

ULRIKE KINDL

(Università “Ca’ Foscari”, Venezia)

*Klopstock’s Messiah – a belated sparkle of Medieval epics?*

*Summary.* F.G. Klopstock’s eighteenth century poem *Der Messiah* has always been considered by scholars amongst the most valuable works of German literature, an essential prerequisite to the masterpieces of Weimar classicism. Yet, although upon its first complete publication in 1780 it was welcomed as a “national poem”, the work never enjoyed a wide fame among the audience and today is almost totally neglected. There are few examples in the history of world literature of such a disconnect between the fame conferred by ivory tower scholars and the cheery insouciance of the wider public. How did this happen?

My suspicion is that from the very start, there has been a misunderstanding of the reception of the *Messiah*: this monstrous epic might be defined as all sorts of things – edifying literature, eloquent strophic poem, even as the beginning and foundation of modern German literature – but not as the German national epic. Not by any stretch of the imagination.

In this essay it will be shown that *Der Messiah* is twice contradictory: first of all as for its formal features; and then also for the subject it deals with.

While he was still a student at the princely school of Schulpforta,<sup>1</sup> Klopstock (1724-1803) made up his mind to write an epic. In all probability, he envisioned a German national epic – whatever he and his contemporaries thought that meant. Early sources<sup>2</sup> report that the young poet considered a genuinely German subject matter such as the historical legends associated with the emperor Henry I, “The Fowler” (876-936), the first great ruler of the Saxonian royal line. Perhaps he was already thinking of the Cheruscan leader Arminius, a figure that was to be at the centre of a trilogy of plays Klopstock would

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<sup>1</sup> Klopstock was a student at this famous classical school between 1739 and 1745. In his graduation address, delivered in Latin, the young graduate solemnly pledged to help create a new German literature.

<sup>2</sup> The writing of the *Messiah* has been thoroughly researched. Cf. the Hamburg Klopstock edition, Gronemeyer et al. (1974-76). The *Messiah* takes up “Abteilung Werke” IV/1-6, ed. by Elisabeth Höpker-Herberg, 1974-1999; volume 3 (1996) contains the apparatus as well as notes on the formation of the text, its history and that of its printed editions, transmissions etc., esp. pp. 187-243.

write later in his life. Germanised into “Hermann” and elevated to the status of patron saint of the movement for German unification in the nineteenth century,<sup>3</sup> the ancient Arminius had the potential to become something of a national “messias”. Klopstock, however, chose an entirely different and very audacious path, ultimately doomed to failure by its very ambitiousness. More on that below.

Mostly through the reception of the Grimm school, the originally northern Germanic Siegfried eventually took on the role of German national hero. In accordance with contemporary courtly tastes, he was made a royal prince of Xanten in the Medieval Nibelung epic.

The appropriation of Old and Middle German literature, particularly its epics, as national cultural treasures was part and parcel of the complicated history of the formation of the German nation state. Starting with the idea of a modern nation emerging during the late Enlightenment period, German unification became a political movement during the era of Romanticism. Klopstock was part of the vast process of myth-creation that took place during this historical phase<sup>4</sup> – not, however, as the author of the German national epic. As a result of a highly complex sequence of events, this role fell to the Nibelung epic, long after Klopstock’s death.

It is highly doubtful that Klopstock even knew the grandiose works of Middle High German epic literature. The rediscovery of the German Middle Ages only began during the age of Romanticism.<sup>5</sup> As much as the older Klopstock might have contributed to the awakening of a German national consciousness, the young Klopstock at the beginning of his literary career was still very much a product of the more cosmo-politically minded Enlightenment, an avid admirer of the educational ideals of antiquity and an equally fervent advocate of the universalistic concept of Christian salvation.<sup>6</sup> In fact,

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<sup>3</sup> Cf. in particular Heinrich von Kleist’s *Hermannsschlacht* (1808); note the creation of Hermann’s myth as the first “founding figure” in the Berlin Museum of German Art, leading the procession of great Germans on the relief adorning the staircase.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Fischer (1995).

<sup>5</sup> We owe the recovery of Old and Middle High German literature mainly to the activities of the Grimm brothers, who are the true founding fathers of German Studies. One of the most important members of the Grimm circle, Karl Lachmann (1793-1851), produced a great many editions of Middle High German texts; many of them still constitute the gold standard for text editing. Lachmann’s critical editions started appearing in the 1830s, i.e. after Klopstock’s death. Cf. Weddige (2001).

