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The Elusive "Poem of the World": The Task of the Reader and the Problem of Knowledge in Heinrich von Kleist's Novellas "Die Marquise von O..." and "Das Erdbeben in Chili"

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THE ELUSIVE “POEM OF THE WORLD”: THE TASK OF THE READER AND THE
PROBLEM OF KNOWLEDGE IN HEINRICH VON KLEIST’S NOVELLAS *DIE
MARQUISE VON O... AND DAS ERDBEBEN IN CHILI*

By

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PROBLEM OF KNOWLEDGE IN HEINRICH VON KLEIST’S NOVELLAS *DIE
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The literary works of Heinrich von Kleist (1777–1811) have long been an important influence on thinkers and writers interested and engaged in the German cultural tradition, particularly due to the enigmatic and highly problematic nature of his narrative approach. In recent years, however, there has been a notable surge of interest in Kleist’s works, which has led to the production of several articles, papers, and even entire conference panels dedicated to the investigation of his *oeuvre* from various angles. Why does Kleist still fascinate his readers so much, and what is it about his texts that allow for such a large and varied body of interpretation? In this thesis, I will argue that it is crucial to examine closely the interface of text and reader when analyzing Kleist’s novellas, specifically *Die Marquise von O...* and *Das Erdbeben in Chili*. I will then attempt to establish a link between Kleist’s unique reaction to the philosophical debates concerning epistemology and aesthetics that were taking place during his short lifetime and the experience of the reader when confronting Kleist’s texts. I will examine these questions first with the aid of narratology and reader-response theory, particularly by examining the issues of closure and focalization in the two narratives. Furthermore, I will illustrate how a narratological/reader-response approach to Kleist’s work can also inform a feminist critical approach and, likewise, how a feminist analysis can complement the former. In the final chapter, I will conduct a feminist analysis, focusing on both form and content in the two novellas to show how Kleist’s work both structurally and thematically challenges “male” Enlightenment values such as order and logic. These analyses ultimately illustrate how Kleist displaced the philosophical questions with which he was grappling into the realm of the text-reader interface, thus emulating and illuminating with this relationship the self’s quest for knowledge and meaning in the world.

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INTRODUCTION

CONTEXTUALIZING KLEIST: THE VIABILITY OF TRUTH AND REPRESENTATION UNDER INVESTIGATION

How can being or presence effectively be mediated or represented? Furthermore, once something is “represented,” what is the perceiver’s relationship with it—that is, can one really come to “know” something through its representation? Likewise, how do we self-represent, and can we ever come to know *ourselves*? Questions such as these that deal with the problems of representation, perception, and interpretation were central issues in German Idealist and Romantic discourse around 1800, particularly as reactions to Immanuel Kant’s epistemological philosophy and his discussion of the notion of *Darstellung* in his *Critiques*.¹ The term *Darstellung*, which Martha Helfer defines in her work *The Retreat of Representation* as “sensible presentation, presencing, or representation,” was introduced as a new type of representation that would consciously avoid or oppose mimetic representation (*Vorstellung*) and its “objectifying” nature (2). An objectifying, mimetic approach to representation leads, namely, to the problem that the representations themselves, rather than those objects or ideas they are intended to represent, begin to form our perception of—and thus also our basis of—truth. If, in turn, our understanding of the universe and ourselves is based merely on representations thereof, then we are subject to the confinement of “knowing” things only as they “seem”

¹ *Kritik der reinen Vernunft* (*Critique of Pure Reason* [1781]), *Kritik der praktischen Vernunft* (*Critique of Practical Reason* [1788]), and *Kritik der Urtheilskraft* (*Critique of Judgment* [1790]).

and not as they actually are. This problematic plays a key role in Heinrich von Kleist's literary approach.

The often quite enigmatic literary works written by Kleist—a figure considered by some to be a part of the German Romantic movement and by others ultimately to “stand alone” with regard to a literary category—can be investigated and, to a certain extent, also demystified by analyzing some of these central issues as they emerged in philosophical and literary discourse during some of his most formative years. Kleist was a disillusioned and troubled but nonetheless inspired young writer who composed works that, in a rather intriguing manner, address some of the fundamental existential and aesthetic questions we still face today. His work seems to have the ability to strike a common chord in readers—or, as Bernd Fischer points out in the introduction to his edited volume *A Companion to the Works of Heinrich von Kleist*: “As any German teacher or any analysis of the history of German studies can attest, readers and scholars alike continue to find immediate and personal access to Kleist's aesthetic, and many continue to be amazed at how Kleist's works foreshadow the concerns and literary tastes of generations of readers” (1). He is an example of one young intellectual whose “Auseinandersetzung mit dem herrschenden Paradigma seiner Zeit (das vielleicht immer noch am treffendsten mit dem epochalen Schlagwort Idealismus gefasst wird)” was not fully appreciated during his lifetime (Mehigan 184); however, an examination of his literary treatment, or “working through,” of the paradoxes of his time can perhaps enable us to understand the effects generated by the works of Kant and other thinkers as they

exposed some of the fundamental problems underlying “Enlightenment thought” and its main assumptions. Likewise, Kleist’s literary legacy can serve as a reminder that our own assumptions about the world and the paradigms of our time can and should be called into question.

In Kleist’s case, there appears to be a relatively high degree of consensus about his background and intellectual development. He was born in 1777, and we know that he was raised and educated within the *Weltanschauung* of the Enlightenment tradition and, for the most part, not only accepted but also deeply believed in its corresponding ideals—such as reason, order, education, self-development, and progress—into his early twenties. Fischer discusses a turning point in Kleist’s ideological position, however, that is traceable in some of the correspondence he carried out around the age of twenty-three: “At this time Kleist presented himself as an adherent of an early Enlightenment road map to human fulfillment: the achieving of happiness through virtue and education. Yet, a closer reading can detect the first seeds of doubt” (3). Later, Kleist’s crisis became much more explicit in his letters to his fiancée, Wilhelmine von Zenge, as well as in the following lines to his sister, Ulrike:

Es scheint, als ob ich eines von den Opfern der Torheit werden würde, deren die Kantische Philosophie so viele auf das Gewissen hat. Mich ekelt vor dieser Gesellschaft, und doch kann ich mich nicht losringen aus ihren Banden. Der Gedanke, daß das, was wir hier Wahrheit nennen, nach dem Tode ganz anders heißt, und daß folglich das Bestreben, sich ein Eigentum zu erwerben, das uns

auch in das Grab folgt, ganz vergeblich und fruchtlos ist, dieser Gedanke hat mich in dem Heiligtum meiner Seele erschüttert—Mein einziges und höchstes Ziel ist gesunken, ich habe keines mehr. (*Sämtliche Werke und Briefe* 636)

Kleist had come across the works of Immanuel Kant and pursued them in hopes of expanding his “collection of truths” about the world and how one should live in it, and his optimism was suddenly upturned with the realization of the possibility that if knowledge is subjective, it must pass away when we do: “Ich glaubte, daß wir einst nach dem Tode von der Stufe der Vervollkommnung [sic], die wir auf diesem Sterne erreichten, auf einem andern weiter fortschreiten würden, und daß wir den Schatz von Wahrheiten, den wir hier sammelten, auch dort einst brauchen könnten” (*Sämtliche Werke und Briefe* 633). In the end, however, he clearly discovered something far from the comfort of education and knowledge that he was accustomed to and the reinforcement that he had sought in pursuit of the greater “truths” of the world. It seems to have been primarily Kant’s presentation of the ultimate unknowability of “noumena” (things as they are) and the consequent knowability *only* of “phenomena” (things as they appear) that threw Kleist into the disillusionment that would eventually evolve into a deep existential crisis. Many scholars point to this so-called “Kant crisis,” which is further elaborated upon in other letters, as an explanation for Kleist’s turning point.

His work that stemmed from this crisis might also be viewed more generally as a symptom of cultural crisis elicited by the troubling paradoxes of his time. Namely, while Kleist’s reaction to these concepts and the consequent character of his literary production

might be considered unique, his confrontation with the notions of the “unknowability” of the world is certainly not a uniquely Kleistian experience: an entire movement of German Idealism was inaugurated by the publication of Kant’s critical philosophy, which, in turn, had marked effects on the literary realm, particularly on early German Romanticism. In her work *Representation and its Discontents: The Critical Legacy of German Romanticism*, Azade Seyhan connects this epistemological problematic of “knowability” with the crisis of representation, which, as mentioned above, was a key motivation for Romantic critical discourse: “Since representation can never fully recover presence or coincide ideally with it, it will always pursue strategies to cover absence. [...] The recognition that some primary presence or truth remains inaccessible to consciousness lies at the heart of the problem of representation” (4). Seyhan points out that these various interrelated “crises” also corresponded with the aftermath of the French Revolution, and that the subsequent destabilization of social and political certainty evoked not only a general anxiety but also an intellectual anxiety that accompanied the sudden need to question the actual capacity of human reason and to reexamine its limits. In short, sociopolitical tensions contributed to the initiation of a paradigm shift in which several different kinds of intellectuals were eager to participate. Hence, the Jena Romantics most certainly had been exposed to these very questions that pervaded the intellectual sphere at the time and were indeed motivated by them to a great extent. The nature of the early Romantics’ literary agenda as evidenced by related discussions on the topic published in *Athenäum*,² for instance, indicates that they were

² *Athenäum* was a German literary journal that was published between 1798 and 1800. It was established by

indeed acutely aware of the issue of the relativity of reality, particularly the impossibility of representing the absolute—even though this was the ideal for which they ultimately strived. This sense of engagement is apparent, among other things, in the Jena Romantics' participation in the "*Darstellung* debate."

When Kant elaborated on the problematic of representation in his writings and addressed *Darstellung* as a new approach through which one could seek to transcend representation and its limits, this "new notion [...] quickly catapulted to the center of the leading philosophical and aesthetic theories in the years between 1790 and 1810," was "perhaps *the* defining force of German Idealism and early German Romanticism [...]," and was "central to the linguistic and aesthetic theories of Romanticism" (Helfer 3, 9). Much of Kant's transcendental philosophy, however, contained (often intentionally) some very unresolved and thus problematic aspects that became controversial topics for other thinkers to pursue, such as the philosopher Johann Gottlieb Fichte and the Jena Romantics. They attempted to remedy or supplement these shortcomings with their own interpretations and elaborations, and in this manner, Kant's work had come to serve not only as a provocation of discussion on the topics of aesthetics and epistemology (among other things), but it had also become a springboard for several different reworkings of his philosophy.

Kant used the term *Darstellung* in the above-mentioned sense of external representation and also as a more technical, yet nonetheless relevant, term that referred

brothers August Wilhelm and Friedrich Schlegel and is commonly acknowledged as the founding publication of German Romanticism.

to the “mediation of the imagination between sensibility and understanding, the two branches of knowledge that form human cognition”—in other words, it is the human faculty to mentally represent or “make sensible of a concept”³ (Helfer 10). The discomfort that arises with our awareness of the sublime, for instance, is caused by our recognition of the *failure* of our cognitive ability to grasp its unlimitedness as a totality, and Kant refers to this as a failure of our *Darstellungsvermögen*. Because Kant himself intended to maintain a separation between philosophy and art, pure representation for him was achievable not through pursuing a “literary absolute,” as the Romantics would eventually claim, but it could only arise through the self’s contemplation of the sublime—that is, through the *negative Darstellung*, or the indirect (yet pure) mental presentations inspired by the sublime when one attempts to grasp that which exists beyond what our senses can perceive. Helfer notes:

Negative Darstellung forces the subject to think the supersensible—the idea—without actually producing an objective presentation of this idea. Thus, it presents nothing except the process—the striving or effort (*die Bestrebung*)—of *Darstellung* itself. It is self-presentation or *Selbstdarstellung* in the Romantic sense of the word, and it is no coincidence that the notion of “negativity” becomes constitutive for Idealism and Romanticism. (45)

The fear and sense of discord that is initially evoked by the limitlessness of the sublime is, according to Kant, assuaged by the faculty of reason, which—although it cannot help the

³ Helfer intends for the word “sensible” to mean “perceivable to the senses” (14–15).

imagination represent it directly—nonetheless allows it to recognize that the sublime is unrepresentable and can therefore still present the *form* of the unrepresentable. This, for Kant, is pure representation, and the emphasis here on *form* as a key to achieving *Darstellung* perhaps anticipates the importance of form for Romantic aesthetics.

One problematic aspect of Kantian philosophy, particularly from Fichte's perspective, was Kant's treatment of the self—namely, the failure of the Kantian self to represent itself to itself. In the words of Azade Seyhan, Fichte found fault in the fact that “[t]he Kantian self is the site of the faculties and their interaction but lacks the facility for self-representation. In other words, it lacks a posited consciousness or otherness that can reflect on itself” (35). Helfer approaches the issue slightly differently, remarking that the Kantian self “cannot represent itself as a moral subject of reason” (11). Consequently, Fichte created the idea of the “self-positing subject,” through which he attempted to establish that consciousness of the self can only exist if it has something external to encounter and “posit” (*setzen*) itself against. By positing those other beings or objects out against oneself, one is able to affirm the existence of one's own consciousness—in other words, the essence of an “I”—or “self”—by deducing it through the identification of everything else that is the “non-self.” For Fichte, self-consciousness is created through self-reflexivity, and the positing process can eventually allow the self to be conscious of itself as an “autonomous moral being striving to become God” (Helfer 68). According to Helfer, Fichte incorporates the notion of “pure representation” into this model and attempts thus to solve one of the “gaps” left open by Kant (119). Eventually, writers such

as Novalis would critique and build on the Fichtean model of the “self-positing subject (or ego)”, as it is also commonly known.

Although Kant attempted to divorce philosophy and art in his treatment of the concept, for the Romantics, *Darstellung* eventually came to emphasize poetic or figural literary expression, which they believed could more effectively close the gap between representation and presence (i.e., the representation of something and its actual existence) than philosophy; thus, literary form became a crucial space in which they could explore and attempt to overcome, or transcend, this problematic.

While many of the Jena Romantics were able to take Kant’s and Fichte’s philosophies as points of departure and expand them to found and support their program of “transcendental poetry”—at least initially—, the writer Heinrich von Kleist expressed his skepticism toward many of the basic premises upon which these philosophies were developed. While it remains undetermined which specific text or texts Kleist is referring to in his letters, the critique is relatively clear and becomes clearer after one encounters his literary works. From Helfer’s perspective, Kleist’s main arguments can be summed up as follows:

Kleist’s critique of transcendentalism is three-pronged. First, we cannot decide whether a priori knowledge or truth really exists. Nor, if truth does exist, can we determine whether our representation of truth is itself true. Finally, it is possible that truth itself does not exist and that we mistakenly believe our representation of truth *is* truth. [...] In other words, Kleist’s “Kant crisis” is motivated by a

representational quandary: the impossibility of knowing what kind of relationship, if any, exists between truth and appearance, *Wahrheit* and *Schein*.
(120)

The skeptical arguments that Kant had unleashed in order to propose a solution could not be called back once they had entered into Kleist's mind. For him, attempting to find a viable method for achieving "pure representation" was futile because one obstacle would always obstruct the self's ability to determine the nature of an object's essence: our subjective perception and consequent inability to know if what we see has the qualities we perceive because they are inherent in the object or because they are built into the framework of our perception process. Kleist's best-known epistolary excerpt illustrates this argument to his fiancée Wilhelmine via a metaphor that employs the image of "green lenses": "Wenn alle Menschen statt der Augen grüne Gläser hätten, so würden sie urteilen müssen, die Gegenstände, welche sie dadurch erblicken, *sind* grün—und nie würden sie entscheiden können, ob ihr Auge ihnen die Dinge zeigt, wie sie sind oder ob nicht etwas zu ihnen hinzutut, was nicht ihnen, sondern dem Auge gehört. So ist es mit dem Verstande" (*Sämtliche Werke und Briefe* 634). Through this metaphor, Kleist is able to articulate his sense of a critical discrepancy between the object as it exists in the self's consciousness and the object in itself, or, as Kant referred to it, the "*Ding-an-sich*." This sudden rupture for Kleist seems to be perceived as a loss of the *Ding-an-sich* itself, and since the idea of the knowability of the essence of the *Ding-an-sich* underpins rational thought, secure knowledge can now no longer exist. By extension, if the goal of

Darstellung is to circumvent or transcend anything that stands in the way of presenting objects or concepts in their totality, then any attempt to do so is defeated already by the limitations of the self's perceptive position. As Tim Mehigan notes in his essay "Betwixt a false reason and none at all": Kleist, Hume, Kant, and the "Thing in Itself," the self is "error prone. And errors are clearly that with which the cognitive aspect of reason is meant to dispense" (175).

