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*Kleist's Female Leading Characters and the Subversion of
Idealist Discourse (review)*

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ity grounded in personal observation” and “the technique of the travel satire” (104). Further, Cusack argues that the *Harzreise* includes a critique of political tourism—by “unmasking the bankrupt aesthetic of nature underlying it, and by satirizing the virulent nationalism it sought to promote.”

In an interlude between Heine and Fontane, Cusack presents a thoughtful essay on Büchner's *Lenz*: “Demolishing the Sublime.” After describing Biedermeier forms of travel literature and landscape aesthetics, Cusack argues that Lenz only experiences half of the expected experience of the sublime, the threat to his own being, and that the second half, in which the power of the human mind and will is manifest, is missing. The “awareness that subjectivity is inseparable from corporeality, and hence from material conditions” (133), Cusack notes, informs both Heine's and Büchner's political philosophies.

The section on Fontane's massive *Wanderungen durch die Mark Brandenburg* presents a conservative, antiquarian political text, with an especially interesting discussion of relations between Fontane's travel narrative and the then popular art form of the panorama. Here, as throughout his book, Cusack draws on a wide range of contemporary sources to develop detailed and sometimes surprising contexts.

The book's final chapter examines three somewhat obscure texts that gain profile through the previous discussions of the wanderer. Gotthelf's novel about the journeyman Jakob's travels through revolutionary Switzerland is seen as evoking the tension between a journeyman's necessary but dangerous wandering and the master's mature and productive stability through property. Holtei's *Die Vagabunden* emphasizes the ideology of the settled life as well. And Raabe's novel, Cusack argues, attempts to reconcile pragmatism and fantasy: we can make our own reality, but must do so in the face of political and institutional resistance.

Finally, grateful for the fuller sense I now have of wandering in the German nineteenth century, an achievement reached through painstaking attention to the wanderer in fictional and historical settings, I'm left wishing for a larger context, for the company of other wanderers in other places, the company of Rousseau (“There is something about walking that stimulates and enlivens my thoughts”), of Thoreau (“But the walking of which I speak has nothing in it akin to taking exercise”), of Wordsworth (“I love a public road”), of Robert Walser (“Ich habe einen wohligen, kleinen, appetitlichen Spaziergang gemacht”), and of Peter Handke (“Sich aufmachen [auf den Weg]: sich aufmachen”). Rebecca Solnit's *Wanderlust: A History of Walking* (Verso, 2001) and Joseph A. Amato's *On Foot: A History of Walking* (NYU Press, 2004) would also provide pedestrian company for Andrew Cusack's more focused work.

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Grant Profant McAllister, Jr., *Kleist's Female Leading Characters and the Subversion of Idealist Discourse*. New York: Peter Lang, 2005. Studies on Themes and Motifs in Literature, vol. 75. 210 pp.

The deconstructive force of Kleist's writing—whether in relationship to enlightenment philosophy, language (speech), classical and romantic aesthetics, or the law (civil, moral, divine)—is a central focus of contemporary Kleist criticism. As the title of this volume already announces, McAllister's study situates itself within this fruitful line of investigating Kleist's oeuvre, in his case works

whose titles entail the names of the eponymous central female characters ("Das Bettelweib von Locarno," "Die Marquise von O," *Das Käthchen von Heilbronn*, and *Penthesilea*). The mention of idealist discourse in the title of the study hints at a form of literary criticism strongly anchored in philosophical investigation. Yet while McAllister indeed bases important conclusions of his investigation on particular concepts of idealist philosophy, e.g. Kant's theory of the sublime, Fichte's notion of individuality (self-definition), and Hegel's re-cognition in the master-slave dialectic, his investigation is theoretically much broader and includes a detailed analysis of the dynamics of gender relations through the prism of different (sometimes differing) feminist theories (Irigaray, Butler, Kristeva, Paglia).

