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Innocence, Interrupted: *Bewusstsein* and the Body in Heinrich von Kleist

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Among his many unusual tropes, Kleist’s representations of the body are some of the most difficult to parse: the bodies in his texts often slip, produce ambiguous signs, and create startling contradictions. What consequences ensue when the flesh generates knowledge, then turns around and reverses or denies it? In this essay, I will explore Kleist’s textual bodies as problematic sites of knowledge that simultaneously produce and deny their own readings. In high-stakes questions of innocence or guilt, signs of the body defy any manifestation of truth, pointing instead to a more ambiguous relationship between the self and its consciousness. By openly manifesting, but never resolving, the extremes of innocence and guilt, Kleist’s bodies disrupt the hermeneutic possibilities of representation. In moments when the stakes are highest, I will argue, the body rebels against an inner, apparently evident truth to produce doubt in the face of certainty. In questions of truth and knowledge, Kleistian bodies point to the limitations of a merely dualistic reading. As Helmut Schneider writes, «Kleistian narrative […] holds itself up precisely by self-destructing» (Schneider 504).¹ The interruption of projected innocence reflects a pattern often found in Kleistian narrative; whenever one reading seems plausible, truth folds in on itself, threatening to collapse the entire textual endeavor.

*Die Marquise von O* … (1808) and *Der Zweikampf* (1811) are two such meditations on the (non)legibility of the body. The former spotlights a woman whose body produces signs of pregnancy the Marquise is unable or unwilling to read; in the latter, the ever-shifting signs of the body indicate an unstable exchange between the signification of truth, knowledge, and the mechanisms that generate them. The term *Bewusstsein*, which Grimms Deutsches Wörterbuch glosses as *Selbstgefühl*, was only coined in the eighteenth century, but it was already widely used during Kleist’s time.² In a letter from August 1806, Kleist writes, «das Bewuβtsein seiner selbst und die
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damit beginnende Herrschaft des Verstandes ist der Sitz des Übels» (qtd. in Skrotzki 13), suggesting that knowledge of the self is the root of all evil. Kleist’s juxtaposition of wissen and selbst points to an affinity between the author’s usage of Bewusstsein and the one put forth by the Grimms. Tainted by the endless production of carnal signs, self-awareness impedes the self. No longer is self-consciousness a positive characteristic leading to self-understanding or knowledge. It is, rather, a «separation from self through consciousness» (Curran 419). The multiplicity engendered by Kleist’s bodies privileges the production of meaning over the actual product of certainty. However, the paradoxes that emerge indicate that no one reading can ever be stable.

Scholars have long attempted to decode the conflicting messages of the Kleistian flesh. Recently, some critics have focused on the fact that for Kleist, the body, rather than language, leads to truth. This stance is rendered more complex by the proliferation of tropes that during Kleist’s time came to represent skill even in the absence of knowledge. In the eighteenth century, falsification and eloquence can coexist; bodies can produce ambiguous signs and still appear eloquent. Recognizing the difficulty of making even the most tentative claims about truth in Kleist’s texts, many scholars have gone only so far as to suggest a connection between body language and one problematic certainty: the certainty of a problem. While most current readings agree that Kleistian bodies generate some kind of truth, these truths are often unsettled, ambiguous, and troubling. In a recent article about the problematic yet essential «middle» of Michael Kohlbass, Zachary Sng points to the challenges of a text that simultaneously builds itself up and breaks itself down: «This misfire points not to a flaw or deficiency in person but instead reveals the duplicity of a force that poses as positing force while secretly working as deposing one» (Sng 181). Scanning the body for truth and knowledge results in a «gesture of self-interruption that precipitates a narrative retracing and requires a hermeneutic doubling-back» (184). Whether or not this doubling-back results in any kind of definitive truth remains unclear. In both of Kleist’s texts, establishing innocence depends on the representations of the body that are both certain and, at the same time, called into question. In what follows I will explore the ways in which corporeal indiscretions factor into decisions between guilt and innocence, arguing all the while for an uneasy exchange between body and consciousness of the self.