Furthermore, Kleist's concern with the goal of pure representation—whether representation of objects and concepts to the self or the self to itself—stems from the problem of the warped spectrality that is involved in the process of representation. For instance, if we perceive something and produce some sort of representation of it, and then another person approaches the representation from yet another subjective position of perception, then an infinite amount of distortion is ultimately possible—perhaps not merely possible, but even inevitable, since the *Ding-an-sich* is distorted at the moment in which it registers in the first person's consciousness. Thus, Kleist's position does not even allow for an *attempt* at pure representation—not due to the inadequacy of the art form, etc., but because of the limitations of the human cognitive process that creates the form. As I will later demonstrate, Kleist's struggle with the issue of distorted spectrality is remarkably present in his novellas *Die Marquise von O...* and *Das Erdbeben in Chili* through the kaleidoscope-like blending of perspective that he embeds in the narrative structure. These works, as well as other works he wrote, are clearly self-reflexive in that they appear to attempt to undermine the concept of pure representation and, in doing so,

also call into question the process of reading itself.

The process of reading is an interesting and important trope for the literature generated during this period and perhaps deserves to be addressed in terms of its potential relevance for viewing Kleist's work as well. Clayton Koelb recently published an entire book⁴ that presents a compelling discussion on the idea of the process of reading as an interpretive tool for coming to an understanding of some of the crucial questions of the theory of life during the Romantic period. Specifically, he addresses how the Romantics drew a parallel between the reading process and the question of how "dead" material can be transformed into something living. He asks, in a manner that immediately evokes images of Frankenstein's monster: "How can we properly characterize and explain the mysterious relations between dead material bodies and living, animate beings? What process causes one to turn into the other [...] And, most puzzling of all, is it possible that life could arise out of lifeless matter?" (3). His answer to these questions, however, draws a perhaps unanticipated parallel: "The key that could unlock these mysteries lay surprisingly close at hand: the process by which dead matter could come to life, they imagined, must be something like the process of reading" (3). Koelb addresses the manner in which art was viewed as a tool with which the fragmentation of the world—for Kleist, perhaps the fragmentation of meaning through the division of the subject and the world in which it exists—could be pieced back together, or "revivified." In the process of contextualizing his argument, Koelb recalls Johann Georg Hamann's characterization of

⁴Clayton Koelb, *The Revivifying Word: Literature, Philosophy, and the Theory of Life in Europe's Romantic Age* (Rochester, NY: Camden House, 2008).

the world as a great poem or book whose pages have been ripped out and scattered and left for us to decipher. Here again, the problem of the “limited human perspective” is addressed with regard to its inability to understand the “language of nature”; for humans, that language is “defunct” and needs resuscitation (4). These issues are also pertinent to Kleist’s writing, particularly since we know that he grappled with related philosophical questions.

It is unclear to me whether or not Kleist intended to do so, however, I would maintain that his works frequently employ the trope—above all, a formal trope in this case—of the reading process, and this trope eventually serves as a metaphorical microcosm to illustrate the situation in which we find ourselves when we attempt to “read” or interpret the world. In his rejection of the Idealist and Romantic treatments of the problem of representation, Kleist appears to have pursued his own experiments in “transcending” the limits of representation despite his dissatisfaction with others’ attempts, and this approach relies heavily on the interaction of the text and the reader. His works clearly portray an effort to work through the problem by displacing it into the realm of the reader-text interface. I will argue that an analysis of his literary approach with regard to the narrative structure’s demands on the reader supports the argument that this quality of his texts ironically renders them, in the end, a perhaps more appropriate form of *Darstellung* than he realized was possible. That is, Kleist turns the problem of false specularities associated with perception and representation (which are both crucial to the process of interpretation) on its head by forcing the reader to become

acutely and personally aware of this very problem—not only thematically but also via the experience of reading the text.

CHAPTER ONE

MULTIPERSPECTIVITY, CLOSURE, AND THE WORK OF THE READER

When we read, it is certainly possible to take for granted the process in which we are participating. Namely, we can easily fall into the assumption that we are in effect merely handing ourselves over to the author's will: we view the words on the page, create a mental picture of the events portrayed, and become carried along whatever path the author has set out for us to follow. From this perspective, reading does not necessarily seem like a "life-and-death" matter; yet, without a reader, the text would not be a "literary work" but, rather, a merely lifeless bound stack of paper containing static words. It takes a perceiver to make written ideas come to life, to make meaning out of the text, as Wolfgang Iser notes in his essay "The Reading Process: A Phenomenological Approach": "The work is more than the text, for the text only takes on life when it is realized" (50). The realization of the work clearly not only depends on the author's creative process as manifested in the text but also on the work of the reader; accordingly, the character of the "realized" work forms somewhere in the space between the reader and the text, however virtual this space may be. Thus, narrative necessarily involves discourse, or a two-sided construction; in other words, a storyteller must have a listener for his story to take on meaning. Conversely, it is this ability to engage in such discourse, or construction, that allows us to make meaning in life and come to conclusions based on that meaning.

When considering the ubiquity of narration in our lives, there is no question that

it can be, and indeed often is, a crucial matter. H. Porter Abbott considers the process of storytelling even in its broadest sense a kind of narrative, pointing out in *The Cambridge Introduction to Narrative* that “[a]s soon as we follow a subject with a verb, there is a good chance we are engaged in narrative discourse” (1). In *A Theory of Narrative*, Rick Altman expounds on the topic further:

Among human endeavors, few are more widely spread or more generally endowed with cultural importance than narrative—the practice of storytelling. Not only are stories universally told, stored, and analyzed, but also they regularly occupy a place of honor in society. Stories constitute the bulk of sacred texts; they are the major vehicle of personal memory; and they are a mainstay of law, entertainment, and history. (1)

Thus, we all participate in narration as well as the interpretation of others’ “narratives,” and we make judgments—indeed, at times “life-and-death” judgments—based on these interpretations. Ultimately, one could say that we “read” each other and the world in a manner not entirely dissimilar to the way we read written material, and our roles as “readers” in everyday life are certainly not insignificant. Moreover, not only do we engage in narrative discourse and interpretation on a quotidian basis, but it indeed appears as if we were *born* to do so. For instance, communicating to our parents—“telling” them what we feel, what we want, or what happened to the neighbor’s fence—is one of the first skills we learn as children, and we are, in turn, dependent on their ability to receive and act upon this information in order to survive. Abbott notes as well that it is

not merely a survival technique that drives narration, but our propensity to narrate and interpret can also be linked to our inquisitive nature as humans, in that we “are made in such a way that we continually look for the causes of things,” and “[n]arrative by its arrangement of events gratifies our need for order” (41–42). Furthermore, he asserts with little reservation that “[g]iven the presence of narrative in almost all human discourse, there is little wonder that there are theorists who place it next to language itself as *the* distinctive human trait” (1). For many theorists, narration is seen as a kind of coping mechanism for humans’ unique “gift” of consciousness—above all employed for the understanding and organization of time.

Our “temporal existence” and the need to come to terms with it brings up another area in which narrative plays a large role—namely, the realm of spirituality, which Altman implies above when referring to sacred texts. Over thousands of years, narrative has served a spiritual role in helping humans come to terms with the fundamental metaphysical questions of the universe insofar as the narrative discourse initiated by spiritual texts can help negotiate the “gaps” posed by the unsolved mysteries of the world. One of these timelessly troubling unknown realms is the boundary between life and death, an enigma that carries with it the question of how the realms of the living and the dead are related to one another and to what extent they can “interact.” In *The Revivifying Word*, Koelb addresses the European Romantic response to such issues by expanding on the idea of the “reading process” as a metaphor for the possibility of revivifying dead matter, which fascinated the Romantics both thematically—given the

discussions about the theory of life in natural philosophy at the time—and as an aesthetic model to incorporate into their literary program. Koelb traces this idea back to a key Biblical notion proposed by the apostle Paul to the Corinthians regarding the validity of Biblical scripture when he attempted to emphasize these written (and thus “dead”) documents’ potential to be as significant as “live,” spoken discourse, which was held in higher esteem by the Greeks than the written word. In order to convince them of the scriptures’ authority, he “[undermines] the authority of the bare text” and emphasizes its power when accompanied by the presence of the divine spirit that God has promised with the new covenant. Koelb paraphrases Paul’s position: “Documents *can* be a form of living, breathing discourse, but only if their dead letters are animated by the living spirit” (7).

Although the potential for the “dead letter” to “come to life” via a divine spirit was not necessarily an important concept for the Romantics in terms of spiritual significance, Koelb argues that the idea of a living spirit animating a dead text provided a fruitful template for them to investigate some of the major questions being examined in the natural sciences with regard to life and death and to come up with an aesthetic approach that would be appropriate for dealing with these questions:

[Paul’s] proposition provided the philosophical foundation for an aesthetic theory, and that theory in turn implied a remarkably productive narrative idea. The aesthetic theory focused attention on the mysterious process by which lifeless material objects mediate an interaction between the living minds of artists and

their audiences. The narrative application was a set of literary texts in which characters cross the boundary between death and life with the help of some form of reading. Romantic aesthetics thus provided not only the theory but also the principal theme for a persistent genre of Romantic fiction. In both theory and practice, then, Romanticism was frequently a matter of life and death. (ix)

In analyzing the literary work of Heinrich von Kleist, this model is important to keep in mind, because Kleist certainly would have been at least indirectly exposed to—if not explicitly aware of—its significance for the aesthetic theory behind much of the literary writing published by his contemporaries. Indeed, the character of Kleist’s narrative approach, particularly that of his novellas, indicates an acute awareness of the role of the reader in the realization—or in Koelb’s terms, “vivification”—of his stories. Additionally, the whole notion of the process of reading as a guiding metaphor for illuminating the process by which we come to uncover (or come to terms with) the “poem” of the world that is presented to us in a seemingly riddled language is not merely relevant when examining Kleist’s works but, I would argue, crucial. Given Kleist’s grappling with the discrepancies between rational Enlightenment thought and the “unknowability” of the world as presented by Kantian epistemology, it is entirely appropriate that Kleist would attempt to explore these contradictions through the text-reader interface in literature. Indeed, a literary work and the role of the reader in relation to it can very aptly serve as a microcosm for our desire to make meaning of a universe that often, and at times seemingly intentionally, prevents us from doing so. Furthermore,

Kleist's texts both structurally and thematically appear to extend this metaphor to an almost exaggerated degree by complicating the reader's task in such a manner that he⁵ is forced to become conscious of the ultimate impossibility of reaching absolute conclusions regarding what is "actually" occurring in the narrative world. Both the mechanics and thematics of this strategy will be investigated at different points in this paper; however, I would first like to return briefly to an idea that Iser and many other important founding thinkers for reader-response theory have emphasized, and that is the reader's role in what Iser refers to as the *Konkretisation* (realization) of the text.

Of course, the idea that the realization of a literary text involves and in fact *requires* work on the part of the reader is not by any means a new concept in the world of literature. Reading always involves attention to nuance and imaginative effort, and only through this attention and effort does the text come to life. Iser even claims that "good" literature *must* challenge the reader by leaving a significant amount of "unwritten" information in a text so that he resorts to using his own creative faculties to fill in the gaps. To demonstrate that this idea is nothing novel, he cites the following passage from Lawrence Sterne's *Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman* (1759–1769), which touches on the same topic:

No author who understands the just boundaries of decorum and good breeding would presume to think all. The truest respect which you can pay the reader's

⁵ I will use the pronoun "he" to refer to the reader rather than "she" or "s/he," both for the sake of clarity and, as I will later discuss, because Kleist's works tend to force a more dominating, "male" manner of reading on the reader (see: Chapter Three).

understanding is to halve this matter amicably and leave him something to imagine, in his turn, as well as yourself. For my own part, I am eternally paying him compliments of this kind, and do all that lies in my power to keep his imagination as busy as my own. (51)

Iser sums up Sterne's understanding of a literary text as "something like an arena in which reader and author participate in a game of imagination" and uses this notion to support his argument that the reader *must* be left some parts of the story to work out on his own—at the very least, in order to prevent boredom (51). For Iser, reading can only involve pleasure when active creativity is involved on the part of the reader; for instance, if it conforms completely to the expectations it arouses earlier in the text, it will leave the reader to simply "accept or reject the thesis forced upon [him]" rather than provoking him to reflect or realize the complexity of an issue or situation (53). However, he does admit that the reader may well opt to "leave the game" when overexerted as well, and the author should therefore avoid both extremes.

Around the same time in the mid-1970s, Roland Barthes addressed similar narratological questions in his work *The Pleasure of the Text* (1973) but arrived at slightly different conclusions regarding the manner in which texts should engage their readers. Barthes, contrary to Iser, does identify a kind of pleasure (*plaisir*) elicited by those sorts of texts that leave less work for the reader to complete and simply lure them along until the end like a "corporeal striptease" (10). He associates this "pleasure" with texts that uphold the cultural status quo and allow for a "*comfortable* practice of reading"

(14). However, comfort is not Barthes's ideal: for him, the ultimate fulfillment goes beyond mere pleasure and reaches *jouissance*, or bliss. In order for a text to achieve this feat, the author must resist the temptation to content the reader and conform to his expectations; the "text of bliss" is thus "the text that imposes a state of loss, the text that discomforts (perhaps to the point of a certain boredom), unsettles the reader's historical, cultural, psychological assumptions, the consistency of his tastes, values, memories, brings to a crisis his relation with language" (14). In Barthes's previous work, *S/Z* (1970), he had discussed these notions in terms of the quality of texts that correspond to "pleasure" and "bliss," calling them *lisible* ("readerly") and *scriptible* ("writerly"). Namely, a readerly text encourages passive consumption and demonstrates the author's power over the reader, while a writerly text encourages active participation on the part of the reader—that the reader to a certain extent constructs, or "writes" the story himself. While Barthes's distinctions vary to some extent from Iser's, he ultimately takes more or less the same position, albeit with a perhaps more explicit ideological agenda: "Why is the writerly our value? Because the goal of literary work [...] is to make the reader no longer a consumer, but a producer of the text. Our literature is characterized by the pitiless divorce which the literary institution maintains between the producer of the text and its user, between its owner and its customer, between its author and its reader" (*S/Z* 1).