The methodological double approach, recourse to philosophical concepts and use of feminist theory, allows McAllister a cohesive demonstration of his major objectives, namely to show the reader how Kleist, through his female title characters, undermines the concept of *Darstellung*, seen by the Jena Romantics (F. Schlegel, Novalis) "as a guarantor of effective representation" (5). Kleist's disavowal of representation (*Darstellung*) as the site of knowledge and truth also subverts epistemological certainties, including rigidly defined gender differentiations. Common to all female figures is a (self-willed) "process of subjugation, self-negation, and dissolution" (168), a negative and disruptive counter model of representation inimical to epistemological stability and textual (aesthetic) closure. The fragmentary and ephemeral constructedness of Kleist's female figures points to an absence, a void at the core of idealist discourse and so reveals an essential aspect of Kleist's aesthetic theory.

McAllister partly ascribes the genesis of this dissenting aesthetic practice to Kleist's often-evoked *Kantkrise*. While Kleist seems to have suffered from the distressing effects of this crisis for the remainder of his life, it also "freed him from the normative definitions of morality, ethics, and gender, resulting in a frantic, fruitful ten years of literary production" (4). The other part of the explanation for Kleist's anti-idealist aesthetics is his own unsettled sexuality.

Kleist's turn away from a belief in metaphysical certainties results in an aesthetic turn that gives expression to the idea (the trauma) of something beyond all limits of experience and comprehension. This "outrage to the imagination" (Kant), the breakdown of comprehension, finds its peculiar treatment in Kant's notion of the sublime, specifically the dialectical concept of negative representation (*negative Darstellung*). *Negative Darstellung*, with its resistance to figuration, has long been used as an explanatory model for modern art's turn away from the beautiful (Lyotard's concept of the "differend" comes to mind) and McAllister makes judicious use of *negative Darstellung* to explain the parallels, and more importantly, the differences, with Kleist's representational practices. One key difference is that for Kleist the disintegration of comprehension, identified by Kant as an essential experience of the sublime, has no stabilizing corrective equal to Kant's account of reason's reasserting of itself in the face of the challenge posed by the sublime. There is no recourse to a shared moral law. Rather, the overwhelming incoherence, this abyss of the imagination, attains permanence as the site where Kleist's aesthetic resides as a form of negative truth. In his detailed analysis of the titular female figures, McAllister shows the effects of Kleist's uncompromising rebuke to the aims of idealist discourse. Tracing the complex and often paradoxical representations of the *Bettelweib*, the Marquise, *Käthchen*, and *Penthesilea*, McAllister delineates their transformation from figurative embodiment in the text to "a metaphoric presence as work," and finally, "as the aesthetic

project itself" (168). The subversive character of this aesthetic project, articulated in a distinct yet amorphous female voice, and the possibility that such a voice might express, if only *per negationem*, a genuine opposition to the discourse of idealist aesthetics, is at the center of this study. The resulting reinterpretations of the four texts yield a multitude of novel insights and (sometimes controversial) results.

The figure of the *Bettelweib*, appearing mostly as an invisible ghost in the story, is read as a destructive force that overwhelms—analogue to *negative Darstellung*—the imagination of the male protagonist, the Marchese, and leads to his destruction as a subject. The merely audible alternative discourse of the *Bettelweib* not only countervenes the dependence of idealist aesthetics on the visual, but also negates the possibility of a "successful" experience of the sublime by refusing the (male) subject the capability to redraw limits or achieve a state of aesthetic contemplation. For McAllister, this negative aesthetic "symbolizes an alternative discourse of feminine verbal representation" (5) characteristic for all title characters, be it the resolute insistence of the Marquise that she wants to know "nothing," Käthchen's demonstrative loss of agency (displayed in the play with parodistic verve), or Penthesilea's conflation of literal and metaphorical signification. Behind all these alternative modes of feminine discourse, often paradoxical and self-destructive, lies Kleist's non-conforming redaction of the Kantian sublime, specifically the idea of *negative Darstellung*.

