

Herman Melville and Christian Grabbe: A Source for "The Godhead is Broken"

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The correspondence between Melville and Hawthorne includes a number of remarkable letters, written at the time of the publication of *Moby-Dick*. One of them contains the following sentences:

Whence come you, Hawthorne? By what right do you drink from my flagon of life? And when I put it to my lips—lo, they are yours and not mine. I feel that the Godhead is broken up like the bread at the Supper, and that we are the pieces. Hence this infinite fraternity of feeling. ([17?] November 1851)¹

Words like these are not easily forgotten, so that when I read in Edgar Wind's *Art and Anarchy*, "There was a god, but he was dismembered—we are the pieces," I seemed to hear Melville's own voice. But no: this was Christian Grabbe's Faust speaking, in Grabbe's play of 1829, *Don Juan und Faust*. Here is the passage:

Faust: . . . es gab einst einen Gott, der ward
Zerschlagen—Wir sind seine Stücke—
Sprache
Und Wehmut—Lieb' und Religion und Schmerz
Sind Träume nur von ihm.

Der Ritter: Du Gottesträumer!

Faust: Der bin ich!

(*Don Juan und Faust*, IV.iii)²

[There was once a God, he was
dismembered—we are his pieces—
speech
and sadness—love and religion and pain
are only dreams of him.
You God-dreamer!
That's what I am.]

Wind relates Grabbe's lines to the dismemberment of Dionysus:

Brutal aphorisms on fragmentation abound in Grabbe, *Don Juan und Faust* (1829) I, ii, "Aus Nichts schafft Gott, wir schaffen aus Ruinen"; or IV, iii: "Must one tear in shreds in order to enjoy? I almost believe it . . . Whole pieces are unpalatable." A pretentious and rather histrionic Titan, Grabbe recalled ancient Dionysiac rites of fragmentation: "There was a god, but he was dismembered—we are the pieces" (IV, iii).³

There is certainly little sign that Grabbe had in mind the sacrament of communion or of the eucharist. In 1 Corinthians 11:23-25, a form of *brechen* is used in the Luter Bible, not *zerschlagen*. ["Take, eat: this is my body, which is broken for you" (Authorized Version).] *Zerschlagen* is used in Psalm 2:9, a passage familiar from Handel's *Messiah*. ["Thou shalt break them with a rod of iron" (AV).] It is Melville who implicitly connects Grabbe's words with "the Supper."

Not that Melville's Supper is an orthodox communion. "My flagon of life" is a common enough metaphor not to startle us, even when Melville shifts the flagon back to his own lips. And even the intense momentary identification ("my lips—lo, they are yours and not mine") does not startle unduly. But suddenly the strong sense of identification wants a stronger metaphor of communion, and makes a leap to the language of Christian sacrament, causing us to reread the "flagon of life." At the same time, it leaps to the language of Grabbe's Dionysiac or Orphic dismembering. Just how are these two different contexts of "breaking up" intertwined in Melville?

Melville's knowledge of German writing is well known, though I have found no mention of Grabbe among the authors he read.⁴ A few months before the "Godhead is broken" letter, Melville wrote to Hawthorne the following remarks on Goethe:

In reading some of Goethe's sayings, so worshipped by his votaries, I came across this, '*Live in the all.*' . . . What nonsense! Here is a fellow with a raging toothache. 'My dear boy,' Goethe says to him, 'you are sorely afflicted with that tooth; but you must *live in the all*, and then you will be happy!' . . . This 'all' feeling, though, there is some truth in it. You must often have felt it, lying on the grass on a warm summer's day. Your legs seem to send out shoots into the earth. Your hair feels like leaves upon your head. This is the *all* feeling. But what plays the mischief with the truth is that men will insist upon the

universal application of a temporary feeling or opinion. ([1 June?] 1851, pp. 193-94)

Lynn Horth, editor of the recent *Correspondence*, notes that the immediate source for Melville's discussion of Goethe has not been found, though the "idea is general in Goethe; the particular thought is presumably a translation of a phrase in stanza four of 'Generalbeichte'" (189).

Christian Grabbe's play treats two figures of legendary force, at least one of whom, Faust, haunts Melville's great novel. We rightly think first of Goethe when we think of Faust stories, but there are others. This one might repay attention.

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NOTES

¹*Correspondence*, ed. Lynn Horth, vol. 14 of *Writings of Herman Melville* (Evanston and Chicago: Northwestern UP and the Newberry Library, 1993) 212.

²Christian Dietrich Grabbe, *Werke und Briefe*, 6 vols., ed. Alfred Bergmann (Emsdetten: Verlag Lechte, 1960-73) 1: 499.

³Edgar Wind, *Art and Anarchy*, 3rd ed. (London: Duckworth: 1985) 140n69.

⁴See Morton M. Sealts, Jr., *Melville's Reading*, revised ed. (Columbia: U of South Carolina P, 1988), for example, 53, and also: "His further reading in the summer and fall of 1850, as he continued work on his manuscript [of *Moby-Dick*] deserves special comment. . . . The growing fascination with German literature and thought . . . was shown once more by his purchase of Goethe's *Auto-Biography* . . . and his subsequent borrowing of both Richter and Carlyle from Duyckinck; Carlyle along with Coleridge was largely responsible for introducing many English-speaking readers of the day to contemporary German writers" (61).