The degree to which a text can be considered "writerly" is, admittedly, a distinction that in and of itself is dynamic and unstable and thus problematic as well; for these reasons, among others, Barthes has been criticized for taking a more "Romantic

approach” to critical theory insofar as he allows his critical writing to be more experimental, open, and, in a sense, more productive than descriptive (for some, it represents more a form of “creative” criticism than critical theory).⁶ However, examining Kleist’s work in light of a more “Romantic” critical angle may indeed prove to be fruitful because of the Romantic milieu out of which it arose. Furthermore, the consequent “unpresentability” of the concept of “writerliness” perhaps derives its justification for being so from some of the same unanswerable questions regarding interpretation that Kleist’s narrative techniques bring to the fore. Hence, although a text’s degree of “writerliness” cannot be exactly measured or pinpointed, reflecting on the idea of it in relation to a text can help illuminate some of that text’s unique qualities that may otherwise be difficult to describe. Moreover, since the power of Kleist’s texts rely heavily on the position of the reader’s interpretation at any given point in the narrative discourse, it seems only appropriate to examine them with the aid of a concept that underlines the significance of the reader’s role by privileging the writerly over the readerly.

Not only can Kleist’s texts merely be associated with the writerly, but they are in fact notorious for seeming to intentionally problematize the possibility of interpretation. The manner in which they endeavor to do so and why can be examined from numerous different angles; however, because I will primarily be dealing with the novellas *Die Marquise von O...* and *Das Erdbeben in Chili*, I will be addressing two key narrative strategies that make this problematization possible throughout these two works.

⁶ See: Niall Lucy, *Postmodern Literary Theory* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 1997) 75–76.

Plurality in Perspective

The first strategy that Kleist's texts tend to employ is directly linked to an issue that necessarily arises from the general readerly-writerly debate in its various articulations. From the viewpoints of Iser and Barthes, one important observation appears to be that "worthy" or "bliss-inducing" literary texts force the reader to encounter something unexpected or unfamiliar—possibly even uncomfortable—, and these kinds of texts invite the reader to recognize within them a certain degree of dynamism or potential interpretive plurality. In this way, possibly unanticipated and perhaps even conflicting responses are awakened in the reader. Iser notes the dynamism of interpretation during the reading process even as the reader moves from one sentence to the next, since each addition of information causes him continually to renegotiate the meaning and eventual direction of the text: "the activity of reading can be characterized as a sort of kaleidoscope of perspectives, preintentions, recollections" (54). "Perspective" is a key word here, and the idea of the existence of multiple perspectives that can arise within the same reader can also be extended to the potential plurality of perspective with respect to the "verity" of a central story event that manifests itself often as a contradiction of viewpoints from different characters in the story. The two Kleistian novellas that I will examine operate to a great degree by forcing the reader to face a kind of despair that accompanies the realization that multiple accounts of a story from different perspectives often cannot be reconciled in any satisfying way for a reader seeking clarity and unity. Indeed, it was largely the problem of perspective—specifically, the subjectivity of

knowledge—in Kantian epistemology that troubled Kleist, and in this way, it is appropriate that the issue would surface in various forms through the content and structure of his narratives.

This problem will be addressed principally, but not exclusively, through an investigation of the narratological notion of focalization as it contrasts with narration. Both Gérard Genette and Mieke Bal are credited with the development of this concept. In *Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method* (1980), Genette addresses a critical difference between the narrator and the eyes through which the story is told, claiming that in traditional narrative theory, there had been a “confusion between the question *who is the character whose point of view orients the narrative perspective?* and the very different question *who is the narrator*—or, more simply, the question *who sees?* and the question *who speaks?*” (186). In *Narratology: Introduction to the Theory of Narrative* (1980), Bal expands on Genette’s observations by emphasizing that the word “perspective,” when used in relation to narrative, can be deceiving, as it causes us to forget that there is a difference between the narrative perspective—or type of narrator telling the story (for instance, a third person omniscient narrator)—and the actual vision through which this narration is filtered:

Focalization is the relationship between the “vision,” the agent that sees, and that which is seen. This relationship is a component of the story part, of the content of the narrative text: A says that B sees what C is doing. [...] Consequently, focalization belongs in the story, the layer in between the linguistic text and the

fabula. [...] The reader watches with the [focalizing] character's eyes and will, in principle, be inclined to accept the vision presented by that character. (104)

Bal thus makes a similar argument for the importance of analyzing separately those in the narrative who see and those who speak; however, she also finds Genette's model deficient insofar as it treats narrators and focalizers⁷ as completely separate entities, even though extradiegetic focalization can also exist—in which case the (third-person) narrator and the focalizer would be one and the same entity. She therefore revises Genette's model by creating a further distinction between internal (character-driven) and external (narrator-driven) focalization (101).

We will see that Kleist's narratives tend to shift discreetly between focalizers and, in doing so, create tensions in the story that are difficult to come to terms with if the reader is not aware of the narrator's ability to "zoom" in and out of the story world through the eyes of different characters whose perspectives are not always perfectly aligned. Furthermore, as Bal points out, the reader tends to accept the "vision" of whatever focalizer is employed at any given moment in the narrative; however, when a contradicting "vision" is presented, the reader must reconsider his initial trust in the narrative, and this can lead to the suspicion of an unreliable narrator and a consequent destabilization of the text. In turn, the reader is forced to reevaluate the entirety of the narrative as presented, and this quality of the text—the fact that the reader is not

⁷ In critical writing, the spelling of this word varies: Genette's translator used "focalizer," and Bal's translator used "focalizer." In this paper, I will use the spelling "focalizer," because I primarily draw from Bal's distinctions and also because the "-or" agent-ending correlates with the term "narrator."

permitted to sit back and passively absorb the story—seems to render it “writerly” in the sense that Barthes and Iser identified and promoted. Additionally, all of these problems of perspective underline the texts’ dynamism and contribute to the complication of closure for the reader, which is the second important narrative strategy that I address.

The Contradiction of Closure

The different signs or signals embedded in the text that cause the reader to make the interpretive decisions that he does are referred to by Barthes as “codes,” and he outlines five of these codes in *S/Z*. According to Abbott, what makes these qualities “codes” is “that author and reader share [them] in order to make a narrative readable” (57). Two such codes that I consider the most pertinent to an analysis of Kleist’s work are addressed and expanded on by Abbott in a chapter on narrative closure: the “proairetic code,” which applies to expectations and actions, and the “hermeneutic code,” which applies to questions and answers. The identification of these two codes, or “levels,” as Abbott prefers to call them, can serve as a particularly helpful tool when taking a critical approach to the two Kleistian novellas that I examine here, as both works—as well as most other works by Kleist—present a distinct problematization of narrative closure. Since the degree of the reader’s satisfaction and/or frustration at the “level of expectations” and the “level of questions,” as Abbott refers to them, is directly linked to the possibility of closure in the narrative, an investigation of the text-reader interface at these levels in the two Kleist works chosen for this study serves as an appropriate means by which we can examine the author’s second important narrative strategy—namely, his

tendency to exploit the reader's desire for closure.

Abbott aptly points out that, in order for closure to be necessary in a narrative, there must first be a conflict of some sort that needs to be resolved. Indeed, Kleist's novellas do often revolve around a central situation or conflict that is mysterious or bizarre in that it appears to be highly unlikely but nonetheless has occurred; this very sense of contradiction often comprises the conflict—for instance, the troubled Marquise in *Die Marquise*⁸ who finds herself pregnant without (knowingly) having copulated or the devastating earthquake in *Das Erdbeben* that occurs just in time to free an adulterous woman who is about to be executed and her lover who is about to hang himself. The resolution of such conflicts requires, at least for the characters in the story, a reinterpretation of the universe as they know it, and they therefore find themselves asking, “Can this be possible? What does this mean?” We, too, as readers find ourselves caught up in the characters' confusion and questioning, and we tend to expect that answers will eventually be provided. Yet, as Abbott notes, “[t]he term ‘closure’ can refer to more than the resolution of a story's central conflict. It has to do with a broad range of expectations and uncertainties that arise during the course of a narrative and that part of us, at least, hopes to resolve, or close” (57). Suspended closure—or “suspense,” as it is commonly termed—gives the narrative its vigor and explains partially why we return to narrative as a form of entertainment. Barthes's system of narrative “codes” suggests that, at the level of expectations, the author can arouse in readers certain expectations of how

⁸ I will henceforth refer to *Die Marquise von O...* as *Die Marquise* and *Das Erdbeben in Chili* as *Das Erdbeben* for the sake of brevity.

the plot will proceed through actions and events (e.g., crime committed leads to punishment), and for the sake of suspense, the author will often delay the fulfillment of those expectations. At the level of questions, a certain amount of clarification is expected by the reader with regard to information that has been withheld or does not quite seem to “add up” throughout the story. Again, the author will often delay or intentionally mislead the reader until he is allowed “enlightenment” of the facts at the end. However, it may also so happen in the end that these expectations and questions are not fulfilled but, rather, frustrated through the absence of closure. The latter is clearly the case in Kleist’s works.

What makes Kleist’s narratives so interesting and at the same time problematic, however, is not the fact that they often contain an absence of closure—this is a fairly common literary technique by now and thus nothing new. The aspect of his narratives that has attracted readers and critics for nearly 200 years is the fact that they *seem* to provide the terms for closure but resist and revoke it at the same time through suspicious details and nuances in the text as well as gaps where crucial information might otherwise be provided. This technique plays on our *need* as readers to know and arrive at some sort of conclusion: “[T]he promise of closure has great rhetorical power in narrative. Closure brings satisfaction to desire, relief to suspense, and clarity to confusion. It normalizes. It confirms the masterplot” (Abbott 64). The result is the feeling of disillusionment that accompanies an unfulfilled promise, which then evokes in the reader a sense of chaos and disorder that permeates the narrative world. Once it becomes clear to the reader that

closure does not seem to be on Kleist's agenda, the reader becomes more aware of his ultimate inability to make a sound interpretation of what is occurring. As Amanda Norton remarks in her article "Another Meditation on *Das Erdbeben in Chili*: Heinrich von Kleist and the Work of the Reader," it occurs frequently in Kleist's works that the text "seems to be taunting the reader about the myriad things he [the reader] does not know or cannot fully understand" (137). In Barthes's terms, Kleist seems to be using codes to trigger certain expectations in the reader and then ultimately betrays these expectations by breaking the "promise" to which the use of the code pretended to commit.

Overreading and Underreading

The two strategies Kleist employs by unleashing perspectival plurality through focalization and resisting closure through gaps and contradiction create tension between the actual "story world"—or diegetic reality—and the narrative through which events are communicated to the reader. These textual "problems" lead the reader to reconcile the paradoxical or incomplete elements on his own. Narratives do inherently contain gaps and tensions, and in order to overcome these "obstacles," a reader will typically compensate by doing one of two things. If there are gaps, he will often make an assumption based on cues and read into the story something that is not there and has no direct evidence—this is called "overreading."⁹ In the face of contradiction and paradox,

⁹ The invention of the terms "overreading" and "underreading" can be attributed to British literary critic Frank Kermode in his work *The Genesis of Secrecy: On the Interpretation of Narrative* (1979).

however, the reader might “underread”—that is, disregard or gloss over (consciously or unconsciously) something that *does* exist in the narrative—in order to establish or restore cohesion and order. Readers engage in overreading and underreading, for one, to avoid being suspended in a state of uncertainty, as this state is very difficult to maintain. Furthermore, as Abbott points out, both underreading and overreading might also stem from a necessity to take action, and “in order to act, we need to know (or at least think we know) what the story is. Our survival as a species has probably depended on our doing this with sufficient speed and efficiency to get done what we need to get done in order simply to stay alive” (88).

It is in fact exactly this human tendency—to jump to conclusions—that Kleist often thematizes in his texts. Namely, we as humans, in our “reading” of the world also underread and overread by taking cues from established thought patterns or social norms. However, often, when we presume we “know,” we are merely making assumptions, and these assumptions can have dire consequences—for instance, if these assumptions play a role in deciding the fate of another person. This brings us back to the notion of reading as a matter of “life and death.” The goal of the textual analysis that follows is to examine how Kleist’s texts exploit the reader’s desire to know and to find closure and, in turn, how the texts’ effects on the reader seek to demonstrate to him how tricky and problematic the task of interpretation can be.

CHAPTER TWO

A NARRATOLOGY/READER-RESPONSE ANALYSIS OF *DIE MARQUISE VON O...* AND *DAS ERDBEBEN IN CHILI*

*Die Marquise von O...*¹⁰

One of Kleist's most frequently read and analyzed novellas is *Die Marquise von O...*, which he published in *Phöbus*¹¹ in 1808 and likely worked on while he was imprisoned in France in 1807.¹² The novella's plot, which in many respects takes on the form of a "whodunit" mystery, revolves around a puzzling and troubling situation in which a widowed Italian marquise finds herself. When the citadel guarded by the Marquise's father, General G..., is stormed one night by Russian troops, the Marquise tries to escape and suddenly becomes cornered by a group of enemy sharpshooters who capture her and attempt to rape her. At the crucial moment, a Russian officer, Count F..., breaks in, fends off the assaulters, and then leads her away from combat and the ensuing fires into a safe building, where she faints and shortly thereafter is reunited with her family and servants. After she recovers, she wants to thank the Count in person for his remarkable deed; however, he allegedly is fatally wounded before she gets the chance to

¹⁰ Heinrich von Kleist, *Sämtliche Erzählungen und Anekdoten*, 3rd ed., ed. Hannelore Schlaffer (Munich: Wilhelm Goldmann, 1995) 107–47. All of my quotes, unless otherwise indicated, will be taken from this edition.

¹¹ Many of Kleist's most famous works were originally published in *Phöbus: ein Journal für die Kunst*. The periodical was a monthly literary journal edited by Kleist and Adam Heinrich Müller in Dresden from January 1808 to December 1808. Kleist and Müller could not agree on the direction of the publication, and it eventually proved to be a money-losing venture for both editors; it was therefore discontinued less than a year after its inception.

¹² David Luke and Nigel Reeves, trans., "Introduction," *The Marquise of O— and Other Stories* by Heinrich von Kleist (London: Penguin, 2004) 15. Kleist was accused of espionage in January of 1807, when Berlin was occupied by Napoleonic troops, and subsequently imprisoned in France at Chalons-sur-Marne. He was released in July 1807 and founded *Phöbus* the following year (see: Fischer 5).

do so. Some time later, the Marquise—described at the outset as “eine Dame von vortrefflichem Ruf” (107)—begins to experience sensations that remind her of her second pregnancy and is puzzled by them because she would have no reason to be pregnant. However, after confiding in her mother and joking with her about the impossibility of such an occurrence, the Marquise soon feels normal again and forgets the whole matter.

Not long after this incident, the Count—who was assumed to be dead but is alive after all—appears at the family’s door and engages in some very mysterious behavior. Namely, he proposes to the Marquise and, despite their lack of acquaintance with one another, expresses his desperate wish to marry her as soon as possible, since he has received orders to carry out military duties in Naples and must depart immediately. He never reveals the exact reasons for his strange sense of urgency but supports his great passion for the Marquise and his unhesitating desire to marry her by the fact that her presence was somehow with him during crucial moments of recovery from his near-fatal battle wounds. The Marquise and her family, however, do not feel comfortable with such a hasty decision and therefore tell him that he must wait for her answer until he returns from Naples. The Count seems troubled by the failure of his proposition but agrees to the terms, leaves, and promises to return as soon as he feasibly can.