In "Die Marquise von O," paternal legitimacy (truth) is revealed as subjectively determined, a fabrication necessary for the dominating status of the story's main male protagonists, the Commander and the Count. The Marquise's continuous attempts at subterfuge and deception disrupt efforts to establish an effective identification, a claim to originary paternity. The elusive and illusionary representational constructs of the Marquise not only thwart the count's entreaties for paternal certainty but also the urgent wish of the readers to understand the "truth" content of the story.

In *Das Käthchen von Heilbronn*, Kleist, according to McAllister, only superficially adheres to romanticism's central aesthetic tenets and subverts and caricatures these tenets, especially the romantics' image of women, by employing highly parodic forms of female representations. These parodic representations, the cipher character of Käthchen and Kunigunde, allow a critical counter-discourse to emerge. The farcical destruction of the aesthetic ideal occurs, as McAllister convincingly shows, in Kunigunde's savage partition into individual, prop-like, artificial (and possibly masculine) body parts, and in Käthchen's swooning fall at the end of the play, a sinking down that refuses to confirm male subjectivity.

In the informative chapter on *Penthesilea*, McAllister shows how the title figure "becomes a disruptive metaphorical presence that usurps the patriarchal order of reason, history, and myth, and removes the philosophical boundary or 'distance' between literal and metaphorical (aesthetic) language" (130). While critical attention has long been focused on Kleist's collapsing of the distance between the metaphorical and the literal, McAllister shows the simultaneous transformation of the signifier "Penthesilea" (the character of the text) into auctorial source of the text and, finally, the text itself. He traces the various modes of *rapprochement* between Penthesilea and Achilles, the Apollonian and the Dionysian, and reveals the price the Amazon queen must pay in her futile attempts to match her desires with those of Pelides. Especially effective is McAllister's interpretation of the main protagonists' inability to "read" each other correctly

and of the ensuing consequences for the textual characters Achilles and Penthesilea, as well as for the written text.

While McAllister displays broad familiarity with feminist theories and skillfully connects and contrasts Kleist's aesthetic program to/with the philosophical and aesthetic ideas in idealism and Jena romanticism, he also employs two additional methodological tools in order to reach interpretative and theoretical conclusions: an extensive use of etymology and a rather unequivocal use of basic Freudian symbolism. Thus *Duden* and *Subtext* also play important roles in the study. When etymology and psychoanalysis are used to demonstrate the validity of theoretical assertions, the danger of fallacious comparison is clear and present.

Case in point: in the otherwise convincing and original analysis of "Das Bettelweib," the contention that the brief meeting of the Marchese with the "alte, kranke Frau" (as the narrator describes the beggar woman) constitutes a "sexual encounter," is progressively reformulated as "visual penetration," "linguistic-sexual rape," "phallic and visual dominance," and "piercing" intrusion. Such thematic intensifications, generated from an initial statement and strung together into a string of (gendered) qualifications—male, visual, penetrating, commanding, phallic, piercing—are contrasted with an equally dichotomous list pertaining to female characteristics: auditory, inward, passive. "Unlike vision that is gathered and comprehended with outwardly, aggressive gazing eyes, themselves apparent to vision, sound is gathered and comprehended passively and internally; the ear's receptive properties are hidden, much like the female reproductive organs" (33). In a much broader way, gendered generalizations also characterize the often seemingly interchangeably used designations of "discourse"—idealist, male, masculine paternal, patriarchal, phallogentric, dominant, master, romantic—and their adjectival corollaries—teleological, binary, reified, mimetic, static, totalizing. These definitions of the "masculine" serve as negative foil for an ascribed authentic "female discourse," defined antithetically with nouns such as non-linearity, inarticulateness, absence, disruption, non-reification, negation, and subversion.

