

# Illuminating Parallels between Friedrich Halm's Unpublished Autobiographical Essay, *Letter to J.C.R.*, and Halm's Contemporaneous Novella, *The Eye of God*

Tony Page

School of Humanities, Bangkok University

## Abstract

This paper explores central moral and psychological ideas contained in the 19<sup>th</sup> century Austrian writer Friedrich Halm's unpublished autobiographical aesthetic and moral essay, 'Letter to J.C.R.' (*Sendschreiben an J.C.R.*) and illuminatingly relates it to psychological and moral concerns embodied in Halm's contemporaneous novella, *The Eye of God* (*Das Auge Gottes*)

*Keywords: Friedrich Halm, Eye of God, Letter to J.C.R.*

## 1. Introduction

In the field of literary study, it remains to this day a vexed question as to whether a writer's life experiences necessarily impinge upon, and help shape, his creative literary output. Are the traces of personal experience discernible in the verbal lineaments of the literary text and do they assist in its interpretation? The 'biographical' approach to literature would contend that they are and do, whereas the school of American New Criticism, for example (as well-one might add-as the more recent Deconstructionist approach of Jacques Derrida and his followers), would argue for a strict segregation of literary text from the author's biography, contending that everything that is required for an understanding of the literary work is contained in that work itself. The all-significance of the text is stressed by Derrida when he famously says: 'there is nothing outside the the text' (Derrida, 1976, p. 158). Wellek and Warren, in their seminal work, *Theory of Literature*, also assert that the total meaning of a work of art cannot be defined in terms of its meaning for its author (Wellek and Warren, 1982, p. 42). Yet this does not mean, of course, that important clues to that work's meaning (albeit not the totality) *cannot* be found in the author's own discursive writings about his literary art. This is hinted at by N. Rescher when he writes: 'The process of *deconstruction* ... can and should be offset by the process of *reconstruction*, which calls for viewing texts within their larger contexts. After all, texts inevitably have a setting-historical, cultural, authorial-on which their actual meaning is critically dependent. And this contextual setting projects beyond the textual realm itself ...' (Rescher, 2010, p. 63).

While I myself generally incline towards a non-biographical stance, I believe that it is unwise to be inflexibly doctrinaire. One should not, after all, simplistically assign a quasi-divine omniscience and philosophical puissance to any one approach, school, critical book, or scholar. Each work of literary art comprises unique and specific features (as well, of course, as general ones), both in its finished form and in its genesis. I thus believe that on occasion, with certain

writers and with certain texts, light can indeed be shed on a literary work by the authorial life experiences in which context that text emerged, a light which facilitates an assessment of the moral (and aesthetic) values by which a 19<sup>th</sup> century writer such as Friedrich Halm, the subject of the present paper, would wish his literary creation to be judged. Such an occasion is indeed presented to us in the case of this Austrian author Halm, whose hitherto unpublished autobiographical essay, *Letter to J.C.R.* (Münch-Bellinghausen, 1828; part of Halm's literary estate, preserved in the Nationalbibliothek of Austria, to whom I proffer thanks for permission to quote from the original manuscript), provides us with some valuable insights into the creative and psychological matrix out of which Halm's contemporaneous novella, *The Eye of God (Das Auge Gottes)*, sprang.

## 1 (b) Methodology

The use of bi-textual inter-interpretation is used in this paper as a means for mutual illumination of two literary/discursive texts.

## 2. Letter to J.C.R.

The *Letter to J.C.R.*, written in 1828 (the year Halm completed his novella, *The Eye of God*-a story he commenced in or just before 1826), has to date received but scant critical attention. This is doubtless due in large part to the fact that no publisher has as yet decided to release to the public this early credo of literary and moral values penned by the soon-to-be celebrated Friedrich Halm. The only researcher who has rightly seen fit to read and discuss this programmatic document is the 19<sup>th</sup>-century Halm editor and commentator, Faust Pachler.