A few weeks later, the Marquise’s bizarre sensations return—“mit größerer Lebhaftigkeit”—and she notices undeniable changes in her body (123). Although she apparently has no knowledge as to how conception could have occurred, her suspicions¹³

¹³ Although it seems contradictory that the Marquise would at all entertain suspicions of being pregnant if she had not knowingly engaged in sexual intercourse, I have deliberately chosen this phrasing because it

are confirmed by both a doctor and a midwife: she is unquestionably pregnant. She swears her innocence but is nonetheless banished by her family and left to live a life in isolation with her children at her former estate. Eventually, she decides to place an advertisement in the local newspaper that urges the father of the child in her womb to come forth and admit his offense so that she can marry him and save her family's reputation. The Marquise's mother, meanwhile, puts her conscience to a test and ascertains that she is, in fact, telling the truth and did not knowingly engage in the sexual act that caused her pregnancy. In the end, it is the Count who walks in at the arranged day and time to reveal his identity as the father of her child and take her hand in marriage. The Marquise very reluctantly, if not unwillingly, marries him but gradually finds herself increasingly happier with the arrangement; a year later, the Count proposes a second time, and they celebrate a second wedding, this time "froher als die erste" (147). The ending is not tragic after all, and they have many children and live more or less happily ever after.

Closure

As is apparent even in this abbreviated version of the plot, the narrative is riddled with a great deal of confusion, primarily due to withheld and/or seemingly paradoxical information. Furthermore, those explanations that are provided often leave the reader seeking further clarification and feeling, at times, even more puzzled than he was before.

underlines the dilemma of her paradoxical situation: her body is telling her one thing—that she is pregnant—and her understanding of the world causes her to believe another—that pregnancy is not possible.

In this sense, possibly the most interesting and curious “figure” in Kleist’s stories is the narrator himself. The narrator of *Die Marquise* purports simply to be recounting the details of a real-life event, which is indicated from the outset in the novella’s subtitle: „Nach einer wahren Begebenheit, deren Schauplatz vom Norden nach dem Süden verlegt worden” (107). However, in a similar fashion to the opening sentence from *Michael Kohlhaas*,¹⁴ the reader is immediately presented with a character that possesses starkly contrasting, if not paradoxical, qualities:

In M..., einer bedeutenden Stadt im oberen Italien, ließ die verwitwete Marquise von O..., eine Dame von vortrefflichem Ruf, und Mutter von mehreren wohlherzogenen Kindern, 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. (105)

Just as Michael Kohlhaas was supposedly one of the “most honorable” and, simultaneously, the “most terrible” of his age, the Marquise happens to have both an “unblemished reputation” and an unexplainable pregnancy. Thus, from the first sentence, the narrator appears to be pulling the reader in two opposite directions with contrasting proairetic, or expectational, codes—and this trend toward paradox only increases throughout the development of the story. More specifically, the narrator is complicating

¹⁴Michael Kohlhaas is the eponymous protagonist of Kleist’s 1806 novella *Michael Kohlhaas*. The opening line reads: “An den Ufern der Havel lebte, um die Mitte des sechzehnten Jahrhunderts, ein Roßhändler, namens *Michael Kohlhaas*, Sohn eines Schulmeisters, einer der rechtschaffensten zugleich und entsetzlichsten Menschen seiner Zeit” (Schlaffer 9).

the reader's desire to recognize and establish a sense of character consistency by pairing characters with potential actions that do not at all correspond to their otherwise remarkably stable personalities.

It is never clear when or how the Marquise is raped—if she was indeed raped—or even that the Count definitively was the culprit, as he never actually comes out with a direct confession. Traditionally, readers and critics have overcome the absence of closure due to a lacking rape scene by interpreting a dash in the text that appears during the storming of the citadel to signify this “unspeakable” event; the dash is initially quite inconspicuous and thus easily overread; in retrospect, however, it seems to emerge as a significant marker after all, since it appears to be the only space in the narrative that could house a potential rape act. After this possibility is considered, it does seem a bit too syntactically awkward to be dismissed as mere punctuation. The dash is granted further validity for this role by the fact that it is imbedded in the text between the Marquise's sudden unconsciousness and the arrival of her servants and family—which means that if the dash allows for or marks an elapsing of some time, the Count certainly would have had the opportunity to take advantage of her; yet, as in the case of the Marquise herself, this possibility seems entirely inconsistent with the Count's character as presented thus far (as well as in subsequent passages):

Der Marquise schien er ein Engel des Himmels zu sein. Er stieß noch dem letzten viehischen Mordknecht, der ihren schlanken Leib umfaßt hielt, mit dem Griff des Degens ins Gesicht, daß er, mit aus dem Mund vorquellendem Blut,

zurücktaumelte; bot dann der Dame, unter einer verbindlichen, französischen Anrede den Arm, und führte sie, die von allen solchen Auftritten sprachlos war, in den anderen, von der Flamme noch nicht ergriffenen, Flügel des Palastes, wo sie auch völlig bewußtlos niedersank. Hier—traf er, da bald darauf ihre erschrockenen Frauen erschienen, Anstalten, einen Arzt zu rufen; versicherte, indem er sich den Hut aufsetzte, daß sie sich bald erholen würde; und kehrte in den Kampf zurück. (108–09)

Why is the Count himself presented as “ein Engel des Himmels” in this passage and repeatedly referred to by her family as a man “wie ein junger Gott” and with “so vielen vortrefflichen Eigenschaften” if he indeed was disreputable enough to rape her (113, 121)? Curiously, it is precisely this predicament we find ourselves in as readers: even though the Count virtually comes out and says, “It was me, I did it,” and seems content to allow everyone to think so, we tend not to want to believe it. That is, it is almost impossible for the reader (or any of the characters in the story, for that matter) to imagine this valiant figure as a rapist. Even in the end, when he enters Colonel G...’s home to (ostensibly) rectify his misdeed, the reader is left wondering, like the Marquise and her mother, how on earth this noble man possibly could be both so chivalrous and so base at the same time. Moreover, the fact that he never openly admits or explains his actions compounds the reader’s sense of hesitancy to accept him as the “bad guy.” The reader is thus forced to wonder if something else is going on—if, for instance, some telling secret in the diegetic world is being held back by the narrator on the extradiegetic level. Given

the Count's excellent reputation, the reader is, for instance, almost tempted to "expect" or assume that he is taking the blame and marrying the Marquise for a more noble cause—perhaps to conceal knowledge about someone else's actions whose implications might be more damaging—and that the "real story" will be revealed in the end. However, the narrator offers no such clarification.

Thus, despite the initial, superficial sense of closure presented by the "happy ending," as well as the opportunity for further closure via the existence of a convenient dash, several important interpretive problems remain on both the level of expectations and the level of questions due to other contradictions and gaps in the text that cannot be easily reconciled. For example, even if the reader decides that the Count is in fact the rapist, it is impossible for him to ignore some other "leads" he may have followed earlier in the story, because details that cause the reader, at least momentarily, to entertain other suspicions also exist in the narrative. The greatest supporting evidence for rejecting the "Count as rapist" interpretation as the true and complete story is a borderline incestuous scene between the Marquise and her father when he is finally convinced of her innocence and the two of them are left alone to be reunited. In this passage, the Marquise's mother stands outside the door and listens to them whispering and then peeps through the keyhole, which enables her to see, to her heart's great joy (!), that the Marquise is sitting on her father's lap. The Colonel's wife then inconspicuously slips into the room and witnesses her daughter leaning back in her husband's arms as he gives her "heiße und lechzende Küsse [...] auf ihren Mund" (142). The mother's approving reaction

makes it difficult to interpret this otherwise quite explicitly erotic scene, and the resulting ambiguity is amplified by her final observation that her husband is kissing the Marquise “gerade wie ein Verliebter! Die Tochter sprach nicht, er sprach nicht; mit über sie gebeugtem Antlitz saß er, wie über das Mädchen seiner ersten Liebe, und legte ihr den Mund zurecht, und küßte sie. Die Mutter fühlte sich, wie eine Selige [...]” (142).

This bizarre scene has two functions: first, it disturbs the reader’s task on the level of expectations by portraying the allegedly chaste Marquise as a non-objecting (and perhaps even active) participant in a highly sexualized encounter with her father. When suddenly seeing her in this light, the reader must seriously reexamine his assumptions about her character and entertain the possibility of a non-rape case. Secondly, the scene presents incest as a viable answer for the question at hand—that is, her father as the father of her child—, and this possibility leads to the reexamination of the father’s behavior in other parts of the story. For instance, did his display of the “utmost consternation” upon learning of his daughter’s assault (“[er geriet] in die äußerste Bestürzung,” 109) arise merely out of paternal love and protection, or is the superlative employed here to call attention to other emotions? We also see other potential cues in the Marquise’s reactions. For instance, after the doctor has been called and determines that she is pregnant, she wants to believe that he is playing a cruel joke on her, and her mother says that her father should be informed. The Marquise seems to be at her wit’s end with this thought: “—O Gott! Sagte die Marquise, mit einer konvulsivischen Bewegung: wie kann ich mich beruhigen“ (124). Her father, when learning of her

condition, is so upset that he seizes a pistol as she is throwing herself at his feet, and a shot goes off, at which point the Marquise turns pale and exclaims, “Herr meines Lebens!” and runs out the door. This exclamation is translated into English by David Luke and Nigel Reeves as “God preserve me!” but literally means “Lord of my life!” in German and could therefore cause some uncertainty with regard to whom she is addressing here: is it a mere exclamation or is she admitting that her father is the “lord of her life” through a secret incestuous affair? While the exclamation on its own is not sexually charged, the reader must later scrutinize such details after witnessing the reconciliation scene.

Furthermore, when the mother later determines that their daughter is not lying after all and is able to convince the father of her innocence as well, threatening to leave him if he does not personally apologize for his outrageous behavior toward the Marquise, he completely breaks down and is crying and sobbing so violently that even the Marquise disapproves of her mother’s harshness and feels the need to comfort her father. Here, the word “konvulsivisch” reappears to describe the father’s state, which makes the attentive reader wonder if the narrator is deliberately linking daughter and father by using such a conspicuously distinct adjective. Does the convulsiveness, perhaps, mark a realization of repressed guilt or other emotions? On the other hand, what “normal” mother would condone relations between her daughter and husband?

While these allegations may seem exaggerated, the lack of closure provided by the narrator necessarily forces the reader to ponder other scenarios that require some imagination, and other strange ambiguities and coincidences do allow for a certain

amount of free play on the part of the reader, however anticipated and directed that “free play” may be. For example, another potential suspect in the Marquise’s rape is Leopardo, the coachman¹⁵ from Tirol that the Marquise’s father had recently hired. The strategy mentioned above by which the mother tests the Marquise’s conscience is to tell her that Leopardo has confessed to being the culprit (even though this is not the case) and that she must now marry him. The Marquise believes her mother and desperately tries to recall a time at which this would have been possible: “Wie? Wo? Wann? Fragte die Marquise verwirrt.“ Then she thinks aloud, “[i]ch war einst in der Mittagshitze eingeschlummert, und sah ihn von meinem Diwan gehen, als ich erwachte! Und damit legte sie ihre kleinen Hände vor ihr in Scham erglühendes Gesicht” (139). At this instant, the mother knows her daughter is innocent and truly seeks to be enlightened about the facts behind her circumstances as much as everyone else. And although the reader is aware that this is merely a test, when considering the description of Leopardo’s broad shoulders, the fact that he is always referred to as “Leopardo der Jäger” as if he were on the hunt for something, and the way the Marquise blushes when she looks at him on the ride home—it is also hard to resist the temptation to wonder whether he might have had something to do with her pregnancy. This uncertainty is amplified when Leopardo enters the room at 11 o’clock on Sunday, when the real father is scheduled to appear; but, of course, he is a household servant after all and has come only in order to announce the arrival of the Count.

¹⁵ Kleist actually uses the word *Jäger*, which has been translated as “chasseur” (Greenberg [1960]), “coachman” (Constantine [2004]), and by Luke and Reeves (1978/2004) as “groom,” which adds an additional pun to the story.

Still, in the end, it is the most difficult task to explain and come to terms with the Count's frantic behavior and eventual return to the Marquise "despite" her scandalous pregnancy if one of these other options is true. This illustrates how Kleist consciously confounds the "hermeneutic codes" between the author/narrator and the reader, thereby causing tensions on the level of questions and answers that preclude narrative closure. On one hand, the text effects closure by attempting to "solve" the central conflict with a marriage and then a second even happier marriage, as if to expel any further doubt; through its often seemingly objective, journalistic tone and "mystery story" format, it also frequently leads the reader to believe that an "answer" can in fact be found in the text. In the end, however, many disparate threads of the story cannot be woven together and are left for the reader to wrestle with.

Perspectival Plurality

The reader is thus challenged to examine the text from different angles and entertain multiple interpretive "tracks" or perspectives, experiencing firsthand its interpretive plurality and its inherent paradoxical quality due to this plurality. The instability that results when the details in the story no longer "stack up" and begin to collapse on one another can also be attributed to the contrasting perspectives of the individual characters, even though the story is relayed by a "detached" third-person narrator. An investigation of Kleist's use of focalization can help sort through the corresponding confusion and shed light on a further strategy he uses to frustrate or force work on the reader.

The narrative confusion begins, of course, with the third person “omniscient” narrator. As mentioned previously, it is easy to take the narrator’s position for granted, especially because we tend to automatically trust narrators in general as authoritative figures with no ulterior motives beyond relaying events—or perhaps because we *want* to trust them. Additionally, the narrator here exudes an air of self-confidence and authority by presenting the account often like an official report or documentation of an event. However, as Bal points out in *Narratology: Introduction to the Theory of Narrative*, every focalizer binds the text to its own bias and limitations. This can hold true for both internal focalizers (characters taking part in the story) and external focalizers—for instance, a third-person narrator not involved in the plot who watches it unfold from some other vantage point. So, regardless of which focalizer is being employed at any given moment, there will always be some sort of limitation in narrative because the focalizer acts as a filter for the way in which we receive information about the events of the story. This problem is further complicated by the fact that, especially in Kleist’s works, it is rarely clear whose perspective is being used, and the focal emphasis can therefore switch back and forth between characters (or characters and the narrator) without the reader’s realization.

If we examine the scene just prior to the father-daughter “reconciliation scene,” for instance, we witness a dialogue between the Marquise and her mother in which it is difficult to determine whose perspective is being presented. Often, it seems rather objective, which would indicate an external focalizer (purely the narrator’s point of

view); however, some curious moments do emerge. The mother has just informed the father that she has proven the Marquise's innocence, and he is now crying hysterically in the next room. The Marquise would like to go comfort him, but her mother insists that she stay and wait for him to approach her:

Meine teuerste Mutter, flehte die Marquise—Unerbittlich! fiel ihr die Obristin ins Wort. Warum griff er nach der Pistole.—Aber ich beschwöre Sie—Du *sollst* nicht, versetzte Frau von G..., indem sie die Tochter wieder auf ihren Sessel niederdrückte. Und wenn er nicht vor heut Abend kommt, zieh ich morgen mit dir weiter. Die Marquise nannte dies Verfahren hart und ungerecht. Doch die Mutter erwiderte: Beruhige dich—denn eben hörte sie jemand von weitem heranschluchzen: er kömmt schon! (141)

The chaos of the situation and the way observations, words, and actions of the two characters all flow together seem to imply the presence of a more distant, external, focalizer who is looking down upon this scene and eavesdropping on their conversation. However, if this is the case, certain elements of the narrative also seem odd and somewhat incongruous. For example, why does the text alternate between the actual dialogue and a narration of it, as is the case when the mother's direct statement "Und wenn er nicht vor heut Abend kommt [...]" leads into a *summary* of the Marquise's statement: "Die Marquise nannte dies Verfahren hart und ungerecht"? The latter seems to be observed with a different lens, perhaps from a more removed position. The occasional but inconsistent use of indirect speech in Kleist's texts (through the subjunctive form)

achieves a similarly troubling effect, which can be illustrated with an example from the same scene: “Hierauf erhob sich die Marquise, umarmte den Kommandanten, und bat ihn, sich zu beruhigen. Sie weinte selbst heftig. Sie fragte ihn, ob er sich nicht setzen wolle?“ (141). Why isn’t direct speech used here, as in other passages? The text could read, for example: „Sie fragte ihn, wollen Sie sich nicht setzen?“ On the other hand, it is not merely a statement about what she said, because it includes the question mark. A more distant narrator may have observed objectively: “Sie fragte ihn, ob er sich nicht setzen wollte.” The actual account of the Marquise’s speech thus seems to indicate at once a presence in the scene and simultaneously a certain distance from it. Perhaps, then, it is through the filter of the mother’s eyes that the scene is taking place; this could explain why the account occasionally seems distorted or even somewhat lacking in attentiveness (hence the mere narrative *summary* of what the Marquise said in the previous passage rather than direct speech)—the mother herself is distracted by the emotion-ridden circumstances and unable to concentrate. When the scene closes and the Marquise and her father are left alone, it becomes clearer that the mother’s vision is being employed, as our vision follows hers out of the room and we suddenly have access to her thoughts:

Die Marquise sagte, [...] er werde krank werden [...] so nahm [die Mutter] wieder das Wort, sagte, es geschehe ihm ganz recht, er werde nun wohl zur Vernunft kommen, entfernte sich aus dem Zimmer, und ließ sie allein. Sobald sie draußen war, wischte sie sich selbst die Tränen ab, dachte, ob ihm die heftige

Erschütterung, in welche sie ihn versetzt hatte, nicht doch gefährlich sein könnte.

