name from daughter to the wife.

Kleist's Agnes then rests for a while; nothing unusual in Wagner, who had everything assembled from very early on and never let anything drop out of his work; he could save up a motif for twenty years before reusing it just once, and even had his fifty-year-old Symphony in C staged in the year of his death. Nor did he forget his youthful Agnes. When he needs her again, thirty years after *Leubald*, she rises from her couch in the chamber of his memory and takes with Tristan the philtre that pulls the blindfold from their eyes and tears open their hearts.

By rights, they should kill one another: Ottokar, his mortal enemy, Agnes; Isolde, the traitor Tristan. They are divided from one another by oath; blood-guilt hovers between them; he owes a duty to his line. Mistrust, lurking passion, mortal dread and desire thicken the atmosphere till Isolde cries out: 'Air! Air! Or my heart will choke!'

The plot turns on a potion. In Kleist, too, drinking is the turning-point. In the first scene of the third Act of *Schroffenstein*, the secret lovers meet. Ottokar scoops up clear spring water in his hat and offers it to Agnes. She imagines it to be poisoned but drinks it nonetheless, believing she is choosing *Liebestod*. 'He brings water: he brings me poison. So be it, I shall drink it all.' As so often later, in Wagner, the two talk suggestively past one another. Ottokar praises the water: it is as good as medicine. Agnes replies: 'For suffering.' Twice she talks of her 'recovery'; Ottokar does not realize that recovering from life is what she intends. Wagner, too, liked ambiguity: when Tristan grasps that Isolde is offering him a deadly potion, he says: 'I take this cup now, that today my cure may be complete'. In both Wagner and Kleist, the moment comes in which all four believe they are drinking poison. Ottokar, at last suspicious of her delphic answers, presses Agnes more searchingly. She confesses she

knows all and has drunk the poison. 'OTTOGAR: Poison?' Understanding there is something deadly about the water, he responds, as Isolde after him, tearing the hat—or cup—out of the other's hand. Isolde cries: 'Half to me!'. 'OTTOGAR: Give it to me, I'll die with you. *He drinks.*' All four down the aqueous venom, which does not fail to liberate the soul. It works quickly and identically on both couples: 'AGNES: Ottokar! *She flings her arms around his neck*'—'TRISTAN: Isolde!'—'ISOLDE (*sinking upon his breast*). The pretended deadly potion releases their love; instead of sinking into the grave, they collapse into each other's arms. Is she all his? asks Ottokar. Agnes replies: 'All yours, without limit'. In one drama as in the other, the 'spectre of suspicion' and 'misleading magic's treacherous art' are renounced forever, in both, the lovers move towards their final union—the potion has done its duty. That Wagner had *Schroffenstein* word for word in his head during all this can be read from his stage directions. The famous scene, is literally a paraphrase. In Kleist's play: '*She drinks, while gazing fixedly at him.*' In Wagner: '*She drinks . . . Both . . . gaze . . . fixedly into one another's eyes.*' What these deep glances lead to has been well-known, ever since August von Platen's *Tristan*. Agnes and Ottokar end up in a cave, exchange clothes and a nuptial kiss; then their fathers stab them to death.

Curious, all of it—everywhere ambiguities and splittings: Ottokar in women's clothes, Agnes in men's; bites which turn to kisses; dogs which bound out of the cellar to tear the lover's flesh; the painful pleasure of tearing the bandage from the wound that will not close—'Heia, my blood! Now gaily flow!'; magic philtres that instead of love mean death. What secret is there in the lees of the potion, and what is it about this love, that an Alberich always curses it, that it is always displaced to the beyond and to the maternal womb of the night; that nothing less than an earthquake must devastate Chile, or a racial massacre ravage Haiti, should it once—an exception immediately punished—be consummated? In *Schroffenstein*, Kleist's Shakespearean fool replies: 'In happiness? That cannot be, my friend. It's bolted from inside.' If that is it, if happiness in love is not only denied externally but blocked within, then the potion that releases it can only destroy: a toxin, an acid that eats away the armour; gunpowder, at last. When the bolt is loosened it is on the pistol in Kleist's mouth, by the Wannsee.

Wagner was more robust; and softer, too. In him, the rift did not run through granite. But the last words he wrote—and here, for once, life

pulls itself together and follows art without a murmur—in his essay *On the Feminine in the Human*, before a heart spasm shook the pen from his hand, are: ‘Love—tragedy’. He had announced *Tristan* as a monument to the love which could not be enjoyed on earth. And Tristan himself does not enjoy it long, but rages against the drink that has kept him alive: ‘Accursed be the dread potion, accursed be he who brewed thee!’ But it is he himself who has brewed it, as he explains, ‘With father’s need and mother’s grief, love’s tears, then and always.’ The passage, externally quite unmotivated, reads like the result of self-inquiry. There must have been some early psychic damage that caused Wagner to let the potions flow into one another; some wounds that his art must go on feeling again and again, like the tongue running over a gap in the gums, even though nothing could be healed and everything remained open to the end.

But it could bring relief, and it kept its maker alive. Wagner turned seventy and did not die until, with *Parsifal*, all was done. The magician had a sound and artful way of being sick.