<sup>6</sup> From the point of view of enlightened thought, the choice of the *Messias*’ subject matter is surprising: the increasingly widespread secularization was already on its way to denying the objective truth of religious concepts. Klopstock was fully aware of the provocative nature of

the education he received at Schulpforta was entirely geared toward the Greek and Latin classics. As a student of theology in Jena and Leipzig, he never lost sight of his classical roots. Initially, he even read the great epic that was to become the inspiration for his *Messias* – Milton's (1608-1674) *Paradise Lost* (1667), not in the English original, but in Bodmer's German translation.<sup>7</sup> This nascent national epic, the *Messias*, was strange both in terms of its content and its form. Taking his cue from his two most important sources, the Bible and Bodmer's prose translation of *Paradise Lost*, Klopstock wrote the first draft of the *Messias* in prose. Only later did he decide to use the – not very German – metre of classical ancient epics. In addition, he drew his material from an entirely un-epic source: the Book of Books, the eternal truths of which were guaranteed for Christian believers through revelation. His epic did not exalt a German national hero, but Christ himself; it did not deal with tragic fates and heroic battles, but with Christian doctrine. Unsurprisingly, the *Messias* was initially regarded as a piece of edifying literature rather than the highly anticipated crowning achievement of German literary history.

Still, the publication of the first three books of the *Messias*<sup>8</sup> caused a "Klopstock mania" which, in hindsight, seems hard to understand.<sup>9</sup> In spite of the odd critical voice, the *Messias* was universally celebrated as *the* German national epic and the literary public eagerly awaited subsequent installments. In the end, it took no less than twenty-five years (1748-1773) for the *Messias* to be completed. At the beginning, Klopstock's fame grew exponentially with each new printing. In 1780, the first complete edition of the "epical composition on Biblical themes" (today's classification of the work) appeared. At Klopstock's request, it was subtitled "A Heroic Poem". After the completion of the *Messias*, which ran to ca. 20,000 verses in 20 books, the entire German-speaking public celebrated Klopstock as its national poet; when he died in 1803, he received a nearly royal funeral. Notwithstanding, even at the

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his choice; however, his main focus was not so much religious truth as poetic truthfulness: the ultimate value of the poetical *sujet* as the only material worthy of the *vates*, the poet as the genial creator and prophet of literature. Some critics such as the Enlightenment figure G. E. Lessing (1729-1781) and, somewhat later, the Romanticist A. W. Schlegel (1767-1845), emphatically disapproved of his choice of subject matter, not so much because of religious scruples; on the contrary, they maintained that the truths of scripture are not appropriate for literary creation because literature is not bound by revealed religious truths, but by the creative force of the poet's imagination. Cf. Nienhaus (1998: 1, 308-311).

<sup>7</sup> Cf. *Messias*, III, of the Hamburg Klopstock edition, *ibid.*, esp. pp. 187-243.

<sup>8</sup> Books I-III appeared in vol. 4 of the *Bremer Beiträge*, 1748.

<sup>9</sup> Contrary to widespread opinion about the epic's immediate success, it took some time for it to gain recognition. Only Bodmer's intervention made it an overnight best seller. Cf. Kohl (2000: 30ff).

time, hardly anyone voluntarily read the alleged national epic. Up to this day, Klopstock and his *Messias* are regarded as an integral part of the canon of German Studies, but the work has found hardly any audience even among highly educated readers, let alone a wider public. On this issue, Lessing sardonically comments:

Wer wird nicht einen Klopstock loben?  
Doch wird ihn jeder lesen? – Nein.  
Wir wollen weniger erhoben  
und fleißiger gelesen seyn.<sup>10</sup>

This state of affairs remains unchanged to this day, even though there is no doubt that Klopstock's influence on German literature was far-reaching and can still be felt.<sup>11</sup> There are few examples in the history of world literature of such a disconnect between the fame conferred by ivory tower scholars and the cheery insouciance of the wider public. How did this happen?

My suspicion is that from the very start, there has been a misunderstanding of the reception of the *Messias*. As we have seen, this monstrous epic might be defined as all sorts of things – edifying literature, eloquent strophic poem, even as the beginning and foundation of modern German literature – but not as the German national epic. Not by any stretch of the imagination.