(142)

This shift occurs so discreetly that it is easy to forget that we are now “watching” the plot unfold through the mother’s filter, which, of course has its own limitations and biases. The bizarreness of the borderline-incestuous scene that follows when she peeps through the keyhole and observes the “reconciliation” of her husband and daughter might be explained by this narrative phenomenon. It is clear that, up until this point, tension and resentment have existed between the Colonel and his wife regarding their daughter’s situation, and that the Colonel was acting in such an unloving way that his wife had to doubt his ability to show love and affection. However, his emotional outburst and incredible display of remorse eventually revives her faith in him not only as a father but as a husband. It is then, quite possible, that images of him as *her* own lover are going through her mind at the time that she is looking through the keyhole—transposing the two—and that the narrator, still using her filter, is either unable or unwilling to sort through the images or provide the appropriate commentary. Such a situation would also explain the mother’s lack of bewilderment and shock in the face of this event. However, due to the narrator’s lack of clarification, we, as readers, are faced with a major paradox, as it seems possible that the father himself may have had some kind of sexual relationship with his daughter that led to her pregnancy.

One instance where a focalization shift causes the reader to question the reliability of the Marquise’s claims of innocence occurs when she is questioning the

midwife about the possibility of immaculate conception after her mother has left the scene in a rage, exclaiming “Verflucht sei die Stunde, da ich dich gebar!” (127). Again, indirect speech is employed through the subjunctive and question marks are combined with indirect questions, making it difficult to pinpoint from whose perspective the dialogue is taking place.

Sie fragte, [...] 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? (127–28)

It is interesting that Luke and Reeves translate “Nein, nein, antwortete die Marquise, sie habe wissentlich empfangen“ as “No, no,’ answered the Marquise, ‘I conceived knowingly” (91), and I believe that the discrepancy between these two versions illustrates well how easy it is to underread nuances in Kleist’s narratives and disregard the importance of the concept of focalization in them. In other passages in the text, particularly where it focalizes through the Marquise, she *does* speak in the first person; yet, despite Luke and Reeves’s rendering of it in English—with quotation marks and in first person—in the original, her speech is *not* directly represented in this passage. A more accurate translation would be “No, no, the Marquise answered, she conceived knowingly.” Understanding the details correctly here is crucial to the reader’s ability to interpret the rest of the story. Hearing “I conceived knowingly” in direct speech about a

character who otherwise claims not to know why she is pregnant makes it a much more troubling passage than “she conceived knowingly.” If we read this passage with the midwife as a focalizer, it is clear that she does not in any way believe in the Marquise’s innocence. The Marquise would certainly be aware of the impossibility of believing her assertions and is likely embarrassed by the midwife’s remark about not needing to explain the ways of the birds and the bees to her. It is possible that the Marquise then plays along just for the opportunity to ask again if immaculate conception, *in general*, is possible. If we were to witness the passage with the Marquise as a focalizer, the text would perhaps read “No, no, I conceived knowingly, the Marquise lied,” and perhaps more of her inner feelings and thoughts would be expressed. As is, the sentence is very matter-of-fact, and therein lies the interpretive difficulty. The midwife has seen dozens of other despairing young women and is certain that the Marquise conceived knowingly—and we as readers are relayed that information in a corresponding manner, in spite of its incongruence with our other impressions about her moral character.

Finally, the “fateful dash” toward the beginning of the story that is often recognized as the point at which the Marquise is raped represents a further instance of the narrator’s failure to address what is actually going on in the narrative. We sense that the narrator had been using the Marquise’s perspective up to this point because, as cited in the previous passage, we learn that the Count “[schien der Marquise] ein Engel des Himmels zu sein” (108): we cannot know what he seemed to be for her unless the narration is taking place through her eyes. Yet, when she falls unconscious shortly

thereafter, her vision stops and the narrative vision has to be taken up through another character's eyes or through the distant vantage point of an external focalizer, which is sometimes used in the narrative. The interpretive problem here is that we can only entertain the possibility that something unknown is occurring in the absence of her consciousness *if* we are aware that it was her vision in the first place through which we were experiencing the narrative. If a conscious person—the narrator himself or the Count—had been the focalizer up to this point, a more explicit reference to the event likely would have been made, but since the Marquise did not witness it, neither can we. Thus, in this case again, as in the others, an awareness of the phenomenon of focalization can help alleviate some of the narrative tension that arises through contrasting character perspectives.

Kleist takes advantage of moments like these to complicate the plot and to force us to call the different characters' trustworthiness into question. Often, however, the resulting tension in the narrative is caused less by the nature of these characters themselves than by the complex framing techniques applied by the narrator. This phenomenon might explain what Norton refers to as "the strange moments of emptiness when the text seems deliberately to be withholding information and hiding meaning" (137).

In my opinion, the narrative tactics discussed above are very closely related to the sense of crisis Kleist experienced when pondering the knowability of the world: in the same way that we try to pursue knowledge in the world, we find that the "answer" or the

“truth” of his narratives is elusive because the events that occur within them can only be grasped through filters with limitations. Likewise, it becomes difficult to interpret what is “really” going on in his stories when the point of focalization shifts between characters and the narrator; yet, what makes this process especially problematic is not the shifting itself, but the fact that we are being discreetly deceived by the narrator when he does not make clear whose vision is being presented. By that same token, the frequent and fairly subtle shifts in focalization might partly explain why we are unaware that the different perspectives even exist: it all begins to run together, like a stream of consciousness through the vision of multiple characters. The paradoxes in the plot that emerge for the critical eye are thus often the result of incomplete accounts from different perspectives that never quite fit together. As Norton points out, Kleist is reminding us that “multiple interpretations of the same event can give rise to all sorts of misunderstandings, great and small, and to subsequent injustices, real or simply perceived” (138). By presenting narratives that contain irreconcilable puzzles but still manage to maintain a sort of cohesiveness, Kleist also seems to be presenting us with a sort of metaphor for the way order in the world can be deceiving. We are drawn to closure and “closed meaning” because it makes us feel secure, but instances of chaos and paradox will always be there to remind us of the tension that exists throughout the world, and, of course, within our own narratives.

*Das Erdbeben in Chili*¹⁶

Das Erdbeben in Chili was published in the *Morgenblatt für gebildete Stände*¹⁷ in July of 1807 after Kleist returned from his imprisonment in France, and the novella was initially titled *Jeronimo und Josephe*. Though much shorter and quite different thematically from *Die Marquise*, the narrative tactics employed in *Das Erdbeben* place similar demands on the reader by problematizing the reader-text relationship through the complication of proairetic and hermeneutic codes. The story opens with an earthquake taking place in seventeenth-century Santiago, Chile, which occurs just in time to free Josephe and Jeronimo, two “forbidden lovers” condemned for maintaining an illicit affair and conceiving an illegitimate child while Josephe was living in a convent. As the earthquake strikes, they are both about to lose their lives—Josephe by public execution and Jeronimo by a suicidal hanging in his prison cell. Both characters separately manage to escape while hundreds of others perish, and Josephe is even able to return to the cloister to retrieve her illegitimate son, Philipp, from the abbess who had been caring for him since his blasphemous public birth on the Cathedral steps during a procession on the day of Corpus Christi. The earthquake and its aftershocks destroy a great portion of the city, killing the viceroy and the archbishop—who ordered Josephe sentenced with the harshest punishment allowed—, and the two lovers separately wade through the chaos of

¹⁶ Heinrich von Kleist, *Sämtliche Erzählungen und Anekdoten*, 148–63. All of my quotes will be taken from this edition unless otherwise indicated.

¹⁷ *Das Morgenblatt für gebildete Stände*, published by Johann Friedrich Cotta from 1807–1865 in Stuttgart, was the leading literary newspaper/journal of the early nineteenth century in Germany. It published works by nearly all of the most prominent authors of the time (See: <http://www.phf.uni-rostock.de/institut/igerman/forschung/litkritik>).

the quake's aftermath to reach places of retreat. Some time later, they happen upon one another and are reunited in a landscape described with such a sense of sacred love that it is compared with Eden: "und [sie] fand ihn hier, diesen Geliebten, im Tale, und Seligkeit, als ob es das Tal von Eden gewesen wäre" (153). Thus, it appears that some greater power has deemed their society's authority unworthy and has denied it the chance to condemn these two young lovers. The two are relieved but also baffled at the circumstances: on one hand, they are portrayed as "sehr gerührt, wenn sie dachten, wie viel Elend über die Welt kommen mußte, damit sie glücklich würden!" (154). On the other hand, their traumatizing experiences make it difficult to believe that this freedom will last.

After Josephe and Jeronimo's reunification, a harmonious interlude follows, throughout which the other survivors "of Eden" seem to have forgotten, or at least forgiven, the charges against the lovers, perhaps in appreciation of their own fortune of having survived the catastrophe. Josephe is approached by a man named Don Fernando, who humbly asks her to breastfeed his infant son, as his wife is injured and unable to do so. Josephe agrees, and she, Jeronimo, and Philipp join Don Fernando's family. As a group, they decide to attend mass in the Dominican church—the only church still standing—to thank the Lord for blessing them with survival. Jeronimo and Josephe, now relatively comfortable again in the company of those who previously condemned them, agree to go as well, still slightly hesitant but soon optimistic that all of the city's survivors will be as forgiving as their current company. Leaving Don Fernando's injured wife, Donna Elvira, and her sister and father behind, the rest proceed in pairs; Josephe walks

arm-in-arm with Don Fernando and carries his baby, Juan, and Jeronimo walks with Don Fernando's sister-in-law, Donna Constanze, and carries Philipp. However, when they arrive, they witness not a peaceful, humble sermon from the preacher but, rather, further outrage over the city's moral decay as embodied by the misdeeds of the "two young sinners." Ultimately, the earthquake is blamed on them—a sign of God's castigation—and many of the survivors pledge revenge. Josephe is suddenly recognized in the crowd, but because of the strange pairing of couples, there is some confusion about which man is her fellow sinner and which baby belongs to her. A mob ensues, and both babies are handed to Don Fernando. Although he bravely fends off several attackers, eventually everyone in the party is beaten to death but Don Fernando himself and Baby Philipp. The victims include his own son, Baby Juan. Despaired but, oddly, quite composed nevertheless, Don Fernando brings Philipp home, and he and his wife adopt him. The text then ends with a peculiar observation: "[...] und wenn Don Fernando Philippen mit Juan verglich, und wie er beide erworben hatte, so war es ihm fast, als müßt er sich freuen" (163).

Closure

As in *Die Marquise*, the story is relayed in a rather journalistic narrative style, which gives the initial impression of narrative objectivity; yet, the reader is soon made aware that this is a pretense due to the many gaps and contradictions—regardless how subtle—that emerge and create disturbances in the cohesion of the story as the narrator presents it. The processes of reading and interpretation thus once again surface as central themes in Kleist's work, as not only the characters in the story but also the reader must

remain suspended in pursuit of often seemingly nonexistent meaning. In true Kleistian fashion, expectations are left unfulfilled—perhaps even mocked—and questions left unanswered.

Because *Das Erdbeben* is shorter and therefore presents less opportunity for character development in general, the reader is not subject to nearly as much personality inconsistency in the characters here as in *Die Marquise*; nonetheless, some odd passages do stand out. It is interesting, for example, to examine Josephe's character according to the information we receive about her in the first couple of pages, in light of some slightly suspicious details that arise later in the story. Initially, Josephe, whose father was "einer der reichsten Edelleute der Stadt" (148), seems to be presented largely as a victim of her society and times. She and her tutor, Jeronimo, had fallen in love but were prohibited from being together or marrying because of Jeronimo's lower social standing. When they were discovered continuing their affair by Josephe's brother, Josephe was sent to a convent; yet, the two still found a way to see one another. Josephe doesn't appear to be generally promiscuous or a "convent whore" as she is later called, but, simply, a young girl desperately in love. The abbess's insight seems to support this view of Josephe's moral character when she requests a lighter punishment for Josephe. Despite the shame her scandal had brought on the convent, it was "[...] der Wunsch der Äbtissin selbst, welche das junge Mädchen wegen ihres sonst untadelhaften Betragens lieb gewonnen hatte, die Strenge, mit welcher das klösterliche Gesetz sie bedrohte, [zu mildern]" (149). Furthermore, when the earthquake takes place and allows her to escape with perfect

timing, it seems that God himself is on Josephe's side—that perhaps society is in the wrong rather than she.

Yet, there is something suspicious about how “well-known” Josephe is by other male characters in the story. For instance, when Don Fernando approaches her to breastfeed his infant son, the two recognize each other and seem to have some sort of background: when he asks her this favor, she hesitates, and he then remarks, “es ist nur auf weniger Augenblicke, Donna Josephe, und dieses Kind hat, seit jener Stunde, die uns alle unglücklich gemacht hat, nichts genossen.” Josephe replies, “ich schwieg—aus einem andern Grunde, Don Fernando; in diesen schrecklichen Zeiten weigert sich niemand, von dem, was er besitzen mag, mitzuteilen” (155). Thus, they not only recognize each other but know each other by name as well and make a point to address each other by name. In the disastrous final scene, it is not Jeronimo who is immediately recognized but Josephe—by several men, no less. The first is her former cobbler, who confirms her identity when Don Fernando tries to deny it for her protection; the narrator remarks that this man “[Josephe] so genau kannte, als ihre kleinen Füße” (161). Another man in the crowd, “Don Alonzo,” who tries to support Don Fernando's efforts to save the group eventually brings further wrath on them when he, asked if this woman is indeed Josephe, hesitates: “Der Schuster rief: Don Alonzo Onoreja, ich frage Euch auf Euer Gewissen, ist dieses Mädchen nicht Josephe Asteron? [...] nun Don Alonzo, welcher Josephen sehr genau kannte, [zauderte] mit der Antwort” (162). The strange aspect about Josephe's acquaintance with all of these men is the fact that they do not merely recognize her or

know her vaguely or fairly well, but they appear to know her *quite* well; the narrator uses the expression “*genau* kennen” more than once.