In his invaluable biographical study of Halm's early life, *Jugend-und Lehrjahre des Dichters Friedrich Halm* (Pachler, 1878), Pachler devotes a little over three pages (pp. 226-229) to the *Letter*, a document dealing with aesthetic and moral matters written to Halm's revered friend and literary mentor, Herr J.C.R. (identified by Pachler as a 'Herr von Reich'). Halm calls this document 'a most earnest and sincere confession of faith' (Münch-Bellinghausen, 1828, p. 184), and it is indeed a declaration of artistic faith, ambition and moral values on the part of the aspiring poet. Faust Pachler summarises the contents of this essay-style 'epistle' as including several attempts to create a poem similar to Schiller's famous *Das Lied von der Glocke*, as well as Halm's assessment of what makes that ballad so striking a poetic masterpiece.

While one is grateful to Pachler for bringing the *Letter* to scholarly attention, one must, however, regret the loose and sometimes inaccurate manner in which he handles his materials. Firstly, he fails to emphasise the remarkable *psychological* revelations relating to Friedrich Halm's inner state at the time when (1826-1828) the latter was composing his first great novella, *The Eye of God (Das Auge Gottes)*. Like the commentators Henry and Mary Garland, who only portray Halm as a 'mellifluous' writer 'embody[ing] the advantages of privilege and financial security', avoiding all that was 'crass or harsh' (Garland, 1997, p. 328), Pachler lets the high significance of Halm's inner sufferings for his contemporaneous *oeuvre* pass by the reader almost unremarked.

Secondly, Pachler on occasion presents as verbatim quotes from Halm's essay what are in fact Pachler's own concocted paraphrases. This is, of course, unacceptable in a literary scholar; yet it comes as no immense surprise, since Pachler was part of the editorial team (comprising himself and Emil Kuh) who had no qualms about splitting Halm's novella, *The Eye of God*, right down its middle and publishing only the second half of that text, in addition to radically altering some of the words and phrasing contained in that story (see Page, a. 2010 for a fuller discussion of this topic). In fairness to Pachler, however, it should be stated that when discussing the *Letter to J.C.R.* he was operating within a limited amount of journal space and doubtless felt that paraphrasing was a justifiable route of compactness down which to travel; additionally, any student of Friedrich Halm owes an immense debt of gratitude to Faust Pachler for providing extremely valuable information on Halm's life and works from first-hand sources which might otherwise have been lost forever.

### 3. Autobiographical Elements in *The Eye of God* as an Aid to Interpretation

*The Eye of God* tells the story of an impoverished mediaeval knight, Ruprecht von Rossum, who inherits an old Rossum-family castle and becomes increasingly godless and obsessed with regaining the wealth and respect which the Rossum clan had previously enjoyed. Contesting Divine justice, he even goes so far as to shoot an arrow into a holy icon of God's Eye, out of frustration over the failures which have attended each of his attempts to improve his worldly lot and in the embittered conviction that God is a malicious tyrant motivated by schadenfreude who delights in thwarting Ruprecht's ambitions. Ruprecht finally achieves power and wealth, but just as he is at this zenith of temporal attainment, he is stricken with blindness and dies in a fit of self-destructive madness. One of the main themes of *The Eye of God* is accordingly the loss of humanity and inner balance attendant upon a diminution in religious faith and moral self-restraint. That such concerns with moral values and personal rectitude had their roots in Halm's early years is evidenced not only by *The Eye of God* itself but in discursive form in the *Letter to J.C.R.* Here we read of Halm's great gratitude towards his literary and moral mentor, Herr von Reich, who has inspired the young man to become what he believes himself to be. Halm writes 'I shall always be eternally grateful to you, for through you I have become what I can justly pride myself on being, namely, strict with myself and forbearing and lenient towards others' (Münch-Bellinghausen, 1828, p. 109).

