

## Luther 2.0 – Tracing his Influence on German Literature from Friedrich Schiller to Volker Braun and Present Day Discourse

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### Abstract

With the 500<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Reformation approaching, the Free German Authors' association will dedicate their annual meeting to a discussion of Protestantism in present literary discourse and how its influence on German literature can be traced through the last 200 years. The meeting is hosted by the authors of Thüringen this year, another good reason to highlight the classical period linked to the town of Weimar. Their protestation at the Diet in Speyer 1529, which gave Protestantism its name, was illustrated by Friedrich Schiller in the first scene of his dramatic fragment "Demetrius". Transferred to the Polish Diet at Cracow in confrontation with the "False Dmitri" of Russia, the play was intended to also decipher the phenomenon of Napoleon. Volker Braun's "Dmitri" of 1980 refers to Schiller's unfinished play and analyzes his discussion of majority rule and the Impostor betrayed under the conditions of the late 20<sup>th</sup> century. Recent invocations of Luther's famous quote "Hier stehe ich, ich kann nicht anders" in such different places as Istanbul and Speyer link the discourse to burning issues of our time. The meeting will also feature Goethe's epic refugee poem "Hermann und Dorothea" in a scenic reading – a text which inspires discussions especially today. Accompanying the meeting will be the publication of an anthology e-book with articles pertaining to the areas to be discussed.

### Introduction

Founded in 1973, the history of the Free German Author's Association (FDA) dates further back in time, to one of the darkest hours of German literature when books were burned by flash mobs in inner city market places: their first president Hubertus Prinz zu Löwenstein had already

been active in the "Association for the Protection of German Writers" in the 1920ies and he helped founding the "American Guild for German Cultural Freedom" in 1935, when he was exiled in New York. The FDA maintains this legacy by the subtitle "Schutzverband Deutscher Schriftsteller" in its name.

The topic of this year's annual conference foreshadows the commemoration of a historical event which took place on October 31<sup>st</sup> 1517 in Wittenberg, when Martin Luther nailed his 95 theses against the sale of indulgences on the church door – this has since been regarded as the beginning of the Reformation. In 2017 its 500<sup>th</sup> anniversary will be celebrated worldwide. Thüringen or Thuringia belongs with Saxony to the regions in Germany where Protestantism had been embraced from the very beginning. The term “Protestantism”, however, is linked to another event which took place 12 years later in the old German town of Speyer: at the Reichstag or Diet which had been convened to discuss the advance of the Turks in Hungary and the question of Church Reformation, the majority of delegates issued a prohibition of the Reformation, while 20 representatives of states and cities protested against this verdict.

### Schiller's Fragment “Demetrius”

When Schiller decided to write a play based on the “False Dmitri”, a figure from early 17<sup>th</sup> century Russian and Polish history, Europe was again in war turmoil and Napoleon Bonaparte had turned from a representative of French revolutionary ideas into self-proclaimed emperor Napoleon I., being viewed as a traitor by democrats throughout Europe.

The first scene of the play, which Schiller worked on until the day of his death and could never finish, is set at the “Diet of Cracow”. There the majority favors an invasion of Russia with the support of the allegedly legitimate heir to the throne as their pretext. The principle of Protestation is represented by the delegate Sapieha, who would rather “break up the Diet” than agree to the peace with Moscow - which he himself had negotiated - being broken. He argues:

“Majority?

What is it? The majority is madness;

Reason has still ranked only with the few.

What cares he for the general weal that's poor?

Has the lean beggar choice, or liberty?

To the great lords of earth, that hold the purse,

He must for bread and raiment sell his voice.

Twere meet that voices should be weighed, not counted.

