

KLOPSTOCK, FREDRICH GOTTLIEB

Klopstock's Work. Friedrich Gottlieb Klopstock (1723-1803) lives into the century beyond, and in many ways is evidence of energies fermenting the future, in Enlightenment German thinking. It is not that he was fully aware of these gifts fermenting inside himself, for his great passion, from early on in life, was to complete a masterpiece, *Der Messias* (The Messiah), which was to link him to the efforts of John Milton, in *Paradise Lost* (1667), which were part of the great past. What powers Klopstock, as poet, could carry into the future of literature were to come from his lyric poetry—his volume of *Odes* (published in 1771) is today much more appreciated than his *Messias*, of which a distinguished scholar wrote that 'of all the religious poems of the world, the *Messias* is unquestionably the most monotonous and difficult to read.' (Of his lyrics, an equally notable critic observed that Klopstock was 'the greatest lyric poet between Walther von der Vogelweide and Goethe.') Who was this Klopstock?

Klopstock's Life. Klopstock was born in 1724 in Quedlinburg, eldest son of a lawyer. In 1739 he was sent to the outstanding classical gymnasium in Schulpforta, where he made his first acquaintance with Homer's epics—largely through the translation of the Swiss writer, Bodmer—and began conceiving of a long epic poem of his own, which was to gestate into the *Messias*, the thirty cantos of which would not ultimately be published until 1773, although sections of the work were appearing from 1751 on. For University Klopstock went to Jena, where at first he was to study theology, at which he was a brilliant thinker, but one endlessly going back to his epic visions. After Jena he spent some time working as a private tutor, then went to visit Bodmer in Zuerich. At that point a conflict of lifestyles—Klopstock was always the active one, social and expansive, a superb horseman—divided the two men's tastes, and as Klopstock, in the manner of literary men in his time, was sizing up his opportunities for the next move, among the princely court supporters, he drew the attention of King Frederick V of Denmark, and went to Copenhagen. His pleasure, and soon sadness, were wrapped up in this trip north, for on the way he met his wife Margaret Moeller, who died four years later—leaving him, in sadness, with the memory of the happiest years of his life. Not much later, the King of Denmark died, and Klopstock returned to Hamburg, to spend there the remainder of his life.

The achievement of Klopstock. The *Messias*, by general agreement, foundered on the impossibility of its theme, to dramatize and hallow Christ's Redemption of the world. (Milton had tried the challenge, in *Paradise Regained*, and by general consent was much less successful than in describing the drama of the Fall.) It is, though, noteworthy that in this huge epic, 20,000 lines, Klopstock made a prosodic decision which was game changing for German poetry. Instead of composing in French alexandrine lines, the ruling Latinate form of French classical literature, Klopstock created in hexameters, the verbal form of Greek and Latin poetry. The result was a greatly invigorated inheritance for future German poetry. In his lyrics, however, he carried his historical presence further, by reaching out, in genuine feeling—that is, relatively free of the neoclassical icing required at the time—to express feelings, about poetry, friendship, love, nature, which are of a very promising freshness, and pervaded by fully realized religious feeling.

The challenge. Why was the challenge facing the *Messias* so difficult? Why did Milton struggle to try to deal with the redemption of man, in *Paradise Regained*, and why was he unsuccessful? Can you identify other long poems which attempt to deal with religious matters—not with the religious sentiment but with religious doctrine and sacred history? Would you say that Dante's *Divine Comedy* is an example of what we are talking about? If so, was that work successful, and how?

Reading

Primary source reading

Hilliard, K., *Philosophy, Letters, and the Fine Arts in Klopstock's Thought*, 1987.

Secondary source reading

Kohl, K. Rhetoric, *The Bible, and the Origins of Free Verse: the early Hymns of Friedrich Gottlieb Klopstock*, 1990.

Further reading

Lee, Meredith, *Displacing Authority: Goethe's Poetic Reception of Klopstock*, 1999.

Original language reading

Buerger, Christa, *Tradition und Subjektivitaet*, 1980.

Suggested paper topics

Take a look at Boileau's *Art Poétique* (1674) to get the spirit of French neo-classical poetry of the 17th century, the poetry of the dramas of Racine and Corneille. You will see the importance of formal issues, many resting on the model use of the alexandrine line. Klopstock first started to write the *Messias* in alexandrines, then switched to hexameters. What was important about that change? What kind of statement was it about the direction of German poetry? What kind of move was Klopstock making, to redirect German poetry away from the French model?

Are there topics which are impossible to write about in imaginative literature? (I reference Klopstock's effort to deal with the Christian Redemption.) Even Milton had trouble with certain aspects of theology, but why? Is 'sacred literature' not accessible to the imagination? Does this issue come up in our time? What about the case of Salman Rushdie's *Satanic Verses*? Is the problem there one of 'blasphemy' or one of the misadjustment of theme to literary imagination?

Excerpt <http://www.poemhunter.com/poem/hermann-and-thusnelda/>

Hermann and Thusnelda

Ha! there comes he, with sweat, with blood of Romans,
And with dust of the fight all stained! O, never
Saw I Hermann so lovely!
Never such fire in his eyes!

Come! I tremble for joy; hand me the Eagle,
And the red, dripping sword! come, breathe, and rest thee;
Rest thee here in my bosom;
Rest from the terrible fight!

Rest thee, while from thy brow I wipe the big drops,
And the blood from thy cheek! --- that cheek, how glowing!
Hermann! Hermann! Thusnelda
Never so loved thee before!

No, not then when thou first, in old oak-shadows,
With that manly brown arm didst wildly grasp me!
Spell-bound I read in thy look
That immortality, then,

Which thou now hast won. Tell to the forests,
Great Augustus, with trembling, amidst his gods now,
Drinks his nectar; for Hermann,
Hermann immortal is found!

'Wherefore curl'st thou my hair? Lies not our father

Cold and silent in death? O, had Augustus
Only headed his army, ---
He should lie bloodier there!

Let me lift up thy hair; 'tis sinking, Hermann;
Proudly thy locks should curl above the crown now!
Sigmar is with the immortals!
Follow, and mourn him no more.