Moreover, Don Fernando is also a questionable character at times. In the final scene, he is depicted as a Herculean hero of sorts, holding the two babies in one arm and fending off the mob—successfully for quite some time—with the sword in his free hand: “[...] dieser göttliche Held, stand jetzt, den Rücken an die Kirche gelehnt; in der Linken hielt er die Kinder, in der Rechten das Schwert. Mit jedem Hiebe wetterstrahlte er einen zu Boden; eine Löwe wehrt sich nicht besser” (163). Don Fernando could leave the two sinners and their baby to their fates with the deadly mob, but, instead, he insists that “er wolle eher umkommen, als zugeben, daß seiner Gesellschaft etwas zu Leide geschehe” (162). His decisions under these circumstances seem to underline his extremely virtuous qualities, particularly when one considers that his physical description evokes images of a Greek god or demigod battling some mythical monster. Yet, given the peculiar behavior between Josephe and Don Fernando, the reader has to wonder if he is defending the young family purely out of good will or if there are other, concealed circumstances that lead him to do so.

In her article on this work, Norton proposes an interpretation of the text that hinges on the possibility of past relations between Don Fernando and Josephe, thus calling into question the stability of the “traditional understanding of the central family structure of Jeronimo, Josephe, and Philipp” (138). More specifically, Norton examines the impossibility of making any assumptions about the true paternity of Baby Philipp or

the past actions of Josephe due to the manner in which she interacts with Don Fernando. Indeed, most of the text's instability stems from the strange verbal exchanges that take place between Don Fernando and Josephe and, additionally, the unexpected nature of the narrator's account of Don Fernando's sentiments at the novella's end. As is typical for Kleist's works, however, the narrative only partially allows for this uncertainty—that is, it upholds the stability of the “central family structure of Jeronimo, Josephe, and Philipp” just enough to provide superficial closure for the reader. Probably most of what does hold that structure together is a phenomenon on the level of expectations: namely, a tendency on the reader's part to assume that a narrator will not begin a story with a lie or deception. Similarly, just as the old saying goes that “first impressions are the most important,” readers tend to privilege the impressions they form first over contradicting information that comes later; in this case, the whole story initially appears to revolve around the consequences of a relationship between Josephe and Jeronimo—potentially even divine intervention in support of that relationship—, and it is therefore difficult to imagine why the narrative, instead of closing, would ultimately open itself to a new and completely different set of circumstances. This paradox illustrates how the text also capitalizes on the reader's *desire* for cohesive closure despite the rather conspicuous traces of contradictory evidence left behind to complicate the interpretative process.

What results is once again a plurality of interpretive perspectives: complications on the level of expectations (level of the proairetic code) that ultimately lead to confusion and inconclusiveness on the level of questions and answers (level of the hermeneutic

code). Norton traces, for instance, the interpretive possibility that Don Fernando, rather than Jeronimo, is the actual father of Philipp. She bases this assertion on their apparent familiarity with one another and makes a rather strong case for this possibility. She first addresses the scene in which Don Fernando approaches Josephe in the aftermath of the earthquake and apparently misinterprets her hesitancy: "Josephe clearly recognizes in Don Fernando someone she knew before the earthquake and whose reappearance in her life is disconcerting" (139). Norton admits that it is possible to interpret Josephe's unease as mere discomfort with reemerging as a "freed person" in a society that had condemned her to death, and this man may have been a member of the nobility that symbolized that social order. This version is the traditional interpretation of her reaction; however, Norton entertains the possible explanation that Josephe's hesitancy has to do with a past romance with Don Fernando that makes the situation uncomfortable:

Although there is no denying the fact that Josephe and Jeronimo are indeed a pair of lovers in the story, it is not wholly implausible to suggest that Josephe might be a woman of slightly looser morals than is conventionally assumed or that Jeronimo might not be the only man with whom she has ever been involved.

(139)

Conveniently, the text does allow, if not encourage, the reader to ponder such a situation, particularly on the second reading after some strange details at the end have been revealed. As mentioned, Josephe turns out to be "known well" by several different men; and, if she found the opportunity to maintain relations with Jeronimo while she was in

the convent, perhaps she had received other visitors as well. By failing to enlighten the reader further about the background between Don Fernando and Josephe, the text invites such hermeneutic exploration.

Norton further supports her claims by the odd pairing of couples that presents itself in the next scene. Why is Josephe paired with Don Fernando instead of Jeronimo? This image is surely puzzling for any reader who encounters it, at least initially; however, as always, such details are only vaguely disturbing, and thus it would not be difficult to overlook their significance if they did indeed turn out to be crucial to the story. For example, a handful of justifications for the pairings come to mind: perhaps Don Fernando wanted to accompany Josephe because she was holding his baby, Juan; or, maybe it was a sign of forgiveness and communal harmony, which would be quite an appropriate image for this peaceful interlude in the chaos; it could also be that Don Fernando knew how recognizable Josephe would be and anticipated that he might have to defend her. From Norton's perspective, however, these interpretations are "underreadings." In the subsequent scene, Don Fernando is just departing for the Dominican church with Josephe's arm linked in his when his sister-in-law, Donna Elisabeth, calls him back and has a frantic whispered conversation with him that Josephe is not able to hear. The whole time *still* holding Josephe's arm, he blushes furiously and tells Donna Elisabeth that things will be fine and that she should tell his wife to calm herself. Then, oddly, the narrative continues with the observation that he "führte seine Dame weiter.—" (159). Why doesn't he let go of Josephe's arm, and why is she referred to as *his* lady and not *the*

lady? Even more peculiar and troubling for the reader is the final scene, in which the mob forms and directly interrogates the two about Don Fernando's identity (the sinful lover?) and the paternity of the child she is holding (Juan), by which they actually mean Josephe's illegitimate child (Philipp), whom Jeronimo is still holding. The entire ordeal is further complicated by Josephe's exclamation as the mob lets loose on her: "[G]ehn Sie, Don Fernando, retten Sie Ihre beiden Kinder, und überlassen Sie uns unserm Schicksale!" (162). Now, it could be that Josephe is merely saying this to help prevent her child from being killed, or is she acknowledging Don Fernando as his future, adoptive father? However, given the already somewhat murky circumstances surrounding Josephe's reputation, this line in the text seems to almost explicitly affirm suspicions that Don Fernando is indeed somehow the father of her illegitimate child. This possibility could also explain one detail to which Norton doesn't call attention—namely, that the second paragraph of the story very choppily places two events directly after one another that in reality would have required an intervening nine months—the “consummation of Jeronimo's joy” in the convent garden and Josephe's labor on the Cathedral steps. In light of potentially different circumstances surrounding Josephe's conception, the reader might recall the awkwardness of this succession of events without any mention of the time that elapsed between them. Might this suggest that the chronology doesn't line up for Jeronimo to be the father?

Finally, given the “Don Fernando-as-father” interpretation of the story, the very puzzling concluding line in the text can perhaps more easily be subsumed in the rest of its

context.¹⁸ Norton remarks appropriately: “This statement raises many questions but answers virtually none. Once again, the reader must fend entirely for himself” (144). No conventional parent would consider another child superior to his own, especially if that foreign child had to replace his dead son, so why is this curious observation made?

Following Norton’s line of thought, it would make sense for Don Fernando to be glad that he is able to raise his bastard son, Philipp, in a socially acceptable situation—this would make even more sense if he were more emotionally and physically attached to Josephe as a lover than to his wife, Donna Elvire.

Regardless of whether a given reader comes to this conclusion or not, the important issue here is that Kleist’s texts often offer evidence that can support multiple, contrasting interpretations—this support is never definitive but exists at least to a significant extent. Indeed, it is remarkable how easily the reader can jump from one interpretation to another with sufficient evidence on both sides. Still, I would maintain that Norton’s interpretation is, though perhaps the most plausible version, nonetheless difficult for the reader to adjust and commit to once he has made other assumptions about Philipp’s paternity. It is, furthermore, due to the pervasive obscurity of other potentially contrasting elements of the text that the reader is tempted to ignore, or “underread” them. Yet, it is not Kleist’s decision or the text’s decision but, rather, the decision of the reader himself to disregard this information. This case further supports the observation that Kleist’s texts deliberately make the reader aware of the burden of responsibility

¹⁸ “und wenn Don Fernando Philippen mit Juan verglich, und wie er beide erworben hatte, so war es ihm fast, als müßt er sich freuen” (163).

associated with interpretation: the reader, like the members of the crowd in the church, is put in a position to make a judgment about a group of questionable characters, and that act of judgment will affect their lives. As both *Die Marquise* and *Das Erdbeben* show, stories or accounts are often more complex than we want to believe; yet, even recognizing complexity might not be enough because the “reader” or interpreter ultimately will still seek closure, and complexity often prevents a sense of closure.

Perspectival Plurality

As in *Die Marquise*, the narrator of *Das Erdbeben* often seems to be intentionally withholding information or leading the reader astray. Once again, the narrator’s trustworthiness as an objective source of information must be called into question, and an investigation of focalization techniques employed by Kleist can help uncover one main method by which narrative obscurity and discord are generated. It seems that, in Kleist’s narratives, part of the interpretive obscurity is deemphasized by a general stylistic obscurity in the text. For instance, when characters speak, Kleist frequently alternates between direct speech, indirect speech, and free indirect style. These changes often appear to signify shifts in focal perspectives; however, if the reader is not aware of this technique, it is easy to write off bizarre scenes or utterances as evidence of an incongruous or imprecise writing style. Kleist’s deliberate confusion of information on the hermeneutic level might thus be disregarded as general confusion in the text; yet, at a closer glance, the shifts do seem, at least to some degree, systematic, and tracing them can help support or refute particular interpretive stances, even if it is sometimes difficult to

pinpoint or verify the focalizer in a particular passage.

First of all, the narrative opens with Jeronimo about to hang himself in his jail cell. Since he is about to end his life, it makes sense that the narrator might be utilizing his perspective—his “eyes”—to recount the events that led up to his fateful situation before the earthquake. This might explain the “jump” in time between Jeronimo’s opportunity to “consummate his joy” with Josephe and her sudden labor on the steps: namely, Jeronimo may have had little contact with Josephe in the intermittent months and that sudden, startling result of his actions was the next event in his life that was connected with her. Here, we receive no information from Josephe’s perspective, although she likely would have gone through a troubling time becoming aware of her pregnancy, hiding her physical changes from the nuns, etc.

For many of the subsequent passages, the narrator appears to switch back and forth between Jeronimo’s and Josephe’s vision. Once they are reunited, he seems to take on a more removed perspective, perhaps acting more as an external (i.e., extradiagetic) focalizer, although he can still relate their thoughts. The next morning, Don Fernando approaches them, and it is a bit odd that he is first referred to as “ein wohl gekleideter Mann mit einem Kinde auf dem Arm” and then is identified with his name by Josephe shortly thereafter. This discrepancy makes it even more conspicuous that the two know each other. Furthermore, the dialogue that takes place between them switches between direct and indirect speech. I would argue that the reason for these discrepancies has to do with a shift in focalization between Jeronimo—who only knows Don Fernando as some

well-dressed man—and Josephe, who knows him and answers in direct speech once the focal perspective has shifted to her (“ich schwieg—aus einem andern Grunde [...]” 155). A few lines later, however, Don Fernando asks if the two would like to follow him back to his family’s camp for breakfast and Josephe’s answer is this time rendered in indirect speech: “Josephe antwortete, daß sie dies Anerbieten mit Vergnügen annehmen würde, und folgte ihm, da auch Jeronimo nicht einzuwenden hatte, zu seiner Familie [...]” (155). It is not clear whose perspective is being used to focalize here, but it *is* clear that a shift took place, and such shifts cause blind spots in the narrative that can manipulate the reader’s interpretation if he is unaware of them.

One further instance of a blind spot in the narrative that is at least partially enabled by a narrowed focal perspective is the virtual absence of Jeronimo as a character during the latter third of the story. After the group decides to proceed to the church, Jeronimo is only depicted two more times, and briefly and superficially at that: first, when he attempts to save Don Fernando from scrutiny by revealing his own identity as the sinner Jeronimo and, lastly, as he is struck fatally to the ground with a club by his own father. In both instances, Jeronimo is suddenly portrayed as a very flat character—practically only a name. Once Don Fernando and Josephe are paired up to accompany one another to the church, it is as if Jeronimo fades away into the background. This perspectival shift certainly corresponds with the apparent thematic shift that enables the reader to seriously consider that Don Fernando and Josephe have a secret past together, especially if it is mostly Don Fernando whose view leads the narrative at this point. Even

if all of the other characters continue to have the opportunity to talk, their words in the last four pages or so are almost always directed toward Don Fernando, and it is primarily his perception of the situation that is described. In the end, it is in fact Don Fernando who lives to carry Philipp home, and so it is also his focal perspective that becomes the most dominant and ultimately prevails.

Although it cannot be confirmed exclusively that Don Fernando is the only focalizer in the last scenes, the story is at least heavily weighted to take place from his vision—perhaps comparable to a movie in which camera shots alternate between a bird’s-eye view and one character’s line of vision so that the story seems more readily to confirm the validity of that person’s view. This lopsided focalization might contribute to some explanation about why it very suddenly seemed plausible that Don Fernando was Philipp’s father. Suppose, for instance, that Josephe did not have past relations with him but that she was extraordinarily beautiful—something the text never mentions but also never negates—and/or that he had expressed interest in her at some point and was now overjoyed to be in her presence. He then would, of course, want to disregard Jeronimo’s existence and imagine that Josephe was as enthusiastic about walking arm-in-arm with him as he was about being so near to her. Wishful thinking often gives people the wrong impressions with regard to romantic relationships, and this certainly could have been the case here. If he let himself be misled and the narrator was focalizing through him, then the reader could have also been misled.

Regardless of what tactics Kleist may or may not have been employing, it is clear

to the reader here that the complete story can never be told or known because multiple accounts of an event cannot be recounted simultaneously. Furthermore, each individual perspective has its own limitations, as we see in the case of Don Fernando, and any attempt to complement deficient perspectives with other characters' perspectives inevitably leads to chaos and inconclusiveness; this, in turn, causes indecision on the part of the reader.

As is evidenced by the narrative complexities in *Die Marquise* and *Das Erbeben*, Kleist's texts do not merely encourage a "passive consumption" of their contents; quite to the contrary, they require the reader to engage in an intensive "dialogue" with the text by locating its gaps and paradoxes and then compensating for these problems by overreading and underreading in order to negotiate a point of relative cohesiveness or balance. In the process of doing so, however, a sensitive reader should simultaneously become more and more aware of the impossibility of ever approaching perfect harmony between the self (i.e., the reader himself) and the text—or, in other words, between the desire to know and the potential source of knowledge. Rather like Kleist himself, we, as readers of his texts, are left in an existential dilemma because we have an unquenchable desire to "know" or uncover the "truth" but soon realize (if we are indeed attentive readers) that some force in the (story)world is clearly withholding conclusive information and preventing us from fulfilling this desire. The resulting discord in Kleist's work suggests a significant degree of "writerliness" insofar as it corresponds to Barthes's understanding of the qualities that constitute a "blissful" text: that it discomforts the reader, upturns or

unsettles his (historical, cultural, and psychological) assumptions, and creates a state of “loss” or longing—in this case, a longing for closure and enlightenment regarding the ultimate “truth” of the matter. The imposition of a sense of loss is achieved all the more effectively by causing a crisis of interpretation that is clearly related to what Barthes identifies as one further notable function of a writerly text—namely, that it “brings to a crisis [the reader’s] relation with language” (*Pleasure of the Text* 14). For language itself is no more than a representation, and, as Kleist’s stories make clear, bare language will always be limited by the subjective perspective that generates it. Yet, a writerly text can overcome the confines of representation by being “productive” rather than “representative” in that it forces *us* to write it instead of allowing itself to be deduced to “some singular system” (*S/Z* 5).

