

Michael Kohlhaas

H. von Kleist

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Two Kleists back to back. I am in the same predicaments with the previous novella, what do I recall, what do I remember? And could it be, humiliating thought, that Kleist's German is too advanced for me, that I simply missed the point? That it all was in a foggy landscape, you get the gist, but you miss significant detail. After all there is a point in having translations, even from languages you pride yourself on commanding. In fact I have since a long time tried to read this particular novella but always having to give up, losing my footing. Let us face it Kleist is difficult to read, an involved and intricate syntax, in which you may easily get lost and stuck. Such attempts go back more than twenty years, but then during a bicycling visit in Berlin in the summer of 2014 I found a collection of his works on sale in a small bookstore, a small yellow Reclam edition in fact, ideal to bring on a bike. And then finally I made another concerted effort, all meant as preparation for returning to this particular work.

The beginning is lucid and sticks in my mind. Kohlhaas deals with horses, but due to some bureaucratic whim, he needs to pay a high toll to bring his horses to a new little principality of which Germany was dotted in former idyllic times. Maybe not so idyllic. Customs he had not had to pay before, it was probably just a ruse, a guy wanting a little bribe, but if so Kohlhaas is far too high-minded, and that is of course dangerous. He has to settle his horses somewhere and he puts them in a nearby castle owned by an unscrupulous villain of sorts, more intent upon partying and harassment than anything else. When he returns he find his horses in sorry shape, they have been mistreated, and he had to pay for their upkeep to boot. He is furious at the injustice he has suffered, it may be rather trivial compared to what life always has in store for you, but that very fact even makes it worse, because after all it is not the severity that counts but the principle. The abstract principle of justice, just as we may get very well worked up by someone who lies, even if the lie by itself is inconsequential, it is the fact of lying that upset us, not the lie itself. Justice and the Love of Truth are intimately connected. Kohlhaas wants justice done. He appeals to men of power in order to engage them for his cause. His wife is sent on a mission, and returns dying.

Now the stakes are higher, the fury more intense, the allure of reckless action almost irresistible. In fact it turns out to be irresistible, he sells his house liquidates his firm, and engages on an act of vengeance, burning down the castle where he suffered his initial offense killing all its inhabitants, except the villain himself who manages to sneak out, but then not being content with this alone, but going on a veritable rampage with a gang of bravados, joining forces with an outlaw, spreading fear, as well as admiration. Of course he will stop once justice has been done. The German word 'Rache' has a stronger sense, it seems, than mere revenge. The Swedish 'hämnd' too is stronger, but I hold 'Rache' strongest, it gives me associations of ruthlessness, bestiality almost, something raw and furious. Sweet is revenge, we say in English and Swedish, but in German it is not süß , it

goes beyond that, or at least so I imagine. This is the lasting impression of the short book, the identification with the hapless character, whose transgressions, although abominable, still manages to enlist your sympathy. It is the old story of the underdog, we rejoice in its getting the better of its oppressors, in fact no fighting back is too strong, too unwarranted. Now of course there are many strands in the plot, minor ones, which I tend to forget, because after all it is a story of 'Rache', desperate, unforgiving, relentless and reckless, you name it, anything else in the story is subsidiary. Yet as in the previous case I may be gently reminded by consulting some outside sources. And after all, maybe I have missed something?

Essentially not. The horses were left as a pledge by the Junker, and Kohlhaas found out when he came to Dresden, what he no doubt always suspected, that it was all a ruse. And the Junker that escaped plays an important role in the persecution of our vengeful hero, that I have forgotten. In Wittemberg there is a meeting with Luther, who disapproves of his acts (one would think so) but is instrumental in negotiating a truce allowing our man to go to Dresden and seek justice. In the city he enjoys his immunity. But his dismantled band collects itself under an outlaw and spreads fear and destruction. I guess those things having been conflated in memory, memory often does so for the sake of economy, consolidating the similar into a unity. Kohlhaas manages to dissociate himself from the outlaw, but this offers to liberate him, because after all he is in captivity, a fact that only has dawned on him eventually. He realizes that he is not free but lives under house arrest. Given that Kohlhaas is tempted to take up on the offer and a messenger is sent for communication, but intercepted by the authorities. The mischief has been done, and Kohlhaas is in dire straits. It all starts to come back to me. Kohlhaas is condemned to death, hardly surprising. But somehow, there is a small subsidiary plot, in which Kohlhaas has come in possession of a piece of paper on which the prophecy concerning the Kurfürst of Saxony and his fate as a ruler is written down. All attempts to get hold of it has foundered and in the end, Kohlhaas manages to swallow it before he is executed, and the Kurfürst gets so upset that he has a mental breakdown.

OK. Mission accomplished. A review of sorts have hastily been put together in a frenzy.

October 17, 2017 **Ulf Persson:** *Prof.em, Chalmers U.of Tech., Göteborg Sweden* ulfp@chalmers.se