Whether it is the shocking beginning, or the series of twists that follow, Die Marquise von O … is one of Kleist’s most absurd and beloved stories. To any second-time reader of the text, the Count F. betrays signs of his guilt very early in the text, fervently insisting time and again that the Marquise
agree to marry him immediately. However, transparent though his motives may be to readers, first-time readers remain in the dark for quite some time, although perhaps not quite so long as the heroine, the Marquise herself. Armine Mortimer calls this hurdle «the cognitive dissonance stemming from the characters’ inability to know» (Mortimer 293); she proposes that «the novella, with its second story, requires a certain realism that calls for a devious reading» (297). It is true that throughout the text, the Marquise explicitly expresses an almost absurdly ignorant reading of her body. She is puzzled by the incomprehensible changes she has perceived in her body, but she does not follow them to their logical conclusion:

A few months after the officer has convinced the Marquise to marry him, but before she has fully realized her predicament, her «symptoms» return with greater strength than before:

The Marquise’s body may be perfectly readable here, but the Marquise herself refuses to recognize the reading. The literal implications of «sie wisse nicht» stand in direct contrast to what her body does know; thus, bodily symptoms both perpetuate and impede the logical conclusions at which the Marquise should, at this point, be able to arrive. By refusing to consider anything other than her own innocence, the signs of (someone’s) guilt remain unnamed and unclaimed.

Throughout the text, the Marquise is famously bad at reading herself, whereas the doctor and midwife diagnose her condition almost immediately. Thus, one must take care to distinguish between different kinds of reading. Readers of the text, too, quite quickly understand the implications of the Marquise’s ailments. Less interested parties (the doctor, the midwife, the reader) are able to understand the narrative of the Marquise’s body, since there is no personal involvement. The Marquise, on the other hand, is plagued by the impediment of her consciousness, which stands in the way of an accurate reading. Her lack of self-knowledge in the face of her body’s
knowledge highlights the pitting of the self against itself to deny its own readings; her flesh produces meanings that the self energetically denies. The Marquise’s pregnancy «splits her body against itself and from her consciousness. The significance of the Marquise’s sexual ‹fall› lies in the heteronomy of her body, which throws her out of her social and normative bonds and endows her with a self-determination opposed to, rather than grounded on, her consciousness» (Schneider 513). The Marquise both knows and does not know, accepts and does not accept, the knowledge of her pregnancy.

Still in the dark about her condition, the Marquise calls a doctor, an expert reader of the flesh, to diagnose her strange condition. When he immediately diagnoses her pregnancy, she reacts violently: «Sie warf sich in der größten Bewegung auf den Diwan nieder. Sie durchlief, gegen sich selbst mißtrauisch, alle Momente des verflossenen Jahres, und hielt sich für verrückt» (Kleist, Werke 3: 161). Although the Marquise is outraged by what she claims is a scandalous accusation on the part of the doctor, her first reaction is to think back on the previous year and consider its implications. In the face of certainty, the Marquise doubts what she knows to be true because of what her body is saying. She knows that she has never consciously had sex during the last nine months, a certainty compounded by the fact that, being a widow and mother of two children, she is certainly no virgin.

On one significant point, the Marquise speaks true: she was unconscious during her rape. The juxtaposition of unconscious and conscious indicates a lack of self-knowledge in the former state. The Marquise had no control over her self – inner or outer – during the moments she was ravaged. And still, for a moment, she doubts the validity of her innocence. The Marquise’s hesitation in this moment stems from the flesh, which produces its own kind of knowledge. While her body does not feel or understand what has happened, it recognizes what state it is in, and what must have happened in order to bring about the pregnancy. Just as the body’s production of symptoms creates doubt about her self-diagnosis, here, innocence is both perpetuated and impeded by two conflicting readings.