In light of the (admittedly somewhat vague) categorization of Kleist’s work as “writerly” according to Barthes’s terms, it is nonetheless important to remind ourselves of the initial intent behind Barthes’s distinctions of “pleasure” and “bliss” or “readerly” and “writerly.” For Barthes, the difference is primarily a matter of power structures: a readerly text is more easily “consumed” because it conforms to our expectations and reinforces certain cultural norms by leading us from point A to point B, even if some degree of suspense is involved. The “pleasure” involved is a pleasure associated with the basic fulfillment of desire—for instance, the desire to “know,” for which narrative closure provides fulfillment. Yet, while the reader may feel “fulfilled” by narrative closure, the process he has gone through to reach this point is regarded by Barthes as authorial

manipulation or domination—that is, the reader can consume the text like a product but is also subject to being “dominated” by the singularity of its meaning. On the other hand, a writerly text, which allows for and forces the reader to recognize a plurality of meaning, encourages the *reader* to write part of the meaning himself and to thereby, in a sense, act as a manipulator of the text. For Barthes, it is then perhaps not a criticism of manipulation that is his concern but, rather, a resistance to the illusory notion of stable meaning; a passage in *S/Z* supports this claim: “The interpretation demanded by a specific text, in its plurality, is in no way liberal: it is not a question of conceding some meanings, of magnanimously acknowledging that each one has its share of truth; it is a question, against all in-difference, of asserting the very existence of plurality, which is not that of the true, the probable, or even the possible” (6).

However, it does seem worth noting that a text that invites/requires a significant amount of work by the reader does, in effect, *force* that reader to manipulate the narrative in an attempt to make it fulfill his desires and/or expectations. This seems to be an issue that Barthes skims over in the readerly-writerly discussion. Moreover, the analyses contained in this chapter make it perfectly clear that, despite the definite “writerly” qualities of Kleist’s narratives, they still pose a significant amount of manipulation of the reader by the author/text. Therefore, the question remains as to how we can analyze Kleist’s novellas in the face of this additional paradox. Is it the author/text or the reader who is doing the “manipulating” (or both?), and what are the ideological implications of this power relationship? Due to the centrality of the analysis of power

relationships in feminist theory, as well as the fact that many of Kleist's most important fictional characters are women, I will explore these questions and related topics via a feminist critical approach in the following chapter.

CHAPTER THREE

A FEMINIST ANALYSIS

Just as it can be fruitful to examine the process of reading a literary work in order to gain understanding about how we come to know—or “read”—the world, an analysis of this process can also shed light on the obstacles that *prevent* us from knowing it or limit us in our pursuit of making satisfying conclusions about it. I have critically investigated from a narratology/reader-response standpoint some of the ways in which Kleist’s work presents and problematizes the reader/subject’s epistemological limitations as well as the external limitations placed on him by the text/world. The analysis thus far has allowed us to witness the manner in which Kleist was able to demonstrate and grapple with certain problematic aspects of Enlightenment thought—whose principles dominated the intellectual milieu in which he was educated—by creating narrative strategies that resist systems of linear, deductive reasoning and fixed meaning. An additional advantage to applying a narratology/reader-response approach is the tendency for its conclusions to support and provide insight into other critical approaches.

One such set of analytical tools is feminist critical theory, which has some significant points of intersection with narratology and reader-response theory, particularly when it comes to analyzing an individual’s limitations and the power structures in society that impose or influence those limitations. Many scholars have, for instance, acknowledged the different ways in which the latter theories have opened doors for further development in feminist thought. In her chapter on the topic of gender in

David Herman's edited volume *The Cambridge Companion to Narrative*, Ruth Page discusses a convergence of feminism and narratology in a narratological subdomain called "feminist narratology," which emerged in the mid-1980s. She credits Susan Lanser with the conception of this notion, who argued that classical models of narrative theory were, despite claims of their gender-neutrality, androcentric after all and thus called for reexamination and revision to more adequately address "narratives told or read by women, as well as stories representing female characters. In turn, narratology offered feminist criticism a useful toolkit of replicable parameters which could elucidate the forms and functions of women's narrative, for example, in pinning down the ways in which they might (or might not) differ from men's" (190). Although Kleist himself obviously was not a female writer,¹⁹ his stories do often revolve around female characters, and the complicated nature of his texts appears to consciously call into question the *use* of "classical models" of narratives; such models might emphasize narrative features that feminists tend to associate with the "masculine" or "male logic," such as linearity and the stability of gender or identity in general. Page also discusses the debate surrounding the difference between "male" and "female" plot structures, whereby she cites the work of theorist Peter Brooks, who has identified one predominant narrative plot pattern as the "male plot of ambition":

¹⁹ A significant amount of speculation does exist, however, about whether Kleist was a latent homosexual/bisexual, as several lines from letters to his close friend Ernst von Pfuel suggest such tendencies. Others contend that this material is merely further evidence for his predilection for literary experimentation by complicating the notion of stable identity with regard to gender, race, class, etc.

[It is] a quest-like progression that moves in a chronological sequence from a perceived beginning to a conclusion where obstacles have been overcome and goals achieved. It is labeled “male” on the basis of the sex of the fictional hero, although this often correlates with the biological status of the author. In addition, the pattern often reinforces masculine behavior [...], and in psychoanalytic terms mirrors a male, heterosexual pattern of erotic desire, typified as a move toward climax and release of narrative tension. (198)

While this distinction clearly makes broad generalizations and is therefore somewhat problematic, it is nonetheless helpful to keep these observations in mind when dealing with Kleist’s texts vis-à-vis a feminist approach, precisely because the texts appear to deliberately subvert this “plot-of-ambition” model. Moreover, although one could likely make similar observations about numerous Romantic literary works, one could perhaps say that Kleist’s texts go one step further by feigning a “release” of narrative tension while simultaneously upholding it.

Further support for the claim that a feminist critical interpretation can be informed by the insights of narratology/reader-response theories is provided by Todd F. Davis and Kenneth Womack in their work *Formalist Criticism and Reader-Response Theory*, in which they devote a chapter to the history of reader-response theory’s development. One subdivision of this chapter deals specifically with the theory’s influence on feminist thought and is prefaced by the following observation: “Of particular significance is reader-response criticism’s theoretical forays into the vital

interconnections between the act of reading and feminist criticism's interpretive aims" (73). One example of these "aims" is identified as a critical response to "patriarchal resonances in literary works" as they relate to female (as opposed to male) readers, and the authors look at some of the major existing approaches to theorizing the reading process from a feminist standpoint (73). Rather than asking "how" women read as opposed to men, the corresponding assertions first attempt to answer what potential effects might arise from neglecting the possibility of significant differences in the processes. For instance, according to Patrocínio Schweikart, when a female reads an androcentric work, she is "confronted with the requirement of identifying with masculine points of view in [her] reading [experience]." Furthermore, Schweikart's work claims that "[d]uring the reading process, women readers are asked to accept male value systems as normal and legitimate perspectives of the world," and that such reading experiences amount to further oppression of women by a male-dominated order (75).

Much of the theoretical work in the field of feminist criticism can serve as a reminder that neither our worldviews nor our identities are constructed in a vacuum, but rather, that they are shaped by dominant sociopolitical and sociocultural structures in our societies. These observations point to women's struggles with various aspects of a male-dominated society throughout time and one of the feminist movement's most broadly acknowledged ultimate goals: to disturb, deconstruct, and subvert many of the assumptions behind any order that misrepresents women and neglects or oppresses their true identities by failing to provide an adequate value system. In *A Reader's Guide to*

Contemporary Literary Theory, Raman Selden et al. point out that, in fact, feminist critical theory perhaps should not be referred to as a “theory” at all because of the term’s association with “male-invented” empiricism: “Indeed some feminists have not wished to embrace theory at all, precisely because [...] ‘theory’ is often male, even macho [...] and as part of their general project, feminists have been at pains to expose the fraudulent objectivity of male ‘science’[.]” Selden et al. attribute this feminist resistance to being “tied down” to a particular conceptual position to their refusal of the “(masculine) notion of authority or truth” as presented by “male-formulated” discourse (116).

Despite Kleist’s position as a male author, we can see apparent similarities in his struggles and ultimate aims in the literary realm; for instance, his writing shows that he was, quite unquestionably, dissatisfied with “classical models” of narrative, as mentioned above, as well as classical models of aesthetics. In possibly every work he wrote, his narrative strategies challenge those traditional Enlightenment values that are often perceived by feminist thinkers as “male” or “patriarchal” values, such as logic, certainty, order, and justice. Furthermore, ambiguity, lacking closure, and various other elements in his narrative structures conspicuously call these values into question. And although some veins within feminist thought privilege literature written by women, it is possible to establish a connection between Kleist’s works and feminist ideals by focusing on the degree of the texts’ “feminine writing-effect” (*l’écriture féminine*²⁰) rather than the

²⁰ The concept *l’écriture féminine* was introduced and developed primarily but not exclusively through the works of the French feminist critics Hélène Cixous and Julia Kristeva and the Belgian critic Luce Irigaray, all of whom place more emphasis on the structure of a text itself and the way signifiers are employed within it

gender of their author (Selden et al. 122). According to Selden et al., feminists who endorse literary analysis via the concept of *l'écriture féminine* “do not see writing as specifically gendered but seek to disrupt fixed meaning; they encourage textual freeplay beyond authorial or critical control; they are anti-humanist, anti-realist, and anti-essentialist; and they represent, in effect, a potent form of political, cultural and critical deconstruction” (137). Although Kleist’s *oeuvre* itself belongs to the German literary canon and in that respect might still be considered by many to belong to the “master narrative” that feminists seek to deconstruct, a closer look reveals many parallels between the feminist and Kleistian objectives: namely, both endeavor to identify and battle the (known and unknown) oppressive constraints placed on the individual by his or her sociopolitical or sociocultural paradigm.

We’ve already examined several ways in which Kleist’s works resist and confound order and logic structurally; appropriately, the overturning of order and logic are very common thematic motifs in his novellas as well. *Die Marquise* opens, for instance, with a chaotic attack on Colonel G...’s citadel that escalates into a sexual-assault scene and possible rape (depending on one’s interpretation of the dash). The Marquise’s father, the main patriarchal figure in the novella, is defeated in more than just one way: his citadel is seized and his only daughter is sexually assaulted and/or raped. Yet, the cause of the unnecessary damage to the property and the jeopardization of his family was perhaps less a sense of ruthlessness on the side of the Russian attackers than the Colonel’s own

than the gender of the author; this means that *l'écriture féminine* also can be, and has been, employed by male writers (see: Selden et al. 137).

obstinacy and refusal to capitulate: “Der Feind, seinerseits, bombardierte die Zitadelle. Er steckte die Magazine in Brand, eroberte ein Außenwerk, und als der Kommandant, nach einer nochmaligen Aufforderung, mit der Übergabe zauderte, so ordnete er einen nächtlichen Überfall an, und eroberte die Festung mit Sturm“ (108). This incident marks an instance of paternal neglect toward his “subordinate” family for the sake of trying to maintain the “status quo” and the order of his domain.

Once peace has been settled and an “order” of sorts has been restored, another unsettling event reveals itself through the paradox of the Marquise’s apparent immaculate conception. The possibility of her having unknowingly conceived calls another system of order into question, namely, the laws of nature, according to which immaculate conception is not humanly possible (unless one believes in the immaculate conception of the Virgin Mary). The Marquise is positive of her innocence and, in fact insists on it, as she is not aware of having had sexual intercourse. Yet, her prior experience with pregnancy serves as a basis for troubling suspicions to the contrary: “[W]ie kann ich mich beruhigen. Hab ich nicht mein eignes, innerliches, mir nur allzuwohlbekanntes Gefühl gegen mich? Würd ich nicht, wenn ich in einer andern meine Empfindung wüßte, von ihr selbst urteilen, daß es damit seine Richtigkeit habe?“ (124–25). After she dismisses the doctor for “lying” when he confirms her pregnancy, she can only partially believe that this was indeed a cruel joke, because she herself had entertained these suspicions as well. After sharing the doctor’s “audacious” remarks with her mother, she frantically weighs the two possibilities and despairs over the dilemma caused by the great unlikelihood of

both. Her mother responds: “und gleichwohl muss es doch notwendig eins oder das andere gewesen sein” (125). Here, we are introduced to a paradox that—at least momentarily—calls the entire order of nature as we know it into question. *Must* B be caused by A, as conventional logic would propose? The Marquise attempts to gain more information from both the doctor and a midwife about the plausibility of immaculate conception in her case and faces ridicule each time—but what, then, could be the explanation? This personal crisis evokes again a sense of disorientation regarding the possible unreliability of reason. The contradiction with which the Marquise and her family are faced has a polarizing effect on the characters: either they are willing to at least entertain the thought of a flaw in the system of reason and natural laws, or they must necessarily mistrust the Marquise’s assertion of her innocence. As readers, we ourselves even begin to wonder whether the Marquise is actually telling the truth, because, just as her mother emphasized, it would have to be “eins oder das andere”—or is it possible that a defect in reason is being revealed?

By allowing doubt about the value of reason to surface—and sustaining this sense of doubt for some time—Kleist seems to be calling into question the authority of the Enlightenment tradition that is based on this value. According to reason, either the Marquise is pregnant and knows the cause *or* the doctor is lying. The “correct” interpretation of this situation is bound to the two options and is therefore closed. Yet, the atmosphere of crisis elicited by this “either-or” dilemma also challenges, in a feminist sense, the patriarchal order of binary Enlightenment reason. The notion that “men’s

domination of discourse has trapped women inside a male ‘truth’” (Selden et al. 131) is being subverted by the mere possibility of a different kind of “truth,” and thus we witness the unfolding of a further dimension of destabilization in Kleist’s texts. Appropriately, it is the female in this story, the Marquise, and the unclear circumstances surrounding her sexual morality that pose a threat to the “patriarchal value” of closed, fixed meaning. Moreover, it is—again, appropriately—her father who is the most deeply affected—indeed, nearly driven insane—by this paradox and the failure of his “logic” to bring him to a satisfying conclusion.

In *Erdbeben in Chili*, we witness a much more far-reaching and literal overturning of the patriarchal order when the earthquake hits Santiago. When the two lovers Jeronimo and Josephe are “saved,” it appears that God or some other force has stepped in to defend their cause against an unjust social order. Despite their relief, there remains an eerie sense about this sudden absence of order and a vague foreboding of what the consequences of this power vacuum might turn out to be.

