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Wildness and Revolution in Joseph von Eichendorff's "Das Schloß Dürande"

Baron von Eichendorff's story "Das Schloß Dürande" concerns the French Revolution. The author could be expected to give a rather partisan view of the subject, being a German nationalist, a member of an old aristocratic family, a zealous Catholic, a veteran of two wars against Napoleon in which he took part as a volunteer, and, perhaps needless to add, a conservative. We might with reason expect that "Das Schloß Dürande" will turn out a piece of rather crude anti-revolutionary, or maybe even anti-French, propaganda, but this does not seem to be the case, although the work in question is indeed, beyond reasonable doubt, anti-revolutionary.

Eichendorff's literary criticism contains, to be sure, some scathing remarks against the so called *Deutschfranzosen* ("Frenchified Germans"), who were numerous and influential especially in the eighteenth century, and who gravitated towards Paris as the capital of the civilised world.¹ This in itself puts Eichendorff in a rather paradoxical position as a conservative and as a romantic, in the former capacity he is obliged to defend the traditional forms of the European civilisation, in the latter he feels duty bound to pour scorn on those who seem to imitate that "European civilisation" too eagerly, i.e. at the expense of their own nationality. They are shown as hybrid creatures whose condition is essentially homeless and nomadic, they belong nowhere.

¹ Cf. Joseph von Eichendorff, "Geschichte der poetischen Literatur Deutschlands", in *Ausgewählte Werke*, in 5 vols, ed. Hans A. Neunzig (München: Nymphenburger Verlagshandlung GmbH, 1987), vol. 5, pp. 139 and 189.

Speaking about the language societies that came into being in Germany in the eighteenth century, he says the following:

Their common and very topical purpose was to purify the German language that had gone wild (*die verwilderte deutsche Sprache*) and to emancipate it from the oppression of Latin, which had overwhelmed the language of educated people; their models were the so-called “academies” that had long before arisen in Italy for the sake of the refinement (*Veredelung*) of the vulgar speech.²

The concept of the language that has “gone wild” is here associated, surprisingly enough, with the idea of getting rid of the supposedly excessive influence of Latin, even though Latin was in those times, and for some people still is, synonymous with high civilisation. It seems then that you may become a barbarian, at least in Eichendorff’s eyes, if you follow civilisation too closely, and thus wildness and bookish learning are by no means mutually exclusive. It may also be observed that Eichendorff is speaking here the language of a modernist, and of a *quasi* revolutionary who wholeheartedly approves of an attempt to free the language of his country from the dead wood of the past. On the other hand, this process of emancipation is conducted in the name of “purifying” the language, which may mean trying to return to the supposed pristine glory of the times when that language was not yet affected by the corrupting foreign or civilisational influence, a concept that might be called reactionary if it did not appear in even the most radical thinking of all times, cf. for example the Marxist glorification of the so-called “primitive community”. Thus the nationalist thinking in Eichendorff is often curiously reminiscent of a revolutionary discourse, and it shows a rather ambiguous attitude to the concept of wildness.

The author of “The Castle Durande” was born a little more than a year before the outbreak of the French Revolution, and there are reasons to believe that he regarded himself as a child of the Revolution, even though the Revolution might have been, from his point of view, more of a wicked stepmother. He writes, for example, in his autobiographical sketches, of the great impression that the execution of Louis XVI had on his family and on him in his early childhood:

And then came from Racibórz (*Ratibor*) an officer riding across the fields of corn, and he brought us the news of the execution of Louis XVI. A tragic impression. I, however, was looking towards the Carpathians as if having a foreboding of the new times. – Over there a new epoch was raging at full speed...³

The quotation suggests, perhaps with the benefit of hindsight, that he, although only a child of five, fully realised of the importance of what was going on in France

² J. von Eichendorff, “Geschichte der poetischen...”, p. 145.

³ Joseph von Eichendorff, ed. Manfred Häckel, *Eichendorffs Werke in einem Band* (Berlin und Weimar: Aufbau-Verlag, 1978), p. XIV.

at that time, and treated it as the beginning of the new times. Talking about his longest novel, *Ahnung und Gegenwart* ["Presentiment and the Present Time"] he said that it was finished "before the French reached Moscow",⁴ which again suggests that he measured his life with dates and events related to the French social upheavals, or the movements of the French, post-revolutionary army. He also wrote an important study called "The Nobility and the Revolution", a text to which we shall still return.