Halm thus deems it a virtue to be controlling of oneself but gentle and forgiving towards others (a value that was, incidentally, shared by Halm's compatriot and professional rival, Franz Grillparzer). Later in the *Letter*, this notion of self-discipline, of not indulging one's desires, finds reiteration, when Halm writes of how he has gained the insight 'that life is more than what unfulfilled desires, inborn indolence and excessive self-indulgence so often would have it be', (Münch-Bellinghausen, 1828, p. 154). When we turn to the figure of Ruprecht von Rossum, we observe the very opposite of the moral *desiderata* which Halm posits as the ideal: Ruprecht freely indulges his obsessions and desires, and behaves in an imperious, intolerant, even vicious

manner towards others. The seeds of this character flaw are evidenced early in the novella, when Ruprecht first arrives at his newly acquired property, Castle Stallberg, and addresses the old servant there-‘Kuno’-in a most fierce manner (a ‘stormy address’, the narrator calls it: Halm, 2011, p. 22), rebuking him most harshly for leaving the castle gates open: ‘I will show you that I am Master!’ (Halm, 2011, p. 22). His lack of forgiveness and understanding towards this old servant for the latter’s breach of duty (the servant had been out in the surrounding woods searching for food) is further made evident when Ruprecht injects sarcasm into anger by saying: ‘But none of that excuses your negligence in leaving the castle unattended; or are the other servants perhaps searching in the woods for mushrooms for their supper like women?’ (Halm, 2011, p. 22)

These are some of the first words that we hear Ruprecht speak, and they immediately characterise him as a man who, unlike his creator, Halm, is far from ‘leniently forbearing towards others’. This tendency towards intolerant harshness and sarcastic hard-heartedness, indeed violence, as indicated by Ruprecht’s trenchant verbal manner, reaches its maximal point when, later in the story, empowered by new-found wealth, Ruprecht speaks the word, ‘vengeance’, out loud to himself and then attacks his own vassals in revenge for their insubordination. Violence of language here incarnates itself into violence of action. Ruprecht’s method of rebuke is far beyond harsh. He tells his son, Ernst, how on the same night that his vassals refused to obey his orders, he launched a merciless attack upon them: ‘That very same night I rode out with my troops and advanced on Enzinger’s farmstead. I burned it down, destroyed its walls, and then devastated all his crops; next I attacked the outlying estates of Teesdorf and did the same to him; then I moved on to Wallrein’s farmstead, and nobody can any longer see where once it stood’ (Halm, 2011, p. 159).

Ruprecht’s brutality is further exemplified when he exacts vengeance against Marshall Mehrenberg (a man who had once failed to show the requisite deference to Ruprecht) in a most murderous manner. Ruprecht proudly tells his son, Ernst: ‘For two months I laid siege to Mehrenberg’s castle. He defended himself like a lunatic. But despite all his resistance, I stormed rampart after rampart, and today nothing more remained of Castle Mehrenberg than a single tower. This I surrounded with fire-wood, ignited it-I would hear nothing of negotiation-and thus Mehrenberg and the few who remained loyal to him were burned to death’ (Halm, 2011, p. 162). The heartless brevity with which Ruprecht-in an almost casual, throw-away comment-here dismisses all willingness to negotiate is chilling. It is clear, then, that Ruprecht fails to enact the moral maxim of leniency towards others and strict control over oneself which Halm so esteems and lauds in his *Letter to J.C.R.*

The *Letter* continues to provide us with valuable programmatic pointers towards key moral concerns that find their literary precipitate in *The Eye of God*. Speaking in the context of his nascent poem, ‘The Oak Tree’ (‘Die Eiche’), Halm singles out the chief causative factors of both unhappiness and human felicity. He writes: ‘My poem had as its exclusive aim the demonstration of how the greater part of the misfortunes to which men fear to succumb resides solely in their imagination, and how in fact there is no greater misfortune than losing sight of the

high purpose of human life and that everything which people normally designate with the name of 'misfortune' is a mere trifle compared to the misery which proceeds from the aforementioned aberration of the human mind-in a word, that human happiness consists in renunciation and active work' (Münch-Bellinghausen, 1828, pp. 155-156).