Sooner or later must the state be wrecked,

Where numbers sway and ignorance decides.<sup>i</sup>”

A paper by Turkish politologist and Kant scholar Mehmet R. Demiray of December 2013 illustrates the actual relevance of these questions when he invokes Luther's quote “Hiersteich, ich kann nicht anders “ (Here I stand, I can do

no other) to describe a peculiar protestation method which emerged during the Taksim square demonstrations<sup>ii</sup> against the Islamist Erdogan government in Istanbul earlier that year: people exercised their right to just stand on this square, defying orders of a ruling party which had apparently been elected by a majority of voters at some point. Schiller, himself probably the most important Kant scholar in German literature, would certainly have agreed with this interpretation of Protestantism principles from a humanistic rather than specifically Christian standpoint. His view was shared by most if not all representatives of classical German literature and, for that matter, Napoleon himself: As Michel Houellebecq recently pointed out<sup>iii</sup>, Napoleon's pragmatic attitude towards religion made him consider converting to Islam during his Egyptian campaign in 1798, for purely power-related tactical-military reasons.

### Volker Braun's Play “Dmitri”

With his choice of the False Dmitri as Napoleon's alter ego Schiller proved to be uncannily prophetic – seven years after death prevented him from finishing the play Napoleon would become the first commander of a foreign army to capture Moscow since Dmitri.

The other important point about Schiller's Dmitri-Napoleon is a feature which gets crucial in Volker Braun's adaptation of the play: he is not just a swindler or mere tyrant, but an Impostor betrayed, who starts his career with true ambitions to improve the life conditions of millions of people (something which, interestingly, is true to a certain degree even about the real historical figure of False Dmitri). Only in the course of the play a transformation does occur, Dmitri learns that he is not really the true heir when his campaign is already under way. He is as much driving events as he is being exploited by others.

This reflects very much Schiller's own situation. After all he had been made honorary citizen of the French republic and had entertained real hopes regarding the revolution not too long ago. For Volker Braun this is exactly the window which he opens in 1980 to achieve his own adaptation into late 20<sup>th</sup> century constellations: the ruling Bolschewiki (literally meaning “majority”) are discredited and Dmitri's revolt starts as an attempt to reinvigorate the true revolutionary movement. Braun introduces new figures – three “Bolschewiki” reciting quotations of Trotzky and Lenin only to be carried off the stage like cardboard scenery items by stage workers – and Schuiski is him an apparatchik of the old regime who is well aware of the skeletons in the closet, or in this case a dead body literally stuffed underneath the throne. He waits for his chance and seizes his opportunity to replace Dmitri once his regime had become despotic like the old one.

Schiller's first scene is divided into two parts by Braun. In the first part at the Cracow Diet the texts are unaltered quotations of Schiller's original ones, but the actors play themselves as actors in a Brecht-like alienation effect: they wander around on the stage with scripts, "memorizing their roles", occasionally chatting with each other unrelated to their actual characters. Sapiha is allowed to make his statement that way, but "laughs" shortly afterwards...Only in the second part Dmitri enters for the first time. Braun has him fail like Schiller's Demetrius but when "the people" enter the stage after Dmitri's death Braun's sympathies are certainly not with those who proclaim that they would never "make the Dmitri" but preferred to just wait and watch further events.

### Religion in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century

This lukewarm inertia of the passive majority has turned out to become increasingly problematic with the start of the new century, as another invocation of Luther's quote "Hiersteheich, ichkannnichtanders" suggests. Just three weeks before Mehmet Demiray's article was published Luther had been cited during what was supposed to be a concert performance in the Luther church at Speyer when HeidemarieMund, a math teacher from Frankfurt sitting in the audience, rose from her seat in order to "break up the curse" of a real Imam who had just started to chant his Allahu-Akbar call for Muslim prayer on the stage.