After she throws the doctor out of her house, the Marquise’s body starts to produce a different kind of sign. She starts to tremble uncontrollably, her face burns bright red. Her body goes into convulsions. She loses consciousness, and trembles even more violently (Kleist, Werke 3: 161–62, 165). The slips of the flesh produced by her already transparent body have less to do with her pregnancy than with her consciousness. The disobedience of her body during these moments functions as a corporeal manifestation of self-knowledge. The Marquise’s flesh is out of joint with what she might want it to do, but in its disobedience, it produces signs that lead the Marquise to
give the doctor’s diagnosis more credence. Although she has sent him away, the Marquise asks her mother to send for a midwife, all the while assuring her that she is innocent. Now, her mother, too, begins to suspect. She exclaims, «ein reines Bewußtsein, und eine Hebamme!» (162–63). Even if the Marquise’s body has announced the truth all along, it needs a female authority, professionally trained, to confirm what her body and, subsequently, her blushes, faints, and tremors have been communicating all along. The Marquise asks ob die Möglichkeit einer unwissentlichen Empfängnis sei. – Die Hebamme lächelte [...] , und sagte, das würde ja doch der Frau Marquise Fall nicht sein. Nein, nein, antwortete die Marquise, sie habe wissentlich empfangen, sie wolle nur im Allgemeinen wissen, ob diese Erscheinung im Reiche der Natur sei? Die Hebamme versetzte, dass dies, außer der Heiligen Jungfrau, noch keinem Weibe auf Erden zugestoßen wäre. Die Marquise zitterte immer heftiger. (165)

Cohn has done some fascinating sleuthing into Kleist’s use of wissentlich as choice of words for carnal knowledge: Kleist is following Luther, who consistently uses the verb erkennen for carnal knowledge in his translation of the Bible. The only exception is the Annunciation scene, in which he chooses wissen (Cohn 136). At first glance, the passage implies a neo-immaculate conception, since readers know that she was unconscious at the time of the rape. The Marquise, one would assume, also knows that she did not know the officer carnally (erkennen), but her body has clearly known carnally (wissen), as evidenced by her pregnancy. Carnal knowledge, when used in the context of Kleist reading Luther, stands in for bodily knowledge. When she consults her conscience, the Marquise cannot find any knowledge of sexual behavior. However, when her body consults its own Wissen, it can read its own signs and deduce what must have happened.

In a startling turn of phrases that could easily be overlooked, the Marquise lies to the midwife, sexually implicating herself for the first time. She tells the midwife in the passage above that she did receive a man knowing-ly. Although on the surface she is giving the logical explanation in order to find out «generally» if conception without knowledge is possible, her inquiry points to the possibility that on some level, the lie is not a lie at all. Her body’s surface, legible as a site of carnal fact, stands in tension with the knowledge and consciousness throughout the key passages of the text. There is the sense that the swan in the Count’s dream has realized its filthy state and has disappeared into the lake, but that it remains unknown whether or not it will reemerge. The stakes for the heroine’s reputation could not be higher. Upon hearing of her pregnancy her father throws the Marquise out of the family house, threatening even to take her children. Her body represents a truth she
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does not want to acknowledge, and seems to serve as irrefutable proof of her guilt.

Both the Marquise and the Count displace the narrative of innocence and guilt into indirect speech and knowledge. These moments highlight their individual awareness of just how precarious the situation is at the same time as they highlight the challenge of locating knowledge in the text. The Count’s dream, referenced above, is the first of these displacements. Rather than emphasize the already quite transparent symbolism of the dream itself, readers might puzzle over the fact that the Count chooses to tell it to the Marquise at all, and that he specifically emphasizes that this dream reminds him of her (Kleist, Werke 3: 156–57). By shifting his knowledge about the rape onto the space of the dream, the Count simultaneously interrupts and displaces his guilt onto the realm of the nonknowledgeable. His indirect speech is both an expression and masking of his role in the affair. He communicates to the Marquise something that she does not yet know about her own body. By marrying him, the Count implies that his victim might regain the honor she does not yet know she has lost.

If the swan incident highlights the displacement of knowledge onto the indirect space of the dream, the Marquise’s decision to place an ad in the newspaper transfers the rape into another indirect reading. It is the description of the advertisement that opens the story, although chronologically, it of course takes places after she hears the story of the swan:

In M … ließ die verwitwete Marquise von O … durch die Zeitungen bekannt machen: dass sie, ohne ihr Wissen, in andre Umstände gekommen sei, dass der Vater zu dem Kinde, das sie gebären würde, sich melden solle; und dass sie, aus Familienrücksichten, entschlossen wäre, ihn zu heiraten. (143; emphasis mine)