This passage indicates firstly the dangers that accrue from an ill-managed imagination. Ruprecht is a character who is driven and beset by the chimaeras of his immoderate, unretrained imagination. He *imagines* his ancestors as being veritable gods upon earth and himself as a mere nothing in comparison; he *imagines* the minor slight which he receives at the hands of Marshal Mehrenberg as an overwhelmingly unacceptable insult; he *imagines* Italy as a land of untold riches which will restore power and opulence to his impoverished family; he *imagines* a Divine conspiracy against himself; he *imagines* the icon of God's Eye to wink its assent to his blasphemous challenge: power and wealth in exchange for sanity and vision; and he *imagines* the fires of Hell which he sees around him at the end of the story, as he is stricken with blindness, to be reaching out for his soul. Ruprecht's imagination is fired by fear-fear of failure, fear of being lost in anonymity, fear of being a nobody. Yet the reality is that on inheriting Castle Stallberg Ruprecht receives sufficient funds from his vassals to lead a moderately comfortable and respected life. Only his proliferating imagination, wallowing in ambitions and fears for the future, deprives him of personal and familial happiness.

The second part of the quotation deals with the causation of human misery, namely, the neglect of man's noble mission on earth, which is specified, conjointly, as renunciation and-work (activity). Ruprecht for the most part knows neither renunciation nor work. Far from renouncing his dreams of self-aggrandisement and grandeur, he feeds the flames of such desires with ever-more fantastical schemes for their fulfilment and spends his days either chasing illusory hopes or lamenting their failure. Never does Ruprecht undertake any work which benefits his family or society at large. Instead, he gives himself over to shooting birds which are resident in and around his castle, devising schemes to marry off his children to the rich and powerful, and trying to impress upon his vassals that he is indeed 'Master'; all of this would justly fall under the rubric of 'trifles' which Halm in his *Letter* stringently contrasts with the 'high purpose of human life'-to renounce (temporal desires) and to work (for the betterment of self and society). Ruprecht, of all of Halm's characters, is the best exemplification of a psyche that has gone off its rails, of a man who has succumbed to an 'aberration of the human mind'.

This brings us to a hitherto unrecognised aspect of the psychological genesis of *The Eye of God*: the mental derangement, depression, numbness and lassitude from which its central character suffers closely mirror mental states and the near-total inner collapse from which Friedrich Halm himself was only just emerging as he inwardly gestated his Gothic tale. This helps to explain the moral and mental force of the story, its vividness and conviction: it issues from deep strata within the writer's own troubled psyche and paints a portrait of a psychologically damaged individual with whom Halm could intimately identify. The supreme difference between creator and creation, however, is that Halm achieved an inner balance through art and nature which remained closed to Ruprecht von Rossum.

What does Halm specifically say in his *Letter* which reveals his mental state around the time he was commencing composition of *The Eye of God*? He writes:

Some time ago, an insuperable melancholy seized me with such force that I began to entertain a dread even of myself. The thoughts which crisscrossed my mind were of such a kind that would have made even the most reasonable person go insane, not merely on account of the strange and extravagant direction taken by my imagination, but due more to the utter despondency to which those thoughts gave expression and-linked to them-the loss of all hope and endeavour, as well as the sense of total abandonment by all that had previously delighted and invigorated me, and an incomprehensible and deadly apathy which seized hold of me and yet at the same time filled me with an oppressive awareness of its presence. I felt as if Fate had meted out a great injustice to me and that it was well aware of its wrongdoing, but, being too proud to admit it and to withdraw its past action, preferred to crush me utterly, as we humans might crush a worm, so that my just complaints would not be heard. And then again I would feel that the whole thing was nonsense, not because it was preposterous and absurd to believe that one was being adversely marked out by Fate, but because life struck me as so empty and desolate, like a mere puppet show, and human beings appeared to me as such pitiful and unworthy creatures that I could not understand how there could possibly be any rights bestowed upon us or between us. We are perhaps-I thought-merely exceedingly skilfully constructed automata, which a great Spirit has created for his own pleasure, and who, purely so that they remain in working order, keeps them in constant motion and activity. Now when that Spirit happens to be in the mood for amusement, he causes us to enact plays, showers us either with endless happiness and innumerable joys, so that we behave like fools or, inflated with pride, become like frogs and finally burst, or else he overwhelms us with care, grief and sorrow, with sufferings of all kinds until, groaning and moaning, we eventually succumb to the burden; indeed, when he, the Master, fears that such a diverting show could all too swiftly reach its conclusion, on account of our weakness, he then inserts into us, with all possible speed, a new little spring, call it what one will-belief in eternal justice, trust, courage, consciousness of duty performed, etc.-and then we continue to twist and turn and twitch convulsively amidst the most dreadful torment in a death-struggle that goes on for years, while he watches with quiet pleasure and occasionally smiles as we automata, knowing nothing of the insertion of the new spring, call our performing confreres martyrs, heroes, geniuses, and praise them as eternally unattainable exemplars of humanity. You can well see from this little example how things stood with my mind and emotions, for these and many chimaeras of like kind occupied my thoughts for days on end and made me so weak-hearted and downcast that I came close to calling everyone a fool who claimed that the purpose of human life was anything other than eating, drinking, sleeping and propagating the race. (Münch-Bellinghausen, 1828, pp. 145-148)