"Das Schloß Dürande" tells a story of a "man of the people", called Renald, a typical representative of the subordinate class, though by no means a very poor man, a hunter by profession, who has (or thinks he has) reasons to suppose that his younger sister, Gabriella, whose legal guardian he is after the untimely death of their parents, has been kidnapped and seduced by the son of a rich and proud landowner, the Count of Durande. The story is set in France on the eve of and during the Revolution, it develops as if it were a classical tale about an honest commoner who is driven to despair by the cold blooded arrogance and perfidy of the representatives of the *ancien régime*. Renald tries in vain to persuade the old count and his young son, who are his feudal overlords, to disclose the whereabouts of his sister, he then tries to bring the counts to justice through legal action, but to no avail, and he even turns to the king himself, i.e. to Louis XVI, but equally in vain. He is even arrested during his attempt to approach the king, and locked as a dangerous madman, which is done at the instigation of the old Count of Durande, who behaves towards Renald in a typically high-handed and malicious way. Renald manages to escape from the mental institution, and, taking advantage of the Revolution, which has just started, he decides to get his own back on the counts, so he attacks their castle and eventually takes it at the head of a group of zealous revolutionaries. A short time before that happens Gabriella appears again this time trying to come to the young count's rescue, but unfortunately, she gets mortally wounded by the revolutionaries when entering incognito the castle. She meets the count, and it turns out that much as she has been in love with him, she chose to stay away labouring under an illusion that he was unfaithful towards her and preferred "a beautiful maiden of Paris". The count disabuses her of that false notion and professes his undying love for her, but he soon notices that she is moribund, and cannot be saved. At that moment a bullet flies through a window and hits the count, who dies, as a result, almost simultaneously with his beloved. Renald, when everything is over learns the truth from an old servant of the house. He realises that his suspicions and accusations were completely ungrounded, that virtually nothing happened that could justify his revenge, and all the blood that was spilled, including that of his beloved sister. In an act of despair he sets fire to the powder stored in the conquered castle and blows himself up together with the castle.

⁴ Volkmar Stein, *Joseph von Eichendorff – ein Lebensbild* (Würzburg: Stiftung Kulturwerk Schlesien, 1993), pp. 41–2.

We have here to do with a deeply ironical narrative in which the protagonist's undoubtedly noble instincts and motives turn out to be mainly based on prejudices and misconceptions which he develops by "jumping to the conclusions", although, admittedly, his misconceptions are fuelled by the brutality of the elder count, and the fierce pride of the younger. Eichendorff clearly cannot fully rationalise the revolution, he sees it exactly as an explosion of irrational passions, an explosion that easily becomes completely blind and self-destructive, in keeping with the old tradition of representing the revolution symbolically as a revolving snake ("uroboros") that devours its own tail.⁵ Needless to add, the subject of wildness may well be expected to stand in the centre of the author's interest. And so it is.

The story begins with a vision of the ruins of the castle of Durande, situated in a picturesque, though wild, landscape. Then we are provided with a description of Renald's house, which is a hunter's lodge, displaying an imposing pair of antlers above its entrance, and often approached quite closely by wild animals. The latter are called in the story, *das Wild*, literally "the wild", which can also be translated as "game", although the word can also be applied to a single animal. It is also at the very beginning that we can see Renald as a hunter of people lying in wait for his "wild", i.e. for the mysterious seducer of his sister: "from time to time the barking of a dog could be heard from the villages, or the screaming of the wild animals (*den Schrei des Wildes*) in the wood. He, however, paid no attention to this, he was taking aim at quite a different wild animal (*ein ganz anderes Wild*)".⁶ The scene is indeed quite heavily fraught with wildness, the symmetrical wildness of the hunter and the hunted, the wildness of the wild animals, the wildness, or madness of the madly jealous brother, and "wildness" of the young aristocrat which is that of a scapegoat, innocently threatened with a violent death, but also that of a woman hunter, a seducer who is well aware of his position of superiority towards women (and men) of the lower class. The dialectics of the hunter and the hunted is of course one of the central, and recurrent motifs of the story.

The heroine, Gabriella, feels a special affinity with the wild nature. She wants to wander through the woods at night in order to speak and commune with mountains, rivers, and trees. She is ready to interpret a peal of thunder as a greeting from her beloved. She tells her monastery friend, Renate, an unfinished fairy tale the main motif of which is an escape from a castle guarded by a "dreadful giant". On the name-day of the monastery's prioress, the nuns are allowed to take part in a grape harvest during which Gabriella climbs the highest lime-tree in the vicinity in order to see the world around and to listen to migratory birds, in consequence of which she is scolded by the prioress and called "a wild wood bird", which makes

⁵ Cf. M. Oesterreicher-Mollwo, *Leksykon symboli*, trans. J. Prokopiuk (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo ROK Corporation SA, 1992), p. 115.

⁶ J. von Eichendorff, *Eichendorffs Werke...*, p. 271. [The translation of all Eichendorff quotations is mine.]

her wish that she really were a bird. Soon afterwards she sees fleetingly her young count Durande when he is leading a group of hunters. The Prioress, on seeing him, calls him "a falcon that is followed by a pigeon", a reference to his trailing behind him a white scarf which Gabriella lost on the night when Renald tried to shoot the count.

