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*Passions of the Sign. Revolution and Language in Kant,
Goethe, and Kleist (review)*

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Since Mathäs invokes desire and its gender, he cannot expect us to ignore his exclusion of women writers and their texts. Granted, women appear as figures in texts where they cannot be marginalized, as in *Der blonde Eckbert*, but overall they are as unimportant in the book as Echo was to Narcissus. Only near the end are we told forthrightly that the study is concerned with the “male bourgeois psyche” (209). Women, it would seem, have no selves in this version of literary history, neither as persons nor as writers nor as characters. Tellingly, when he does touch on feminine narcissism, Mathäs relies on a politically blinkered passage from Freud (159–60) and then exonerates him for his sexism with a convoluted passive: “He only echoed gender politics that had been in the making since the birth of the bourgeois subject” (160). That claim occludes the politics whereby males sought to convert their actual paranoia into the control and domination of women.

The concluding chapter on “Narcissism and Cloning” ends up re-reading Kafka’s *Das Urteil* as an indication of how the themes continue from the eighteenth century into the present. In its brevity, it really cannot do justice to the ethical concerns posed by cloning today or to the sophistication of discussions from current philosophy of science and of technology.

I am sorry to be so negative about missed opportunities. The history of affects in the eighteenth century is drawing more and more attention, and in that project this work will doubtless find its readers.

Carleton University

Arnd Bohm

Andreas Gailus, *Passions of the Sign. Revolution and Language in Kant, Goethe, and Kleist*. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006. 222pp.

Gailus’s book is aptly published as part of the “Parallax” series of the Johns Hopkins University Press, which addresses re-visions of culture and society. Subjects of re-vision, in the double sense of a second look and a transformation of the topics under investigation, for Gailus are the French Revolution and its impact upon the German cultural elite, here represented by the philosopher Kant and the producers of novellas, Goethe and Kleist. Under re-vision is not only the established, traditional view “at work in classicist aesthetics (Schiller), idealist philosophy (Hegel), and the modern novel (Goethe), which all relied on teleologically structured, and thus progressivist, models” (23) of history for the absorption of a radical rupture, a historical caesura, and an absolutely new event whose appearance requires a complete transformation of cultural life and its symbolic order, but also the need for a reassessment of the relationship between revolutionary event and language, between politics and poetics around 1800.

Tracing the re-visions of this relationship in impressive close readings of Kant’s *Conflict of the Faculties*, Goethe’s *Conversations of German Refugees*, and Kleist’s novella *Michael Kohlhaas (From an Old Chronicle)*, Gailus stresses the insertion and conversion of the revolutionary, historical event into the language of these texts, which defy the discursive phantasms of the idealist, organicist strategies of an integration and diffusion of the caesura into the textual and cultural fabric by precisely exposing them to the disruptive and traumatic blow of the revolutionary event. This event, here manifested in and by the French Revolution, is not an object of historiography, but rather a non-structural occurrence, i.e. the emergence of the absolutely new, inherently meaningless, contingent, violent, and groundless foundation on which cultural, political, psychic, and

symbolic life restlessly rest. As such a groundless ground it is not only the source of vitality and the dynamic origin of these orders, but—at least as far as language is concerned—it imparts itself to the latter once it is liberated from its semantic function and its performative dimension is stressed as a positing force, as an articulation and utterance capable of producing and positing new discursive formations, political orders, communicative and social structures.

Now Gailus argues—hence the title *Passions of the Sign*—that language can assume this per- and transformative, revolutionary power “only to the extent that it opens itself up to its *internal* outside, the extraverbal force of passion” (11). Passion then, both as extraverbal and extrasymbolic, but also extra- and trans-subjective force, is invested in and uploaded by what Gailus calls the “energetic sign”; and whenever these energetic signs are either generated or encountered, historical, political, social, and discursive change and innovation become possible, if not inevitable. The crucial question, of course, is: when and under what conditions does a symbolic structure open itself up to its internal extrasymbolic force that drives and sustains it? A possible, almost tautological answer could be that this moment arrives whenever a symbolic order has cut itself off from its vital source, when it is no longer centered on its de-centered and de-centering energetic sign. If this is the case, as Gailus suggests, then we can also support his claim “that the paradox of the energetic sign is the linguistic manifestation of a more general *paradox of exteriority* that unsettles all symbolically orchestrated systems, whether political, social, psychological or otherwise” (11). This claim enables Gailus to analyze how Kant, Goethe, and Kleist reorganized the relationship of the political and the poetic, of revolution and language, and how these reorganizations along the paradoxes of the energetic sign, the paradox of exteriority, and the paradox of the extra-legal foundation of the law as the constituted center of the various orders and systems imply the revolutionary restructuring of history, language, and subjectivity. In the words of Andreas Gailus:

Unfolding in the medium of energetic signs, each of these domains is subject, at any instance of its articulation, to the countersymbolic force that lies within and beyond it. History is subject to contingency and thus understood not as a progressive narrative but as an expanse of revolutionary possibilities; language is subject to the extra-linguistic context of utterance and hence primarily conceived not in semantic but in pragmatic terms; and the individual is subject to impersonal affect and is figured not as locus of self-determination but as the site of passions that exceed the self and its pleasure principle. (11–12)

The invocation of Freud and his move beyond the pleasure principle plays as significant a role for the meticulous and superb close readings of the three texts by Kant, Goethe, and Kleist as Lacan's insight into the “‘extimate’—intimate yet foreign—kernel” at the center of symbolic structures, the recent focus of contemporary literary theory on the performativity of language (Austin, Derrida, and Butler), and the philosophical discussions concerning the mythical foundations of the authority of the law and its foundation in an extra-legal force (Schmitt, Benjamin, Agamben, and Derrida). Gailus demonstrates a remarkable ability to draw on these theories and discussions so as to frame and enrich his analyses of Kant's, Goethe's, and Kleist's texts. While they all share the basic concern for the investigation of the conditions of possibility of a vital, energetic symbolic life—whether for the sake of its re-formation (Kant), its re-invention and renovation (Goethe), or, in Kleist's case, revolution—Gailus also stresses the differences

between the three writers, their texts, and their strategies, especially their different modes of relating to and coping with the passions of the sign, the extimate, asemanic kernel, and the extra-legal, violent foundation of the symbolic order. While Kant employs an aesthetics of the sublime to rationalize this force in his analysis of the German passion/enthusiasm for the French Revolution, thus channeling it into symbolic structures, including those of his own philosophical text, Goethe's *Conversations* explore the possibility of transforming the anarchical energies of the desire for freedom into the freedom from desire via strategies of renunciation and, moreover, aesthetic sublimation. Kleist's novella *Michael Kohlhaas*, finally, with its multiple narrative strands and double ending explores the conditions of possibility for an historically effective speech, for, as it were, the triumph of art and the authority of literary speech over the symbolism of political power by means of the vitalization and energizing of signs as celebrated in the aesthetic staging of Kohlhaas's execution/sacrifice to the energized rule of law and his poetic ingestion and materialization of the sign in the two finales of the novella (141–49).

Passions of the Sign, then, presents itself to the reader as an important, significant, and, in the best sense of the word, passionate analysis of a configuration of philosophical and literary responses to the French Revolution which, when read through the prism of central contemporary discussions in theory and criticism, yield an alternative perspective on our established, traditional reception of the German cultural reaction to the challenge of the French Revolution, an alternative which is also, as Gailus points out, the seed for an alternative, critical response to the crisis of modernity. *Passions of the Sign* is therefore not only the example of an engaged and energizing literary criticism, but also an indispensable illustration for the reaction of a cultural and symbolic system that seeks to embrace and understand rather than repress and shy away from its own historical, structural, foundational crisis.

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Jocelyn Holland, *German Romanticism and Science. The Procreative Poetics of Goethe, Novalis, and Ritter*. New York: Routledge, 2009. 221pp.

Jocelyn Holland opens her book with two epigraphs: the first from Goethe, the second from Ritter (the passage with which she also concludes the book). Both epigraphs indicate the centrality of the idea of procreation for Goethe, Ritter, and German romanticism in general, and, as Holland puts it, emphasize that procreation was *the* mystery of the day (5). In focusing her study on the conception of procreation, contextualizing it within the science of the time, and showing how procreation serves as a discursive phenomenon with distinctive “patterns, tendencies, and rhetorical features” (2), Holland makes an important contribution to scholarship on romanticism, most especially to the nascent field of the history of romantic science.

Holland's book is divided into six chapters. The first chapter introduces her project and describes the intellectual (specifically scientific) context around 1800. Her discussion of the various competing theories at the time (epigenesis and preformation) is coupled with a consideration of the influence of these theories on Goethe, Novalis, and Ritter. In the same way that Blumenbach and Kiemeyer saw the force of reproduction as “central to all organic processes of the body,” so, she argues, “a more generalized understanding of procreation is