We note the presence in Halm of an imagination of ‘strange and extravagant direction’, which is precisely Ruprecht’s condition. When Ruprecht sees the kneeling figure of his servant Kuno rise to his feet in the chapel, for example, after Ruprecht’s return from Italy, Ruprecht imagines Kuno to be a lurking enemy: ‘as if he Ruprecht really had to fear the approach of an enemy, rather than the forms and figments of his imagination’ (Halm, 2011, p. 82). Later, when Ruprecht attacks the Eye of God and the icon falls to the ground, Ruprecht is depicted as: ‘expecting that his agitated imagination would present before him another foe against whom he must fight’ (Halm, 2011, p. 106). Moreover, Ruprecht’s imagination is so clouded by depression after his attack on God’s Eye that even the beauties of nature cannot shake him out of his tenebrous inner fantasies (unlike with Halm, as his *Letter* reveals): ‘everything appeared to his mind in such gloomy forms that even the cheerful autumn day outside could not awaken him from the gloomy dreams that issued from his imagination’ (Halm, 1828, p. 92). It is typical of Ruprecht that he projects onto an external canvass what are actually phenomena generated solely through the distorting lens of his own perceptual equipment. Thus instead of facing and embracing the reality of the Divine (which is what his spiritually oriented wife, Bertha, and his humble servant, Kuno, and indeed Halm himself in the *Letter* specifically enact and recommend), Ruprecht dismisses the Divine and its iconic image in the form of God’s Eye as: ‘a monstrous product of the poetic imagination’ (Halm, 2011, p. 104).

It is further noteworthy that Halm’s path to inner emotional balance is revealed in his *Letter* to have been via the threefold route of the restorative powers of nature, prayer, and acts of poetic creation (and doubtless narrative creation too, in the form of his novella, *The Eye of God*). In the *Letter*, Halm writes that before any work can begin we must engage in prayer and ensure that our relationship with the Divine is on a purified footing:

Something more, hear, before we begin:  
 Before all work-a prayer;  
 Only he may achieve worldly gain  
 Who stands in harmony with God  
 (Münch-Bellinghausen, 1828, p. 135)

On the restoration of soul which Halm experienced through the delights of nature in springtime we read in his *Letter*: ‘My longing was no longer directed towards a distant, scarcely attainable goal, but towards that which lay immediately about me, to the beauty of re-awakened nature, and this longing I could easily satisfy’ (Münch-Bellinghausen, 1828, p. 151). This is the opposite of Ruprecht von Rossum, who is blind to the beauties of nature that surround him and who remains fixated on a distant goal of longed-for worldly greatness and trapped in inert interior rigidity. Halm, in contrast, during his walks through nature experiences a loosening up of a congested inner psychological state, a return to an inner flexibility which is the precondition for a resurgence of artistic creation: ‘through my solitary springtime walks, my spirit regained,

surprisingly quickly, the activity and elasticity which it had lost ... with this ebb of passions in my soul there returned to me the hours of inspiration, the friendly gift of poetry, the most heavenly of all the comforts which the Muse can bestow' (Münch-Bellinghausen, 1828, pp. 152-153). It is the ebbing of choking, congestive passions-passions which, the *Letter* elsewhere makes apparent, were fed by a nihilistic vision of the world-which releases Halm from inner stagnation and allows his soul to sing out in creativity once more. This is a release that is denied Ruprecht von Rossum.

