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“Die allmähliche Verfertigung des Geschlechts beim Anziehen”
Epistemologies of the Body in Kleist’s
Die Familie Schroffenstein

This article investigates the complex interrelation between gender, the body, and epistemology in Kleist’s early drama Die Familie Schroffenstein. Although Kleist’s drama appears to take recourse to gender and the body as guarantors of truth, it ultimately insists that the question of gender must not be confounded with that of truth or moral law, and that the body cannot serve as a foundation for epistemologically correct statements.

Ich weiß nicht, was ich Dir über mich un-aussprechlichen Menschen sagen soll. – Ich wollte ich könnte mir das Herz aus dem Leibe reißen, in diesen Brief packen, und Dir zuschicken. – Dummer Gedanke! (Heinrich von Kleist to Ulrike von Kleist, March 13, 1803).

From his Kant crisis to his preference for “it seems” and “as if” constructions,¹ the Kleistian trauma of the epistemological inaccessibility of the world has become commonplace in scholarship about this fascinating and unusual early nineteenth-century author.² Kleist’s textual universe is haunted by the anxiety that all knowledge will ultimately remain uncertain. The fear that the truth not only about the constitution of the world and the nature of moral law but also about the core of one’s personal identity can never be grasped informs many of Kleist’s dramas and stories.

To Kleist, however, unattainability does not equal undesirability. Even though the Kleistian world is such that “wir können nicht entscheiden, ob das, was wir Wahrheit nennen, wahrhaft Wahrheit ist, oder ob es uns nur so scheint”,³ Kleist’s texts are driven by the desperate and often ferocious de-

sire to stabilize cognition and prove the validity of “natural” moral laws. In order to do so, they attempt to deduce the moral teleology of the world from its physical facts. More often than not, the body is singled out as privileged signifier and guarantor of stability, certainty, and truth. Raimar Zons even claims that Kleist’s texts are addressed not to souls, but to nerves. One need only think of the numerous instances of swooning, blushing, and stammering in which the body seems to promise access to the truth of the Other. But Kleistian characters are not content to limit their search for truth to the surface of the body. When in dire straits, only the sacrifice of the body can restore order and stability. In *Die Hermannsschlacht* (1808), for example, the bodies of Hermann’s sons are pledged to guarantee the truth of his message, and the despoiled dead body of the rape victim Hally becomes the instrument with which national unity is restored. As the second example indicates, it is especially the female body which is called upon as the last reliable repository of truth. Again and again, Kleist’s “nostalgia for a preverbal, pre-discursive realm”, for a truth that has not yet been corrupted by language, attaches itself to the female body. Thus, one might be tempted to conclude that, if Kleist’s metaphysical arch does not tumble, it is not because all stones are pressing downwards – as Kleist claims in a letter to Wilhelmine von Zenge – but because it rests on the female body of the caryatid.

However, such a conclusion would fail to do justice to Kleist’s philosophical sophistication. Just like Kleist is no advocate of a Rousseauistic return to nature, he is also unwilling to endow the body with the task of redemption. The figure of the Doppelgänger in *Amphitryon*, for instance,

Sembdner. Munich 1964. P. 163. All subsequent quotations from Kleist are taken from this edition.