

## Der Zweikampf

*H. von Kleist*

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Vintage Kleist. I read it on the train ride from Łódź to the ferry at Swinoujście after my most recent adventure on bicycle in Poland. What is it all about? It is set in Medieval times and has the charm and feeling of an old chronicle. This is the pervading feeling that stays in memory, more than three months after reading it, I am very hard pressed to recall it, let alone write an accurate and understandable synopsis of it. One could of course cheat, maybe look it up at Wikipedia and in that way at least get the old associations going, because surely they must still be smouldering somewhere. Another solution, maybe the only honest one, is to read the story again, but that would take too long a time and I am set to finish the volume of essays tonight before I take off. How much easier would it not have been if I had stuck to my normally disciplined ways of writing down when everything is still fresh in my mind. And is that not the whole point? After all the habit is a kind of reading diary and as with all diaries they should be written on the spot, as Collingwood notes, mere mental recollections do not count as sources for history. But honestly what do I remember really? It all takes place in high society, thus among dukes and counts, the simple people so to speak, led not life interesting and extravagant enough to serve as material for the kind of novels Kleist loved to write. There is a young lady being violated and there is some man falsely accused. There is the issue of honor which can only be settled in the manly way of fighting each other face to face. What better way to show your worth, prove your innocence or at least to establish respect. I recall that the good guy is almost killed by the bad one. In fact he is taken for dead, but miraculously recovers, to the satisfaction of everyone, including the reader, and the latter is the real challenge to a writer. After all his business is to make the reader care about what is only made up. In fact, when skillfully done, readers may become more engaged in fictional characters than real. The former are larger than life, and then I also include contemporary celebrities and people of the past long since dead, yet kept in the public imagination, such as Plato, Newton, Goethe, because fiction lives in the imagination, and for people with imagination, that is what the liveliest takes place. But back to the book. Let me look it all up again, cheating against the most sacred of my rules. (Anyway I have done my best, or almost my best, so in order not to disappoint the reader I have to supply something.)

OK. It all starts out with a murder. The victim and his brother were not on the best of terms. Could he be the one who did it? There is a weapon that indicates it. It all starts to come back to me. And there is of course a motive, concerning a change in line of inheritance, from which he would benefit, would the brother die. But he has an alibi, he was at the time of the kill secretly involved with a widow (young and sexy as they often were in the past), and he produces a proof a ring that had once belonged to her dead husband. Of course this is compromising for the widow and a gallant fellow tries to resurrect her reputation at the same court in Basel as the accused brother had presented his fateful alibi. The only way, and here I seem to remember rightly, is to have an honest

fight, a 'Zweikampf' ('Envig' in Swedish, but what is the English word? probably does not exist, at least not in the same way). The good guy loses and hence must be considered the guilty one and is condemned to death. No beating around the bush here in those heroic times. But, as I recall, he miraculously recovers from his near fatal wounds, while the victor with mere superficial wounds is struck with an infection and eventually expires. That I did not remember, but surely recalls once prompted. But before he does so, he is overcome with remorse and admits his guilt. The gallant officer marries the widow and as a wedding gift they get the estates of the dead count and brother. Happy Ending.

Maybe a bit trivial? Good stories usually are when a synopsis is made. The story itself being of less importance than the delivery. Fiction is not concerned with content, just form. In fact the story, maybe because of its simplemindedness was not well received initially and only did get its proper due in the 20th century. But what lingers on is the impression of a colorful medieval painting, and that was its main purpose I suspect. Vintage Kleist.

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