What had happened?While the Turkish Kant scholar Dr. Demirayused Luther's quote from a standpoint above religious peculiarities, i.e. in a way Schiller would certainly have endorsed, Mrs. Mund had acted on decidedly Christian grounds. Rather uncannily again, Schiller's first "Demetrius" scene was basically acted out in reality, a reversed anti-alienationscenario. It wasperformed by an ordinary concert audience at the original site, in the very church built around 1895 to commemorate the Diet of Speyer Protestation – only that the majority was not shouting "War! War with Moscow!" this time, but silently listening to the shouting Imam while the female Sapiha did her act. The Protestant officials of Speyer had meant this Allahu-Akbar to be part of just another one of those "cultural events" involving classical music, for which they had started to open "their"House of God many decades ago. For them, allowing the Imam on

stage was a sign of tolerance, for the sake of Kantian humanism. It had not occurred to them that somebody might take it for what 1.5 billion people consider it to be – a call for Muslim prayer which desecrates the church building if completed without opposition.

A Muslim Imam and an evangelical fanatictrying to outshout each other in the Luther church at Speyer would have been too bizarre an event for Schiller to even consider it as a comedy plot. Yet this is the reality we live in today and unlike Braun's Sapiهانobody laughed when it happened – police was called and Mrs. Mund asked to leave the church. She had been born and raised in the East German GDR, under the very conditions of petrified revolutionary impetus which Volker Braun illustrated in his "Dmitri".

Luther 2.0 turns out to shed surprising new light on some 200 year old masterpieces of German literature, which then may open our eyes to important aspects of our current situation. Just like Goethe's epic poem "Hermann und Dorothea", in which the refugees wandering through German cities have been driven out of their homes by the French revolutionary army, one only needs some slightly new perspective to appreciate their timeless truth. The same applies to Schiller's Demetrius as the Impostor betrayed: while contemporary audiences immediately thought of Napoleon, they were also familiar with the fictitious book title of "The three Impostors", referring to the three religious figures of Moses, Jesus and Mohammed. Schiller'sDemetrius tells the Polish magnates: "Yes, justice lies with me – you have the power", and we are immediately reminded of fanatic zealots of our time who are both perpetrators and being exploited, supposedly justified and even commanded by their religion to conquer certain lands or subdue certain populations–which they do,with a little help from some power-providing hypocrites.

### Conclusion

In both Schiller's and Braun's version it is a woman – Marfa, the mother of the real heir to the throne – who at some point refuses to continue acting in the role she had initially accepted, thereby preparing the climactic breaking moment of the play when Demetrius/Dmitri is murdered. Braun introduces it with another Brecht-like piece of alienation:

Marfa *embraces Dmitri*: “O dear, what am I doing here? I am the actress... .. but I no longer know what to make of this role which I must bring to an end”

...

Schuiski: “Declare that he is your son. Kiss the Cross on that.”

*Marfa lets go*

Dmitri *shouts*: “Stop! Don’t say anything. Don’t speak as my mother. Speak as the empress. As the mother of your people. Am I the emperor of the people! *Friendly*: Look, this is not about me but about the people. Make your decision for the people.”

Marfa *astonished*: “What has the people to do with that?”

Dmitri: “Like what is good for the people, the people!”

Marfa: “For the people?”

*Dmitri nods vehemently. Marfa shakes her head in confusion and keeps silent: for one long minute*

Authors have the responsibility to pick up the baton of literature and carry it through our times. Fearless speech is part of this responsibility as well as consideration to choose the right words in the right place. During our annual meeting in October the Free German Authors’ association will work

at defining what that may entail. In preparation of the meeting an anthology e-book is planned which will collect articles on the subjects discussed. Submissions are welcome in German or English (translation services available). Please contact [rothe@online.de](mailto:rothe@online.de) for more information.

**Please Submit your Manuscript to Cresco Online Publishing**  
<http://crescopublications.org/submitmanuscript.php>

<sup>i</sup> <http://www.delphiclassics.com/shop/friedrich-von-schiller-english/>

<sup>ii</sup> <https://www.opendemocracy.net/mehmet-ruhi-demiray/universal-message-sent-from-taksim-hier-stehe-ich-und-kann-nicht-anders>

<sup>iii</sup> <http://www.lefigaro.fr/livres/2015/01/06/03005-20150106ARTFIG00458-houellebecq-napoleon-aurait-pu-se-convertir-a-l-islam.php>