The damage is extensive: not only is the convent in which Josephe was housed completely destroyed, along with the bishop and all of the nuns in that convent, but the Viceroy of the city himself, who decreed the lovers’ sentences, has also fallen victim to the disaster. The narrator’s reporting of this news further underlines, in addition to the physical destruction of their surroundings, the subversion of the religious and political hierarchies previously in place. Beyond the collapse of their society as such, we also witness a deep contrast between transformations in the way the ground itself—society’s

dwelling place—is portrayed. The lovers must make their way through the rubble of buildings, gates, and other symbols of human achievement until they finally reach one another; yet once they do reunite, this landscape of broken barriers exudes the character of a harmonious, pre-hierarchal society and is celebrated as if it were the Garden of Eden. However, just as there is uncertainty about the meaning of this strange event and what the future will bring, the depiction of this new “ground” is shifting and ambiguous, thus emphasizing a sense of instability. In her article “Patriarchy's Fragile Boundaries under Siege: Three Stories of Heinrich von Kleist,” Marjorie Gelus identifies contrasting possibilities: is it “a sanitized nature based on Rousseau’s model,” “a much more dangerous nature that nullifies the symbolic order on which patriarchy rests,” or “a barely veiled continuation of patriarchal relations” (63)? Josephe and Jeronimo choose to trust that the danger has subsided, and their interpretation appears to be confirmed initially, as the survivors all appear to be working together as a cooperative and understanding community in a new order of peace:

Und in der Tat schien, mitten in diesen gräßlichen Augenblicken, in welchen alle irdischen Güter der Menschen zu Grunde gingen, und die ganze Natur verschüttet zu werden drohte, der menschliche Geist selbst, wie eine schöne Blume, aufzugehen. Auf den Feldern, so weit das Auge reichte, sah man Menschen von allen Ständern, durcheinander liegen, Fürsten und Bettler, Matronen und Bäuerinnen, Staatsbeamte und Tagelöhner, Klosterherren und Klosterfrauen: einander bemitleiden, sich wechselseitig Hülfe reichen [...] als ob

das allgemeine Unglück alles, was ihm entronnen war, zu einer Familie gemacht hätte. (156)

Drawing on Lacan's distinction between the paternal and the maternal through patriarchy's dependence on signification, Gelus characterizes this "maternal interlude" as "reduced to the visible, the pre-symbolic," while the patriarchal power structure destroyed by the quake represents "a more abstract and invisible reality, the reality of paternity, whose authority the entire patriarchal system, including the signifying system, is set up to assert" (61). Furthermore, the patriarchal system of law—by which the Viceroy determined Josephe and Jeronimo's offense prior to the disaster—is replaced by the "authority of maternity" when Josephe's breastmilk is needed to feed Don Fernando's infant son. This event further disrupts a system of fixed meaning associated with the patriarchal order, as it renders Josephe's identity (or representations of her) unstable. As Gelus points out, perceptions of her shift "among fallen woman, madonna, [and] mother outside the patriarchal signifying chain," whereas the "signifying chain of patriarchy" would have permitted only one of three identifies for women: "virgin, madonna, [or] whore" (62–63).

Unfortunately, this instability must eventually submit to restored order when Josephe is killed; likewise, the peaceful interlude is violently brought back under patriarchal control. It is interesting to note that the confusion of identity that pervades the final church scene is ended definitively by Jeronimo's father when he betrays his son by revealing him as the "real" Jeronimo. Like the Colonel in *Die Marquise*, Jeronimo's

father is more concerned with reinstating the status quo than supporting his child, however misguided that child may appear to be. Furthermore, the confusion surrounding Philipp's paternity is superficially dispelled with Don Fernando's adoption of him at the conclusion of the story. This points thematically to what Gelus refers to as the system's intolerance to ambiguity (particularly paternal ambiguity), and, accordingly, this is one problem that Kleist constantly ironizes in his work: an overconfidence in logic and the consequent blind tendency to impose solutions where they don't fit for the sake of maintaining structure and order. This is the process that traps not only wives and daughters but also even sons under patriarchal value systems with which they cannot identify.

Thus, while the stories of *Die Marquise* and *Das Erbeben* develop in the midst of remarkably different sets of circumstances, we do see some thematic parallels and common motifs between the two. On the most obvious level, both plots revolve around events that seem incompatible with logic and thus trigger the consideration of divine intervention or some other force that acts outside the realm of reason. The characters directly involved are then left suspended between two rather unlikely interpretations of the "unerhörten Begebnisse" happening to them, which reinforces Kleist's preoccupation with the idea of uncertainty and unknowability. Moreover, both stories involve an overturning of order in both a literal and a figurative sense. On one level, power structures are physically destroyed, both in the case of the citadel in *Die Marquise* and the greater part of the city of Santiago, along with its institutions, in *Das Erdbeben*. The

physical lack of order that characterizes several of the novellas' scenes further supports this theme. Yet, it is the intense mental chaos portrayed that drives the sense of urgency in the narrative, and with this, we see a more figurative display of the subversion of order. The mere existence of speculation that an incredible event has occurred in a way that offers no logical explanation serves as a challenge for the reader to step outside his or her intellectual paradigm and consider such a possibility.

However, while Kleist challenges the reader to entertain such thoughts, he simultaneously seems to aspire to undermine the reader's ability to do so through the complex narrative strategies that he employs. This brings us back to the readerly-writerly debate and the question of manipulation posed at the end of the previous chapter: if indeed Kleist's works aspire to disrupt and subvert a system of thought that represents domination and force, then why does he so blatantly taunt and manipulate the reader? I would argue that this is a rhetorical strategy aimed at increasing the reader's awareness of and sensitivity to the ways in which a) social structures and values compel us to comply with and participate in an oppressive system and b) our complicity, while perhaps partially a matter of human nature, nonetheless reinforces the structures that, at the same time, also have the potential to oppress us. An examination of the problematization of justice in Kleist's works can, for instance, add support to this idea.

Issues of legality and justice are prevalent themes in nearly all of Kleist's work, including *Die Marquise* and *Das Erdbeben*. Both the Marquise and Josephe are subject to either undue or excessive judgment and punishment due to their socially unacceptable

pregnancies. For instance, because of the murky circumstances surrounding the Marquise's actions in the narrative, the reader is, at times, left to form his own conclusions about what has "really" happened and whether her perspective should be trusted. By creating ambiguity but leaving behind traces of evidence that could *potentially* discredit her, Kleist is anticipating and playing on the reader's urge to make a judgment via deductive reasoning that is based on stereotype and prejudice. The same phenomenon in *Das Erdbeben* allows the reader to "overread" and thereby come to suspect further sexual relations in Josephe's life and other possibilities for Philipp's paternity. Thus, these women are subject to (potentially) unfair judgment not only by the societies in their storyworlds but also by the reader—even if only momentarily. While the process of interpretation necessarily involves the task of making judgments, the tendency to do so points to the difficulty for the reader to remain suspended in uncertainty because it is too unstable. Like the mob at the end of *Das Erdbeben*, the reader eventually desires a quick return to order. The result is an exertion of power over the text by making an assumption (e.g., about a character's actions) that allows for the dissolution of tension and the desired closure.

The issue of a text's domination by the reader is also addressed in feminist theory. The Davis/Womack volume includes in its section on the intersections between reader-response theory and feminist critical theory a compelling summary of a series of studies conducted by Elizabeth A. Flynn, who sought to obtain data with which she could determine how to establish a "feminist model of reading." Her findings indicated that

“male students frequently seemed to dominate (and, in some cases, remain detached from) the text and pass judgment on its characters.” She found that the female students, on the other hand, “achieve very different sorts of balances between detachment and involvement in the text. They typically reserve passing judgment, sympathize with the text’s characters, and seem willing to submit to the text, rather than attempt to dominate it” (76). While these characterizations are, again, quite generalized and may or may not ultimately depend on the reader’s gender (gender studies proponents would point out that gender and sexual preference exist not in a binary fashion but on a continuous spectrum), it may be useful to connect the manner of reading coded here as “male” to the issue of judgment in Kleist’s works. That is, power relations within the Kleistian reading experience can serve as a microcosm for the situations and social forces we face in our lives: the world is—despite comfort and security offered by science and reason—largely unknowable and often *does* seem to taunt us with what we can’t know; however, as we should realize when encountering Kleist’s texts, we must be wary of falling into the habit of assuming that we can always know or that a readily available answer exists, as such assumptions can lead us to reach false conclusions and make inaccurate judgments.

Whether or not we can justify labeling it “male” or “masculine,” a dominating manner of reading the *world* is indeed the kind of “reading” that continually reinforces imbalanced social structures, misrepresentation, and injustice. It appears that it was Kleist’s aim to make this connection conspicuous and cause the reader to ponder not only the ultimate

futility of seeking objective knowledge but also the implications of a social order in which such thought patterns are fostered and maintained.

CONCLUSION

As both the narratology/reader-response and feminist critical analyses indicate, Kleist's works *Die Marquise* and *Das Erdbeben* set out not only to make a statement about the inadequacy of Enlightenment principles but also to personally and directly engage the reader in the epistemological and aesthetic problems with which he struggled so intensely. With Kleist's philosophical anguish in mind, Gelus characterizes his works as a "battlefield for his own idiosyncratic collision of values, enacting the split within himself between the steadfast upholder of patriarchal values and the androgynously subversive dismantler of stable meaning" (60). Indeed, it is his unique treatment of the very idea of "splitting," or fragmentation, in and through his works that makes them so challenging for readers and, yet, so powerful that they remain "[s]eit gut hundert Jahren, seit Beginn der Moderne [...] aus dem literarischen Leben nicht mehr wegzudenken."²¹ Just as Kleist was confronted with the concept that the perceiving subject can never know the true essence an object—or the *Ding-an-sich*—and therefore must come to terms with a fissure between the two, so must the Kleistian reader also face a division between himself and the story's reality. This split also has implications in the realm of power relations, since the inability to "know" and name something (or pin down its meaning) prevents a process of objectification in which the subject comes to dominate the object. To extend this to the literary realm, the Kleistian reader is ultimately prohibited from dominating the text in the manner that Barthes describes—that is, the reader cannot simply

²¹ Walter Müller Seidel, ed., "Nachwort," *Heinrich von Kleist: Sämtliche Erzählungen und andere Prosa* (Stuttgart: Reclam, 1984) 355.

“consume” it like an object but must grapple with its infinite resistance to closure. By forcing the reader to overread and underread in order to pursue a nonexistent point of closure, Kleist is able to reveal to the reader his drive to seek knowledge and the sense of dominance that accompanies it; yet, despite the reader’s attempts to arrive at conclusive meaning, the text does not allow itself to be dominated in the end. As with Kleist’s metaphor of the “grüne Gläser”²²—through which he explains that humans will never be able to know whether they are observing objects for what they truly are or whether their “eyes” are adding some quality to these objects which makes them appear so—the reader faces a troubling dilemma: is he “seeing” the story as it is, or is his inner eye altering it to fit a certain pattern of expectations? These questions lead once again to Kleist’s constructivist perception of reality and the consequent problem of representation expounded on in the introduction. Hinrich Seeba²³ recognizes the importance of the image of the eye in Kleist’s texts and views his project as a test of the eye

as to whether it can show “die Dinge wie sie sind” or whether the eye, being no longer mimetic but a creative sensory medium, adds (“hinzutut”) something to what in the Enlightenment—and in historicism, for that matter—the mind was expected to point out, to represent, and to reproduce without any subjective [...] interference. While in most of pre-Kantian epistemology it was only beauty, not truth, that was seen in the eye of the beholder, Kleist [...] made the eye—both the act of seeing and the point of view—the critical issue of the search for truth. (113)

²² See epistolary excerpt on page 10.

²³ Hinrich Seeba, “Kleist’s Visual Poetics of Knowledge,” *A Companion to the Works of Heinrich von Kleist*, ed. Bernd Fischer (Rochester, NY: Camden House, 2003) 103–22.

This reference to the eye not only as a symbol for seeing/knowing but also for emphasizing the subjective point of view brings up a further realm in which Kleist's texts have proven to present and problematize a kind of "split" with respect to the pursuit of knowledge. First of all, his implementation of discrepant focalizers as a narrative strategy poses a complicated intermingling of character perspectives that enables the reader to witness the fragmentation of truth due to differing perspectives. Additionally, because of the labyrinthian interpretive process that the reader must undergo, he finds within *himself* varying hermeneutic realities that may ultimately cause him to question his own character. For instance, coming to understand the famous "dash" in *Die Marquise* as a rape scene, according to Michel Chaouli,²⁴ is one such instance where the reader is forced to recognize his own dynamic imaginative potential: "In meeting a part of ourselves in the text, something rather more disquieting occurs, for we have, without meaning to, opened the possibility of observing our own work of fantasy production" (75). He remarks, furthermore, that this kind of active reading is not narcissistic because we cannot merely allow it to "mirror what we already know," but through our work, it "opens a path to the reader's encountering something far more disturbing than a difference to and within the text: namely a difference within him- or herself" (75). Hence, by destabilizing meaning in his texts and making the reader aware of the impossibility of establishing a stable interpretive stance, Kleist has forced the reader to realize in himself the possibility for a split or unstable identity as well.

²⁴ Michel Chaouli, "Irresistible Rape: The Lure of Closure in 'The Marquise of O...,'" *Yale Journal of Criticism* 17.1 (2004): 51-81.

Insofar as *Die Marquise* and *Das Erdbeben* cause the reader to experience this instability firsthand, they embody, to a large extent, the characteristics that Helfer uses to describe Kant's definition of *Negative Darstellung* of the sublime, which he considered the most adequate form of "pure representation"²⁵—a manner of presentation that transcends mere objective representation. Namely, these texts bring the reader to an understanding of the problem of epistemological crisis without producing it objectively and directly but, rather, by performing and enacting the corresponding tensions so that they resonate in the reader. These tensions include those outlined in the previous paragraph: the futility of seeking objective knowledge, or stable meaning; inherent contradiction between subjective points of view with regard to accounts of event; and the dynamic nature of the individual's interpretive stance due to unconscious subjective input. Even if stable meaning or objective knowledge were to exist—which we can never know—, then all of these factors would contribute to a distortion of that knowledge. The only thing that Kleist (or anyone, for that matter) is able to ascertain for certain is that we *cannot* ever really know anything—and this he is able to communicate *directly* to the reader, not (or not only) via a mere representation of the problem but by subjecting the reader to the problem itself.

Although—or perhaps precisely because—Kleist sought a literary form that might more adequately and truly address the realities of the turbulently shifting worldviews and social power structures of his time, his work appears to have gone largely unappreciated until after his death; the disappointment Kleist experienced due to the failure of many of

²⁵ See citation from Helfer's work on page 7.

his dramas—which he considered the “higher” form or genre of literature—was reportedly one of the driving forces behind the depression that eventually led to his suicide in late November of 1811.²⁶ He is now, however, widely recognized as an influential protomodernist in that his work is said to have affected the development of key German modernist writers such as Franz Kafka and Thomas Mann. His influence on Kafka is particularly notable and is also the subject of much scholarly work. Furthermore, as noted previously, Kleist’s grip on the international literary audience has not diminished since his death.²⁷ Thus, although Kleist himself was, like a character out of one of his novellas, perhaps only one of many voices of the Romantic era vying for his own approach to achieving legitimacy and truth—he was nonetheless able to make a significant and lasting impact on modern literary aesthetics. And while the tracing of his reception and influence is an interesting topic for another day’s discussion, it is worthwhile to note the irony of this situation in light of the anxiety he expressed to his fiancée Wilhelmine when facing the realization that knowledge acquired “subjectively” must also cease to exist when the subject does: “Wir können nicht entscheiden ob das, was wir Wahrheit nennen, wahrhaft Wahrheit ist, oder ob es uns nur so scheint. Ist das letzte, so *ist* die Wahrheit, die wir hier sammeln, nach dem Tode nicht mehr—und alles Bestreben ein Eigentum sich zu erwerben, das uns auch in das Grab folgt, ist vergeblich

²⁶ In the afterword to *Sämtliche Erzählungen und Anekdoten*, Schläffer relates a remark made by Clemens Brentano in a letter to Achim von Arnim a few weeks after Kleist’s death: “Überhaupt werden seine Arbeiten oft über die Maßen geehrt, seine Erzählungen verschlungen. Aber das war ihm nicht genug; ja, Pful sagt mir, daß sich vom Drama zur Erzählung herablassen zu müssen ihn grenzenlos gedemütigt hat” (305).

²⁷ See pages 2, 29.

[...]” (*Sämtliche Werke und Briefe* 634). The “truths” or insights that Kleist was able to “collect” during his lifetime, despite how bound to his own perspective they may have been, did not follow him into the grave but live on through the revivification process that the reader-text relationship enables. The inevitability of fragmented knowledge or meaning thus also has a brighter side that should not be dismissed: it survives in part to help readers come to new realizations and truths.

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