What, then, was Klopstock's own understanding of the concept of "epic" – and why did the groundbreaking work that was to be the crowning glory of German literature have to be an epic? True, Klopstock's idea of devoting his life to the creation of the postulated German national epic, something he had already committed himself to while still a student at Schulpforta, was a huge challenge, even though his choices would turn out to be ill-advised. This was mostly due to two reasons: first, the idea of a Christian epic poem was, its literary merits notwithstanding, already obsolete both in terms of its content and, most of all, its form (notably its genre). Given his time, Klopstock's choice of the epic genre was entirely understandable: for an eighteenth-century reader, the epic was still the highest and most noble form of literary

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<sup>10</sup> "Who would not commend Klopstock?/But would everybody read him? - No./We'd rather be less exalted/and more widely read." [G.E. Lessing, "Sinngedicht an den Leser", *Epi-gramme*, 1752].

<sup>11</sup> With surprising consistency, Klopstock scholars regard the author of the *Messias* as an indispensable precursor of the classical-romantic era who, during its later heyday, was overshadowed and ultimately transcended by it. Cf. Kohl (2000), esp. the section on "Das Klopstock-Bild in der deutschen Literaturgeschichte", p. 4ff.

expression. It must have already been clear to contemporary observers, however, that the creative potential of this particular genre was already spent.<sup>12</sup>

For an eighteenth-century audience, epics were synonymous with the heritage of classical antiquity, most prominently Homer. Starting with the Renaissance, Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey* were joined by Virgil's *Aeneid*, i.e. Latin antiquity. The link was regarded close enough that in some quarters, Klopstock was enthusiastically welcomed as the "German Virgil". Klopstock in fact modelled his work on the Homeric epics, commencing his *Messias* with a Homeric *incipit*:

Sing, unsterbliche Seele, des sündigen Menschen Erlösung [...]

Cf. Homer:

Sage mir, Muse, die Taten des vielgewanderten Mannes [...]  
 Ἄνδρα μοι ἔννεπε, Μοῦσα, πολύτροπον, ὃς μάλα πολλὰ //  
 πλάγχθη [...]

Singe den Zorn, o Göttin, des Peliden Achilleus [...]  
 Μηνιν, ἄειδε, θεα, Πηληϊάδεω Ἀχιλῆος // οὐλομένην [...]

or Virgil's *Aeneid*:

Arma virumque cano, Troiae qui primus ab oris  
 Italiam fato profugus Laviniaque venit Litora [...]

His metric choice was also determined by classical precedents. Klopstock opted for the truly classical Hexameter, not for the Alexandrine metre which Gottsched had declared classical in his *Critische Dichtkunst* (1730) only a few years before Klopstock embarked on his *magnum opus*.<sup>13</sup> Through his influence, the hexameter became for a short time the metre of choice of German classicism – soon to be replaced by iambic blank verse, a metre more suited to the German language. Together with the clumsy six-footed

<sup>12</sup> Cf. Max (1981: 75ff).

<sup>13</sup> Klopstock's choice was very deliberate; in fact, during his studies in Leipzig (1746-1748), the young poet had attended lectures on poetry by no less an authority than Gottsched himself. His views on literature, however, owe less to Gottsched and French classicism, which the latter extolled as a literary role model, than to the Swiss literary critic Bodmer and his ideas about "the miraculous in poetry" (cf. J. J. Bodmer, *Kritische Abhandlung von dem Wunderbaren in der Poesie*, 1740). Klopstock's resolute preference for the ancient metre also found its way into his theoretical writings on poetry, e.g. *Über die Nachahmung des griechischen Sylbenmasses im Deutschen* (1754).

hexameter, the outdated epic genre itself departed from German literary history. Theatre became the new stage for epoch-making literary creations, as can easily be demonstrated by Lessing's *Nathan*, Goethe's *Iphigenie*, and Schiller's theatre.

The claim that Klopstock's *Messias* represents the "first great German epic after the Middle Ages"<sup>14</sup> has a surprisingly tenacious hold on the imagination of German literary historians. They are right in chronological terms, but the connection they postulate between Medieval high literature and Klopstock's epic is highly questionable. As we have asked before, is it not the case that his work marks a failed attempt of monumental proportions to create something novel – so novel that not even the poet himself knew exactly what it was supposed to be? We have already mentioned that in all probability, Klopstock did not even know Old and Middle High German epic literature. He regarded Old French literature, to the extent he knew it, as "novelistic" – in the way we now classify Medieval chivalresque epics as "verse novels". Finally, the Italian tradition, e.g. Dante, Ariosto or Torquato Tasso with their highly complex metrical structures, remained alien to him.