The Marquise’s textual displacement of the rape complements the Count’s telling of the dream; the Marquise, not knowing what happened, displaces her innocence into the realm of public knowledge. The absurdity of the ad underscores her innocence in the face of public humiliation, and it appeals, albeit without her knowledge, to the guilt of the Count. Separating herself from any guilt by denying her role in the pregnancy, at the same time as she publicly broadcasts knowledge of her body’s condition, the Marquise blurs the boundaries between interior and exterior knowledge. From the very first sentences of the text, readers encounter a body perplexed by what it knows (and does not). Convinced of her innocence, the Marquise is unable to relate to the Count’s story of the swan. And yet, by the time she places the ad, her body has come to know what her mind has not yet understood. Despite the progression of her pregnancy, references to ‘not knowing’ abound. The Marquise’s pregnancy announces itself on the space of her body – it becomes
the site of carnal knowledge – but the Marquise does not acknowledge it. She still cannot (or will not) understand the analogy of the swan’s tarnished innocence. The more explicitly her body exclaims its pregnancy, the more emphatically the Marquise recoils from it.

The puzzle of knowing and feeling culminates when the officer visits the Marquise in her exile. He insists on an audience with her, presumably to admit to his crime. She turns him away emphatically, exclaiming, «ich will nichts wissen!» (171; emphasis in original). The Marquise is sending mixed messages. Clearly, the length of time it takes her to figure out that she is pregnant, along with her insistence on remaining in the dark, indicates a reluctance to unite body with consciousness. According to Cohn, «[that] frantic shutting out of knowledge from the self paradoxically betrays the presence of the knowledge within the self» (Cohn 133). Together with the lie she has told the midwife, her emphatic denial of knowledge at this point indicates that she already knows the truth.14

In order for the truth of the body to unite with knowledge, the Marquise must open her consciousness to the absurdity of what has happened. Along the path to truth, the Marquise’s body slips, she lies, and she refuses knowledge. The result begs readers to question the function and utility of self-consciousness in a subject so insistent upon denying the truths her body produces. In order to regain the innocence of the swan, the Marquise must concede to the interruptions of her body and accept the knowledge of what has happened. She must accept marriage with the officer, but before she can come to love her perpetrator, she must come to terms with the various readings she has had of him. Just as dashes and other punctuation marks stop the flow of speech throughout the text and fill it with what Mortimer calls «blank center[s]» (Mortimer 299), the body stops the flow of reading and interpretation. It is, however, vitally important to the way in which the Marquise comes to knowledge. Producing signs that make her doubt innocence and suspect a hermeneutic gap that can only have been caused by her own unconscious rape, the Marquise must accept the paradoxical fruitfulness of opposites. This goes beyond Mortimer’s implication that the first and second stories dialogically complement each other until readers, and the Marquise, realize the truth; rather, the body and the self, as well as innocence and guilt, continually interrupt each other. The Marquise’s final explanation of her shock at learning the truth about the Count’s paradoxical embodiment of both innocence and guilt highlights her own journey from one to the other at the hands of her body: «er würde ihr damals nicht wie ein Teufel erschienen sein, wenn er ihr nicht, bei seiner ersten Erscheinung, wie ein Engel vorgekommen wäre» (Kleist, Werke 3: 186).
Following the plot and searching for the truth in Kleist’s *Der Zweikampf* feels a bit like walking through a labyrinth without a map. The issue of Graf Rotbart’s alibi (his claim to have slept with the chaste Littegarde during the time his brother was murdered) overshadows the main plot; the resolution of the murder seems almost like an afterthought when it resurfaces at the end of the text. During the duel, meant to manifest God’s judgment of the truth in the matter, Herr Friedrich is wounded mortally, whereas Graf Rotbart is merely scratched. But Herr Friedrich does not die. Over the course of the next few weeks, his wounds magically begin to heal. Graf Rotbart’s scratch, on the other hand, literally eats away at him until he confesses the truth.

Each manifestation of so-called ‘truth’ postpones actual understanding; wounds, supposedly signs of God’s truth, point to one meaning, then its opposite. The inner truth clashes with the topical message of the wound. No assertion of truth seems complete; a new confusion of the plot lies around every corner. Herr Friedrich does not know that Littegarde is innocent. And until a certain point, Graf Rotbart believes that he really did sleep with her, since Littegarde’s chambermaid disguises herself and replaces her unknowing mistress in bed. Knowledge in *Der Zweikampf* is held up by the refusal of the body to function according to a duel supposedly set up to represent God’s will. Readings of the body here cross each other in a «labyrinth of apparently irreconcilable contradictions» (Demeritt 38). Although the wounds initially point to innocence and guilt, their readings switch by the end of the text, thus calling into question the significance of trying to interpret them at all.