During Renald's conversation with the old count the former tries to obtain a leave in order to find his lost sister, the count guesses, wrongly as it turns out later, that she must have been together with his son, and describes the young count as "a young, wild swan that must be plucked, but with moderation". Under the weight of such malicious allusions Renald shivers in a helpless rage and is compared to a lion that is tied up (*ein gefesselter Löwe*). In his conversation with a revolutionary agitator who plays a rather sinister part in the story, the latter tries to stir his anger towards the count by calling the aristocrats, "the lords of the forest, to whom all wild animals (*das Wild*), of lower and upper regions, belong", and referring to the "simple people", the mythical "us" by saying: "Aren't we accursed dogs that lick the shoes that kick us?"⁷ The discourse of the wild is strongly contrasted here with that of the tame, but the boundaries between the two are not so clear at all. The aristocrats are shown as those that want the people tame, but also as those who derive all their pride from exercising some control over the creatures of the wilderness, i.e. from being, like the young Durande, essentially hunters.

Hence comes perhaps the most interesting aspect of "The Castle Durande", the fascination of the counts Durande, and of the aristocracy in general inasmuch as they are symbolical of it, with wildness in general, and the wildness of the revolution in particular. The old count is very ill when he learns about the successful escape of Renald from the mental asylum. It is a great blow for him and for those under him:

There was a lot of confused running to and fro in the whole of the castle; the count was seated on his velvet bed. There he tried in vain to rise, sinking back he shouted: "Who says that Renald is not mad?" Since nobody spoke, he lowered his voice; "You don't know Renald, he can become terrible, like a raging fire – does one leave a murderous animal at large? – A lion is beautiful when it shakes its mane, if only it were not so bloodthirsty!"⁸

A short time afterwards the old count dies in a sublime mood, having a vision of his long deceased wife who becomes in his mind almost identical with the Blessed Virgin. In a somewhat similar fashion the young Durande suffers from a great ennui in the context of which the news of the revolution casts a kind of spell on him:

⁷ Ibid., p. 287.

⁸ Ibid., p. 298.

The ball was not yet over, but the young count had heard there a lot of wonderful things about the fiery signs of a revolution, about the secret movements of fully armed military units, about the Jacobins, "friends of the people", and the Royalists, so that his heart swelled as if a windstorm were drawing near. . . . Furious and exhausted, he threw himself on the coach. "I am so tired", he said, "tired of desire and always more desire, boring desire! I wish there were a war!"⁹

His wish is of course granted sooner than he expects. The count finds his class pride in the face of the deadly danger. He addresses his faithful retinue of hare hunters in the following way:

"We have long enough played at war in the wood", he said "now the hunt turns against us, we are now the wild animals (*das Wild*), we must get through. What shall it be! Another lunatic asylum is thrown open, a raging St Vitus's dance is going on in the whole country, and Renald accompanies it on his violin. I have nothing to do with the people, I did them nothing but good, if they wanted something even better, they should have demanded it in an honest way, I would have given them willingly, but I'm not going to be scared into giving up a single piece of my ancestral land, I defy their defiance!"¹⁰

Being of a hunter race, the count certainly found running with the hares a rather novel experience. The revolution is from his point of view first of all a fascinating, though evil, hunt, made perhaps even more fascinating through the fact that he and his class have become hunted animals.

Eichendorff in his work "The Nobility and the Revolution" ["Der Adel und die Revolution"] refers to the process of the softening or decomposition of the aristocratic class solidarity through the ideology of the Enlightenment, in which he distinguishes a true and a false enlightenment:

The problem was no longer one thing or another, it was life in its entirety that was problematic, Satan was being driven away with Beelzebub, it was a war of everybody against everybody else. A crass materialism was inseparable from bodiless abstractions, a delicate humanism was fraternising with the bestiality of the mob, the pigheaded mankind was hurried with blood hounds to a new happiness, philosophy, superstition, and atheism were crashing into each other, so that in the raging confusion nobody knew any more the friend from the enemy.¹¹

According to Eichendorff, who has mainly German conditions in mind, the attitudes of the nobility towards the revolution varied, and ranged from instinctive, and bloodthirsty hostility, through pretended indifference, to a suicidal attitude of an unhealthy fascination in the case of the most bored noblemen who treated the

⁹ Ibid., pp. 288, 289.

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 302.

¹¹ J. von Eichendorff, "Der Adel und die Revolution", in *Ausgewählte Werke*, in 5 vols, Vol. 4, p. 364.

revolution as: "a highly refined amusement, and were jumping headlong into the flaming crater of the volcano".¹² The noblemen in "The Castle Durande" certainly do not go that length, but they also are fundamentally ineffectual, world weary and show a suicidal drive and a predilection for pompous gestures, which makes the old count desire to blow up the whole castle, an intention that is paradoxically fulfilled later by his enemy. Significantly enough, the latter, though a commoner, follows also the noble, even if somewhat anachronistic, occupation of a hunter.

The final words of "The Castle Durande" summarise well the above sketched theme of wildness and madness, and express also succinctly the conservative message of the tale:

These are the ruins of the castle Durande, that appear overgrown with vine among woody hills on beautiful spring days. – You, however, take care not to awake the wild animal in your breast, so that it doesn't suddenly break free and devour yourself.¹³

¹² Ibid., p. 356.

¹³ J. von Eichendorff, *Eichendorffs Werke...*, p. 313.