Focusing on the position of the *Messias* in literary history, however, we have to admit that there *is* a common thread leading from the beginnings of Old High German poetry to Klopstock. The *Heliand* and the *Evangeliar* of Otfried von Weissenburg draw on biblical material. The *Muspilli*, an apocalyptic drama,<sup>15</sup> also resembles the last books of the *Messias*. Still, even if Klopstock had known about the existence of these works, he certainly did

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<sup>14</sup> Cf. Frenzel / Frenzel (1991: 195).

<sup>15</sup> The *Heliand*, written around 830 in long alliterative verses, was edited for the first time in 1830. It is a so-called "reader epos", mainly intended to help Christianize the heathen Saxons. The work narrates the story of a heroic Jesus figure, a "hebancuning", in the tradition of Germanic heroic epics. We can safely assume that it was written for a lay audience; it is regarded as the work of a monk from the Fulda school who wanted to bring his biblical source closer to his audience using contemporary stylistic devices. The *Evangelienharmonie* by Otfried von Weissenburg, written ca. 863-70 with end rhymes, belongs to a group of texts associated with the Franconian dialect. The author was a monk in Weissenburg and a student of Hrabanus Maurus. His anthology of texts drawn from the New Testament mainly addressed a learned, clerical audience. Its purpose was less missionary than to produce a text in Old High German comparable with his Latin biblical sources. The *Muspilli*, written in long verses around the year 880 as part of the Old Bavarian literary tradition, seems to display familiarity with both the alliterative rhyming technique of the *Heliand* and the end rhymes of the *Evangelienharmonie*. The main purpose of this compilation of apocalyptic material seems to have been missionary activities. Editions of these and other examples of early German literature, however, only started to appear during the late romantic era; therefore, Klopstock could not have known the texts.

not read a single line of them: the systematic philological treatment of ancient German literature had not yet taken place.

We do not even know whether Klopstock was familiar with Johann Sebastian Bach's (1685-1750) monumental passion oratoria (*Johannespassion*, 1724; *Matthäuspasion*, 1727).<sup>16</sup> Whatever the case, it is clear that he would only be interested in its biblical references. Notwithstanding poetic license, the meaning of the *Messias* rests entirely on the biblical text which Klopstock quoted verbatim again and again. What is more, Klopstock's two proven sources – Milton's *Paradise Lost* and Luther's Bible translation – explicitly do not depend on Medieval literature but on its very opposite: the groundbreaking changes in the world view of the literate public engendered by the Renaissance and the Baroque age which overcame and transcended Medieval thinking.<sup>17</sup>

Klopstock intended to effect a similar renewal by fusing the two basic strands of Western tradition, namely classical antiquity and Christianity, in an artistic creation inspired by the spirit of the German language. Without doubt, he has to be credited with one particular renewal, that of the German language: crafting the language of Luther's Bible translation into a viable literary idiom might be his main achievement.<sup>18</sup>

What he was not able to achieve was the realization of his poetic plan: a true synthesis of ancient and Christian knowledge. His unfortunate choice of the epic genre was one of the main reasons for his failure. The heroic epos did not suit his subject matter, the holy Christian belief; both of them in turn did not agree with a language that was described as "national". This, however, we only know from hindsight. Klopstock's *Messias* is in fact one of the prime examples of this mismatch between form, content and language.

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<sup>16</sup> Throughout his life, Klopstock was very interested in music and took great care to have his songs and hymns properly set to music. Contemporary tastes, however, leaned towards Gluck and Händel. Incidentally, Klopstock was introduced to the latter's *Messiah* (1742) only in 1764. There is no evidence that Baroque cantatas and oratoria had any influence on Klopstock. This constitutes a significant and grievous gap in the scholarly research of Klopstock's life and work.

<sup>17</sup> Cf. Blumenberg (1981). The secularization phenomenon of the medieval worldview and replacement of the medieval closed eschatological system of thought by a new "readability" of the world.

<sup>18</sup> Ladislao Mittner (1964: 175) agrees and writes that the *Messias* is less a poetical masterpiece, "*non tanto un'opera di poesia, quanto una grande azione rinnovatrice compiuta nell'ambito poetico*".