Reading the wounded body in *Der Zweikampf* leads from one riddle to another. The final sentence, proclaiming that dueling will continue to be used in matters of contention, but that it will only result in truth «wenn es Gottes Wille ist» (Kleist, *Werke* 3: 349), indicates that signs of the body point either to what they signify, or to their opposite, or to nothing at all. The exterior body produces signs and invites, even demands, interpretation, but the readings it yields are not always accurate. Kleist’s playful, yet urgent, deferral of resolution in the text gestures towards his overall awareness that truth comes from a clash between body and self that cannot easily be resolved.15

Irmela Krüger-Fürhoff has pointed out that the study of wounds proliferated during the time Kleist wrote *Der Zweikampf* (Krüger-Fürhoff (1998) 24). One might speculate that Kleist found in wounds an ideal manifestation of his interest in troubled bodies and empty truths. The violence of a wound is reflected in the violence always implicit in Kleist’s texts. Graf Robart’s wound begins as a minor one; it is described as having merely scratched the skin, but it slowly begins to eat away at the body: «ein ätzender
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[...] unbekannter Eiter, fraß auf eine krebsartige Weise, bis auf den Knochen hinab im ganzen System seiner Hand um sich [...] sein ganzer Körper [löste sich] in Eiterung und Fäulnis auf» (Kleist, Werke 3: 342–43). The external wound eats away – literally – at the body until the interior truth is exposed.16 Whereas the Marquise’s pregnancy begins on the inside and works its way out, wounds in this text begin on the exterior and press inwards, divulging the truth by means of the persistent body. Here, on the other hand, the wounds themselves seem less to be sites of knowledge than starting points for a long hermeneutic struggle. As Rotbart’s wound eats away at him, cancer-like, it gets under his skin, forcing a hermeneutic clash of interior and exterior and betraying, albeit slowly, his interior guilt.

In Grimms Deutsches Wörterbuch, a wound is defined as «eine gewaltsame durchtrennung der körperoberfläche» (qtd. in Krüger-Fürhoff (2003) 36). Emmert’s Lehrbuch der Allgemeinen Chirurgie writes that a wound begins «bald von der Oberfläche des Körpers, [ist] sichtbar und dringt nach innen» (qtd. in Krüger-Fürhoff (2003) 36). In line with these definitions, Krüger-Fürhoff observes that «[d]ie Körper in Kleists ‹Zweikampf› besitzen [...] eine höchst fragile Oberfläche, die von zahlreichen Verletzungen gezeichnet wird» (Krüger-Fürhoff (1998) 27). Offering deeper insight into the psychological and physiological status of the human skin than any other modern thinker, Didier Anzieu posits in The Skin Ego (1974) that the skin serves as a frontier that provides a «double-feedback» between interior and exterior. «The skin,» he writes, «together with the tactile sense organs it contains [...] provides direct information about the external world» (Anzieu 105). According to Anzieu’s logic, Graf Rotbart’s wound, though only a scratch, opens up the pathway to the truth by means of the skin. Herr Friederich’s injury, by the same token, though seemingly mortal, feeds on the truth to the opposite effect.