Returning to the long quote relating to Halm's earlier mental collapse: we note the drift towards insanity which Halm feared during this phase of his depression, an insanity which increasingly gains the upper hand in Ruprecht von Rossum and is full-blown at the end of the tale. Even before that, Ruprecht on several occasions lapses into a state of utter apathy and mental numbness, which is a condition, the *Letter to J.C.R.* indicates, that Halm had himself passed through prior to commencing composition of *The Eye of God*.

Most importantly, we are struck by the dark view of Fate or God which Halm entertained during his emotional crisis, a view strikingly similar to that which blights the inner world of Ruprecht von Rossum. Just as Halm during his mental breakdown saw Fate or God as a malignant and sadistic spirit which delights in watching the painful struggles and sufferings of man, so too Ruprecht sees God as a tyrant full of malice (the word 'malicious' or 'spiteful' is used a number of times regarding God) who takes pleasure in thwarting each and every of Ruprecht's plans. Just before Ruprecht attacks the Eye of God, he remarks bitterly to his servant, Kuno: "Let me tell you who it is that is committing an outrage here: the dark power that tyrannically holds the world in its fetters, the blind monster Fate, that is the one who is committing an outrage-and that is what we call 'God' " (Halm, 2011, p. 102). One might possibly wonder whether this vision of Fate or God is in fact a philosophical stance which the rather pessimistically predisposed Halm would want his readers to share; yet such an interpretation is one of which Halm would not have approved, for in the *Letter to J.C.R.* he significantly dismisses this pessimistic, indeed nihilistic type of weltanschauung to which Ruprecht adheres as an 'illusory and neurasthenic contempt for life' (Münch-Bellinghausen, 1828, p. 159) and recommends instead an offering up of an 'enthusiastic prayer of thanks', together with an appeal to God for 'the courage of renunciation and the energy for constant, tireless activity' (Münch-Bellinghausen, p. 159).

Furthermore, Halm implicitly dismisses Ruprecht's views of a malicious Fate singling out and stalking an individual as mere 'chimaeras', 'preposterous and absurd'. What is more, later in the *Letter* Halm tells of how he was able to reconfigure his consciousness 'gradually into a nostalgic yet joyful sense of renunciation, into a comforting consciousness of having sacrificed my desires to That which is Higher' (Münch-Bellinghausen, 1828, p. 152). It is this self-sacrifice to the Higher in man, this uplifting of the lower within oneself to the Beyond-the Divine-that Ruprecht for the most part fails to achieve, but which Halm exalts in his *Letter to J. C. R.* And it is this which gives us a key to a correct understanding of Halm's besetting religio-philosophical aims in his early fictional narrative, *The Eye of God*.

## 4. Conclusion

Friedrich Halm's as yet unpublished *Letter to J.C.R.* has provided us with some valuable guidance towards a legitimate reading of his first great novella, *The Eye of God*, a reading which does not do violence to relevant viewpoints and moral judgments which Halm himself held at the time of that story's gestation and creation. The *Letter* has revealed to us something that has previously escaped scholarly notice: that Halm was more intimately aligned, at the emotional and psychological level, with his creation, Ruprecht von Rossum, than has hitherto been supposed. At the same time, the *Letter*, through the discursive philosophical and religious reflections which it embodies, makes clear that Halm was able to lift himself above the emotional-psychological plight in which his character remains mired. Halm was able to achieve this partly through prayer, but also by means of an appreciation of nature and engagement with poetic creation. The *Letter to J.C.R.* thus casts an elucidatory interpretative light upon *The Eye of God*, with which it is contemporaneous in both theme and time.

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