More specifically, in the "Bettelweib" interpretation, the Marchese's purported transformation into a sexually submissive androgyne, obsessed with sexual self-exploration seems to be based more on grammatical and semantic sleight-of-hand rather than textual evidence. In this respect, an especially heavy interpretative burden falls on verbs with the prefix *ver-* whose multiple resemantizations finally provide the necessary meaning for a *quod erat demonstrandum* effect. This happens so frequently throughout the study that a few additional examples are in order. The "masculine storm" responsible for the toppling of Penthesilea ("a living metaphor of a feminine discourse") acquires its essential nature ("masculine") primarily based on the grammatical gender of *der Sturm* (163–64). Kunigunde's transformation into the text itself works like this: "*Urkunde* is related to the word *Erkenntnis*, meaning to recognize. Therefore the documents appear to do much more than just function as a type of leitmotif for Kunigunde's character. Her documents actually 'recognize' and constitute her subjectivity, they are a self-reflexive means for her self-definition. Kunigunde literally posits herself in language and is conversely posited by language, recognized by language. She becomes a cipher for language, a *Satz*" (105). "Moreover, her status as a viable linguistic medium is incurably flawed due to the fact she is '*verschrieben*.' Superficially, '*verschreiben*' means to order, yet it also means to make an error in writing; metaphorically she has been mis-written" (112). And finally:

"Furthermore, because *verstanden* immediately follows *verschrieben* und *verfertigen*, the notion of 'understanding' is also compromised" (112). The spatial vicinity of verbs and their shared prefix (*ver-*) are purported to create an interdependence of meaning.

The connection of the Latin verb for weaving, *texere*, with Kleist's *text*, also requires extensive etymological help: "Penthesilea's *Kranz*, with which Achilles desired to scar her, suggest an act of writing. Duden defines *Kranz* in terms of weaving: 'In der Form eines Rings geflochtene oder gebundene Blumen, Zweige.' *Flechten* is an act of weaving similar to/ the Latin *texere*" (144–45). At stake is Penthesilea's allegorical connection to idealist aesthetics: "*Gewand* does mean robe, not a veil, but its meaning is derived from *Tuch*. Moreover, like a veil, a *Gewand* or *Tuch* is a piece of woven fabric, and as such refers to the topos of a text's construction as weaving (*texere*), a metaphor that also constitutes an image of the aesthetic veil" (149). The connection of Achilles to language is similar: "The word 'text' is derived from the Latin *texere*, meaning to weave. Appropriately, the language used to describe Achilles evokes imagery of threads, tangles, and yarn, imagery which subtextually conveys linguistic significance. He is so closely associated with language that he occasionally weaves himself into a textual knot" (152).

The study as a whole is a thought-provoking and original contribution to recent Kleist scholarship. It makes good on the title's promise to show Kleist's use of female characters as a mean to subvert the aesthetic and philosophical certainties of idealist discourse. While a good deal of prior knowledge in regard to idealist philosophy, romantic aesthetics, and feminist theory certainly aids the reading of the book, the author gives sufficient background information for readers who are not versed in these fields. The audacity and novelty of many of the study's interpretative conclusions provide the reader with ample reason to reread (and rethink) Kleist's stories.

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Ehrhard Bahr, *Weimar on the Pacific: German Exile Culture in Los Angeles and the Crisis of Modernism*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2007. 358 pp.

Newly arrived from Europe in 1939, Thomas Mann finished his novel *Lotte in Weimar* with words addressed to a celebrity: "Good god, Frau Hofrätin, I must say: To help Werther's Lotte out of Goethe's carriage, that is an event—what can I say? It must be written down." Two years later, *The New Yorker* titled society reporter Janet Flanner's article about Thomas Mann in California "Goethe in Hollywood." (Mann responded that every-other fact was false.) And with that the real and fictional journey through time and space from Goethe's eighteenth-century Weimar to the Weimar Republic's *Magic Mountain* and from there to Hollywood's mythical shores was completed.

In this forty-first volume of the distinguished series "Weimar Now: German Cultural Criticism," Ehrhard Bahr ranges from the theory of Adorno and Horkheimer to Brecht's California work, from the architecture of pre-exile Richard Neutra and Rudolph Schindler to works by Werfel and Döblin, and from Thomas Mann's *Doktor Faustus* to Schoenberg's late work. The book elicits some of the interdisciplinary pleasures apt to emerge from a look at a topic like this; but because it is more a set of loosely connected essays than the promised treatise on exile LA and modernism, it can be frustrating as well.