A reading of the wounds as a de facto clash between interior and exterior is possible, but it does not take into account some of the complexities of the text. If wounds stand in for the truth, then why do these truths seemingly change?18 Why do they not (seem to) express the divine verdict that they were meant to? Looking at Littegarde’s status in the text sheds light on the murky workings of truth in Der Zweikampf. As pieces of the truth start to emerge, Littegarde experiences a moment of doubt similar to the Marquise’s self-suspicion. When Friedrich comes to visit her in her cell, she exclaims, «Schuldig, überwiesen, verworfen, in Zeitlichkeit und Ewigkeit verdammt und verurteilt!» (Kleist, Werke 3: 338). Although she does not explain for several pages the true sequence of events, or her exact role in the intrigue with Rotbart, the outburst is enough to convince Friedrich of her guilt, and
the ambiguity of the passage implies that she herself believes it. Hearkening back to the Marquise’s moment of reflection, trying to remember if she might have slept with someone over the past year, Littegarde here doubts her own innocence after the signs produced by the duel prescribe a certain hermeneutic truth. The flesh that represents Littegarde is separated from the consciousness contained within her body. Just as the Marquise doubts her own innocence during the doctor’s examination of her body, Littegarde, having displaced her own innocence onto Friedrich, starts to doubt her own role in the affair based on the signs of his skin. Rather than believe the knowledge of what she experienced, Littegarde gives the truth of the affair over to mediation; she takes a passive role in the discernment of her own body’s truth. Just as the Marquise places an ad in the local newspaper, putting truth in the hands of an external source, Littegarde’s innocence hinges on others’ readings – not of her body – but of her mediator’s. Friedrich serves as her as and as the pathway to her innocence, but in the process, they both become unsure of the signs of his body. Once Littegarde confesses, Friedrich reinvests his wound with the meaning assigned by the rules of the Zweikampf. Because she has displaced her own innocence onto Friedrich, who represents her, Littegarde believes she must read the outcome of the duel as it appears on his body. The next few paragraphs double back on the (albeit absurd) truth Littegarde seems to have revealed and confirm that she did not, in fact, sleep with Rotbart. The deferral of truth, while providing another clue in the overarching narrative, shuts out the possibility of a definitive reading.

Moments of doubt in Der Zweikampf complicate the solving of the mystery for the characters in the text as well as the reading of the text itself. When the exterior signs of the body are deemed unreliable, and when the text itself produces signs of uncertainty, the problem truth gets handed over to mediation. In the end, restoring innocence requires a return to convention. Rather than settling on a definitive hermeneutic explanation of the wounds, the conflict is resolved by confession, another longstanding legal and social tradition. When Rotbart realizes the imminence of his death, he is seized by guilt, and hurries to the site where Friedrich and Littegarde await their execution. He then pleads for their release:

«Unschuldig», versetzte [Rotbart], indem er sich gestützt auf den Prior, halb darauf emperrichtete: «wie es der Spruch des höchsten Gottes, an jenem verhängnisvollen Tage, vor den Augen aller versammelten Bürger von Basel entschieden hat! Denn er, von drei Wunden, jede tödlich, getroffen, blüht, wie ihr seht, in Kraft und Lebensfülle; indessen ein Hieb von seiner Hand, der kaum die äußerste Hülle meines Lebens zu berühren schien, in langsam fürchterlicher Fortwicklung den
Kern desselben selbst getroffen, und meine Kraft, wie der Sturmwind eine Eiche, gefällt hat. Aber hier, falls ein Ungläubiger noch Zweifel nähren sollte, sind die Beweise.» (Kleist, Werke 3: 347)

Because of the exteriorization of bodily signs proves unreliable, Rotbart’s verbal confession finally produces the much sought-after truth. Like the body, confession is inscribed in a long religious and legal tradition, and the two work together here to produce truth and knowledge.¹⁹

The wounds of the body, while certainly saying something about interior and exterior, repeatedly and permanently multiply their own meanings, resulting in a textual maze of possible readings. Consciousness and knowledge both matter and do not, and innocence seems to be simultaneously everywhere and nowhere. The stakes are high in both texts: innocence must be found. The fact that at the end of Der Zweikampf, the more accurate reading of signs is assigned to the verbal, not the bodily, realm, indicates a distrust in the body’s capacity to signify, and it places authenticity in the hands of verbal, rather than bodily, confession. It implicates the instability of the body in its relationship to the self.

Although the body cannot reliably resolve the mystery in Der Zweikampf, one must keep in mind that privileging the verbal over the physical in matters of confession is by no means an easy matter, since words can be just as easily falsified as the body can evade a clear reading. The last line of the text calls into question whether or not the Zweikampf model, or God’s supposed judgment therein, matters at all: from henceforth, by official decree, truth will only be found in a duel «wenn es Gottes Wille ist» (349). Even after the resolution of this particular mystery, ultimate truth is deferred into textual infinity.²⁰ Textual mediation proves just as unreliable as the reading of exterior signs; the body becomes enmeshed in a series of hermeneutic pecadilloes. Self-knowledge interferes with what previously seemed certain, as in the Marquise.

