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The Father in Fatherland: Violent Ideology and Corporeal Paternity in Kleist

This article analyzes the interdependence of paternity, nationality, and aesthetics in the work of Heinrich von Kleist to explore his paradoxical underlying relationship to the issue of ideology. Kleist maintains that paternity and nationality are mutually constituted through language and then anchored to bodies through acts of violence. Male bodies are conscripted for war, simultaneously validating both fatherhood and fatherland. The domestic sphere to which female bodies are restricted is no-less-risky; there they serve as a medium for propaganda that establishes bonds between men. Because this process of exploitation is rendered visible on the surface of Kleist’s texts, his work escapes common assumptions about ideological writing. By denying his warriors and soldiers the autochthonous character Schmitt claimed as the hallmark of a partisan, Kleist also evades labels of partisanship assigned to him by Schmitt and, more recently, Wolf Kittler. Kleist’s alertness to the artificiality of ideology does not, however, amount to the critique desired of him by so many critics. Instead, he desperately embraces the violent consequences of ideology as the only foundation for identity.

In the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, the human body entered politics. Indeed, a transformation of the understanding of the body coincided with the creation of the human as a political subject in ways that have been much discussed since Foucault’s excavation of the interlocking medical, sociological, and biological discourses that have come to define both body and subject. At the turn of the nineteenth century the view of the body as a machine that had dominated the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries did not disappear. Rather, it was sublimated into an organic model that continued to understand the body and its organs in terms of purposes. The question of the body’s teleology not only affected methodological debates about the natural sciences, but defined the significance of the body, i.e. defined the body both as a signifier, and as a determinant, of the meaning of being human. The material of the body was scrutinized, anatomized, interrogated for clues to a final purpose according to which society could be organized. As Emma Spary points out, “increasingly, toward the end of the [eighteenth] century, justifications for social, racial and gender hierarchies were located within the fabric of the body itself” (195). Even Kant occasionally succumbed to the temptation

of imagining a final purpose for humans which could be derived, albeit nega-
tively, from the body; namely the body’s failure to provide evidence of a final
purpose for humans inside the realm of the natural and physical, constituted
one part of his argument in favor of intellectual and communal activity as the
ultimate purpose of human endeavor.\(^2\)

The disciplines that turned toward the materiality of the body around 1800
in search of such purposes varied widely. Aesthetics, natural history, and
surgery, but also the political rhetoric of revolution and of empire converged
upon the human body as their source of authority and authenticity. Because
it does not generate meaning, however, the body cannot sustain this role.
Its failure to signify independently provides ideal conditions for the rise of
ideologies. These ideologies share a strategy of naturalization by which
they legitimate themselves through a claim to read the truth from the orga-
nization of the body, combined with an assumption that nature is normative.
Against the background of this ferment over the body, the work of Heinrich
von Kleist becomes particularly revealing. Again and again, Kleist exposes
the mechanism by which ideology is constructed, undermining its claims
to natural authority at every turn. This exposure is not, however, a critical
endeavor; in spite of his recognition of the manipulation required to construct
ideology, Kleist’s ideological commitments are very real. Kleist’s work there-
fore implies another path to ideology, one that acknowledges and accepts its
constructed nature. Significantly, however, Kleist’s refusal to locate the source
of authority in the body does not represent a turn away from the body. Instead,
Kleist documents the way in which ideology functions through the regulation
of the body itself.

\(^2\) Kant argues against the natural end of happiness in favor of a cultural final pur-
pose in §82–84 of the *Critique of Judgment*. While he allowed for the purposiveness
of organs, Kant rejected the conclusion that their purposes could determine the final
purpose of the individual. The definition of the organism was important not only for
Kant’s understanding of teleological judgment. Jonathan Hess has demonstrated the
political implications of the organism for Kant, who deployed the organic body as
a metaphor for a republic in which individuals are simultaneously ends and means.
In this way the republic contrasts with an absolutist state in which individuals are
merely means, and which Kant figured as a machine. While Kant thus reconstitutes
the body as a political relationship, as Hess argues, we should not lose sight of the
fact that the political body was intended to supersede the physical body as the locus