Paradoxically, from a theoretical point of view, Klopstock could not have chosen any other subject. The epic as a genre presupposes the world as a totality: the structure of the epic plot is not problematic, but confirms the existence of the world as a huge, but always unambiguous and straightforward whole. This epic world constitutes the link between narrator, narration and audience because it never deals only with the private fate of specific individuals but, instead, with a shared view of the world that is experienced and formed in the acts of narrating and listening. Thus, Klopstock's choice of a Christian biblical subject was only logical: the Christian belief was one of the founding myths of the West. During Klopstock's life, however, the relation between epic and myth underwent crucial functional changes, caused by the transition from the Enlightenment to Romanticism, from secular rationality to pietistic sensitivity.

At the precise moment when traditional Christian teaching received its most eloquent literary expression, the formerly unquestioned authority of the doctrines embodied in these teachings imploded. Religion became a private affair. This most important legacy of the Enlightenment put an end to Christian teachings as a viable subject matter of epic poetry.

While Klopstock was working on his *Messias*, another poet tried his hand at the epic genre: Wieland (1733-1813), but he avoided any serious reference to the epic worldview. Wieland's epics are charming little pleasantries, equally at home with biblical material (e.g. *Der geprüfte Abraham*, 1753), the knightly world of the Italian Renaissance (e.g. *Idris und Zenide*, 1768) or burlesques in the English tradition (e.g. *Oberon*, 1780). Like Klopstock's monumental work, Wieland's short epics are mostly forgotten, but they equally illustrate the rupture between claim and (literary) reality that emerged in the eighteenth century. People still evoked the epic as the most noble literary genre, in perfect agreement with Gottsched's ideas about epics, with which Bodmer and Breitinger totally agreed; however, in reality the theatre was now the main stage for literary innovation, and the modern novel had become the most important literary form.

Goethe also dabbled with the epic genre, but he studiously avoided any reference to mythical and biblical subjects. Works like his *Reineke Fuchs* (1794) or the bourgeois idyll *Hermann und Dorothea* (1797) were required reading in the nineteenth and also the early twentieth century. Today, their clumsy hexameters are the butt of grammar school students' jokes. But let us not forget that only a year after Klopstock finished his *Messias*, the same Goethe wrote the novel that put German literature back on the map of world

literature: his *Werther* (1774). Quoting the *Messias* in a rather touching scene,<sup>19</sup> he at the same time irreverently consigns it to the scrap heap of literary history.

Only a few years later, Goethe created the true national expression of German literature, *Faust*. Composed in a doggerel that sounds slightly absurd to modern ears, it describes a breathtakingly dramatic conflict. The work is not at all burdened by its literary form, even if it still demands a lot of directors and actors. Like the *Messias*, few Germans have read *Faust* from beginning to end. But even fewer are completely ignorant of the subject of the work. Interestingly, the plot does not draw on biblical material, but nevertheless revolves around a conflict between god and man. Still, the reader is fully aware that the integration of the *Faust* story into a religious framework consists of more than just the “prologue in heaven”. Goethe’s *Faust* neither seriously struggles against the devil, nor does he fully trust in god’s benevolence: he is enough of a demon himself. The profundity of this conflict within the figure of Faust has yet to be fully fathomed. This is why Goethe’s *Faust* is the natural complement and antipode to Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*, the eternal skeptic: they are the prototypical modern heroes and true icons which define the image of modern man.

Klopstock’s *Messias*, on the other hand, simply ended up as the source for Händel’s oratoria – if one likes classical music.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Klopstock’s name is used as a “Losung”, a secret password between the two lovers: “Wir traten ans Fenster, es donnerte abseitswärts und der herrliche Regen säuselte auf das Land, und der erquickendste Wohlgeruch stieg in aller Fülle einer warmen Luft zu uns auf. Sie stand auf ihrem Ellebogen gestützt und ihr Blick durchdrang die Gegend, sie sah gen Himmel und auf mich, ich sah ihr Auge tränenvoll, sie legte ihre Hand auf die meinige und sagte: - Klopstock! Ich versank in dem Strome von Empfindungen, den sie in dieser Losung über mich ausgoss. Ich ertrug nicht, neigte mich auf ihre Hand und küsste sie unter den wonnenvollsten Tränen.” J. W. Goethe, *Die Leiden des jungen Werthers* (version A), 1774.

<sup>20</sup> On Klopstock’s reception in music, cf. Kohl (2000: 165ff).

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