The higher the stakes in Kleist’s texts, the more the readability of the body fluctuates and is deferred. The so-called authority of the body can cause uncertainty in seemingly clear-cut situations. The text defies reading extremes such as innocence and guilt in any evident way. Rather, Kleist’s narrative insists on interrupting such extremes, blurring boundaries between feeling and knowledge, and calling into question the ability of reading to signify anything at all. By pitting the knowledge of the body against self-knowledge in Die Marquise von O… and Der Zweikampf, Kleist shows that the intricacies of one word can serve as a perfect manifestation of imperfect truths.

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Notes

1. The reader might recall, among others, «unendliches Bewusstsein» vs. «gar keines» in Über das Marionettentheater, angel vs. devil in Die Marquise von O..., guilt vs. innocence in Der Zweikampf, or «Küsse» vs. «Bisse» in Penthesilea.

2. Kleist’s usage of Bewusstsein in many ways corresponds more to the English term self-consciousness than to its German counterpart. When the prefix self- was attached to consciousness in English beginning in the seventeenth century, it took on the sense of shame and self-awareness that simply never took hold in German usage. In modern German, to be selbstbewusst is a positive thing; it is to be confident. Though they do not correspond exactly, I will use the English terms consciousness for Bewusstsein and self-knowledge for Selbstgefühl throughout this article.

3. Scholars have persuasively, though not conclusively, argued for Kleist’s problematic stance vis-à-vis the Enlightenment in light of his so-called «Kant-Krise.» See, for example, Phillips, Borkowski, and Mehigan.

4. Schneider suggests that «religious and metaphysical symbolism underscored this essentiali-zation of the vertical human posture, the most portentous example being […] the biblical fall» (Schneider 504).

5. This recalls Schlegel’s Athenäum-Fragment 116, in which he writes that Romantic poetry can «multiply [reflection] in an endless succession of mirrors.» The subject can only be defined by the reflection that results from endless multiplications following each fall. The significance of the problems raised by consciousness and subjectivity in the eighteenth century and beyond was central not only to German thinkers and writers, but to those throughout Europe. In his historical analysis of the narrative of the fall, Jenny writes that «every fall involves the removal of the subject» (Jenny 61; translation mine). This is somewhat reminiscent of the removal of consciousness in Kleist’s texts. Jenny’s trajectory highlights the development of original sin from a negative «fall» to a positive manifestation of the body and the subject. Much like Kleist, he sees the fall as an infinite expression of the subject: «the human body expresses an infinite repetition of falling, and lingers, as though enveloped, in the very moment of the fall» (94).

6. Skrotzki’s Die Gebärde des Errötens im Werk Heinrich von Kleists (1971) dissects each instance in a manner reminiscent of positivism and of eighteenth-century attempts to scientifically decode the wounded body. While his exhaustive work is very helpful in identifying some of the ways in which Kleist uses the body as a marker for trouble, it does not allow for the ambiguity inherent in Kleist’s texts.

7. As Stephens writes, «die Wahrheit [bei Kleist] scheint nicht in der Sprache selbst [...] sondern vielmehr in der Eloquenz der Körperzeichen enthalten zu sein» (Stephens 74). Moments later, however, Stephens follows his observation with the disclaimer that «[Körperzeichen] können irreführend oder gar verfälscht werden» (74), thereby suggesting that even (or especially) the organic candor of bodies can multiply hermeneutically.

8. Eloquenz, Beredsamkeit, and Rhetorik, to name a few. Many scholars have accounted for these and other rhetorical tropes. I will mention only one major representative from each. For a good history of Eloquenz, see Potkay. For Rhetorik, see Guerrini. For an analysis of Beredsamkeit and the body, see Geitner.

9. Schneider, who writes about the trope of falling in Kleist’s oeuvre, observes that «Kleist makes ample use of emotional body language like crying, blushing, or blanching, but only to challenge sentimentality’s assumption that these «natural signs» of the soul ex-
press an immediate, unadulterated truth» (Schneider 503). Gelus uses the example of laughter; she writes that «For Kleist, laughter usually appears in association with – and serves a similar function to – blushing, outbursts of anger, disintegration or even total loss of language, talk of dreams or intoxication or madness, fainting, and, finally, actual madness. [...] Each one signifies some level of danger or distress [...]. Laughter in Kleist’s world, then, is almost always a sign that something is wrong. Sometimes it affords the character a temporary defense against fears and trouble; in other instances, it is simply a token of incongruity that marks the onslaught of unknown forces» (Gelus 452, 470).

Butler’s notion of «troubled» bodies might serve as a subtext for the generation of bodily truths in Kleist. In her preface to Gender Trouble, she argues that identity is «constituted through discursively constrained performative acts» (Butler xxxi). Butler seeks to destabilize the «presumed universality and unity» of fixed constructions of gender (6), positing that gender «proves to be performative – that is, constituting the identity it is purported to be. In this sense, gender is always a doing [...]» (34). Kleist’s bodies, and the multiplicities they represent, seem to put Butler’s theory of destabilization into action. The inconsistencies inherent in many of his texts perplex our readings; one is aware of a certain performativity at the same time as one is not sure what, exactly, is being «troubled» or constructed in the process.

See Mortimer 298 and 300 for apt analysis of the paradoxes faced by characters and readers alike in trying to reconcile the extremes put forth by the text.

Cohn has remarked on Kleist’s privileging of Bewusstsein (over, for example, Gewissen, which would seem more appropriate in this passage). During the rape, too, the Marquise is «völlig bewusstlos» (Kleist, Werke 3: 145). Gewissen, on the other hand, contains wissen, or knowledge, whereas Bewusstsein is more interested in the self and in an awareness of the self. In both cases, the Marquise is out of touch with her self-knowledge. Her body tries to communicate its carnal knowledge, but, still opposed to her self-consciousness, the Marquise denies it. After the various slips of her body, and the opinions of two professionals, the Marquise faints. But here, Kleist uses Ohnmacht – without power – which suggests that while she no longer has the power to control her body, she has read its message.

Smith claims that the midwife «draw[s] out indirectly what she [the Marquise] already knows» (Smith 207). While this is true, I insist on the previous knowledge of her body as site of the pregnancy, easily readable to most, and on the development of her consciousness leading up to this moment.

Mortimer discusses at greater length the question of who knows what and identifies the Marquise’s mother as the most discerning reader of the Marquise’s body (Mortimer 298–300).

Krüger-Fürhoff believes that part of Kleist’s struggle with how to depict the body stems from the divergence between various conceptions of the body beginning in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries (Krüger-Fürhoff (2003) 39). Her claim resonates with Bakhtin’s investigation of the relationship between the carnivalesque body and the self. Michel Foucault also famously pinpoints the late sixteenth and early seventeenth century as a moment of epistemic shift in The Order of Things.

The visual image of the body eating away at itself here evokes another link to Martin Luther, who repeatedly refers to the body after original sin as leprous. The Oxford English Dictionary defines leprosy as «[a] disease causing scaliness, loss of pigmentation, or scabbiness of the skin,» frequently «causing loss of sensory and motor function
(esp. in the limbs) resulting in destruction of tissue and deformity of the affected parts of the body in severe untreated cases.» (OED Online, s.v. leprosy). It stands in for the disconnection between interior and exterior, until it has worked away enough of the flesh to reveal the truth.

17 Schüller writes, «[D]ie Körperwunde verwandelt sich zum Zeichen, das allegorisch die Subjektivierung artikuliert: Der traumatische Schnitt eröffnet die Möglichkeit des Sich-Selbst-Erkennens im Interpellieren des Anderen» (Schüller 26).

18 Sng writes that «the Kleistian strike is [...] not an agent of beginnings or endings, but a purveyor of endless mediation – which is to say, of im- mediation» (Sng 181). In Zwei-kampf the im- mediation consists of the oscillation between guilt and innocence: each time the readers thinks to have found proof, truth is deferred by a new interpretation of the signs previously thought to be readable.

19 Interestingly, Kleist situates this story at the end of the fourteenth century, a time in which legal systems were beginning to be more highly developed. Sacramental confession had also gained significance in the years following the Fourth Lateran Council (1215), and again following the Council of Trent (1545–63). See the first volume of Fou-cault’s History of Sexuality for an extensive account of how the structures of power and knowledge in confession produced and built up truths and individuals.

20 Sng writes that «A middle or medium is supposed to hold a place open and therefore make available the possibility of future arrival. Instead, what ends up happening is more like a permanent deferral and foreclosure of arrival» (Sng 176).

Works Cited


