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LOSS OF MEMORY,
ESTRANGEMENT FROM THE BODY:
HEINRICH VON KLEIST'S
"DIE MARQUISE VON O..."
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Even the most enthusiastically optimistic readers of Kleist's shocking story have admitted a certain lasting feeling of discomfort and disconcertment at the end of this tale of accidental rape, mysterious pregnancy, parental opprobrium and eventual forgiveness with its "happily-ever-after" ending (Schmidhäuser, McGlathery). Indeed, the narrative raises many questions which never seem to be answered: How has the Marquise not known of something so important as the physical penetration of her own body, and how can she, who has given birth twice already, misread the signs of pregnancy? Is it actually obvious from the beginning who has "gone behind the Marquise's back", as she puts it, or is the Count's culpability only clear with the 20/20 vision of hindsight? Should the Marquise really have forgiven the Count so easily, and has his penance been enough? Does a penance for this act-- rape which ends in marriage-- even exist, or is it necessary? If so, what is it; if not, what should the Marquise have done instead of marrying him? What is the relationship of the incestuous kiss the forgiving father gives the Marquise when he becomes convinced of her innocence to the rape which occurred earlier, and what is the meaning of the Marquise's passivity in both cases? Why does her mother look on this kiss with glee?

SELF AND DESIRE: OR THE LOSS OF MEMORY

There has been an obvious invasion of the Marquise's physical space, a penetration and taking of her body which is explicitly compared several times in the text to the penetration and taking by force of the castle of the Commandant, the Marquise's father. Yet I would like to investigate the invasion of the Marquise's mental space. Her reaction upon seeing the Count for the first time is to vacate the area, at least mentally: she faints, thus enabling him to violate her body. She loses

"*Bewußtsein*"--consciousness, and as one critic has pointed out, in a strange play on words, Kleist has her perhaps also lose her "*Gewissen*"--conscience (Cohn 131). In any case, the Marquise claims a lack of knowledge and of cognitive capability (both words, *Gewissen* and *Bewußtsein*, contain the root "wissen", to know): she may be physically present, but she mentally and morally absent in the presence of the godlike Count. Later, she apparently forgets about the incident, and so fails to tie it in with the growing evidence of her pregnancy. When she does realise she is pregnant, she experiences yet another cognitive loss, to continue the series; that of her "*Selbstbewußtsein*" or self-confidence (self-consciousness?): she becomes insecure in her knowledge of her self, of her body and the biological workings she should be familiar with, of her social roles as daughter and mother, and of her social status as virtuous or fallen woman.

In Kleist's stories, confrontation with an existential aporia leads to a falling unconscious and a loss of memory. Yet what is the aporia the Marquise faces? What can be so terrible that she must lose all mental and bodily control, and repress whatever knowledge she should or could have afterwards? Because of the retrospective obviousness of what has happened to the Marquise during her faint, some critics have determined that she wants the Count so badly, but for some reason cannot admit it; therefore she faints in order to circumvent the decision of whether to say yes or no.¹ To me, it seems much more likely that, subconsciously, she knows what is about to happen to her: the parallel of the enemy taking the fort and the daughter being an obvious truth in the patriarchal order, where women are exchanged as goods in times of peace or taken by force in times of war. The Marquise knows that, in her father's castle in a time of war, she is not a Self to make decisions, or to have her own desires: rather she is an object to be taken possession of. By abdicating all cognitive and all physical ability, by removing all volition, the Marquise allows herself to become an unconscious object. During her faint, she becomes estranged from her Self, she becomes something other than her Self, she becomes *something* not unlike the swan Thinka which the Count in his youth used to

sully with mud. The swan remained essentially untouched, for it could dive into the water and cleanse itself with little effort; the Marquise, however, becomes implicated in the violation of her body as soon as she regains consciousness. As soon as she becomes aware of her condition, the knowledge is interpreted as desire, a desire she must deny if she is to remain true to whatever Self she can be said to have.

The alienation from her own body and what has happened to that body thus leads the Marquise to silence: but just what happens in that silence? Kleist tells us very little about what is "really" going on inside the Marquise--not perhaps because it is unimportant, but because there are no words for it; the Marquise herself is at a loss to explain to her family what is happening, the strange growings and changings inside her body which feel like something it is impossible to believe they "really" are. When she finally does think of words to describe herself and her condition, the words sound self-aggrandising and exaggerated: in the end, she compares herself to the Virgin Mary, claiming the same sort of immaculate conception. Yet this is not just some sort of hysterical silliness on the part of the Marquise, but rather her only choice of words: the binary oppositions of the patriarchal order can describe only Madonna and whore, Maria or Eve, a woman included approvingly in the social order or one excluded with opprobrium from it. Unwilling to align herself with the Other, the excluded, the Marquise can but choose to assume she is among the most holy. Kristeva says:

"A woman will have only the choice to live her life either *hyper-abstractly* [...] in order thus to earn divine grace and homologation with the symbolic order; or merely *different*, other, fallen [...]. But she will not be able to accede to the complexity of being divided, of heterogeneity, of the catastrophic-fold-of 'being'" ("Stabat Mater" 173).

The Marquise's denial of desire has two sources or causes. Firstly, as I have said, as the victim of rape, she can hardly be said to have desired anything. Yet there is another matter to be considered here. One line of criticism has found the Marquise to be at fault at the beginning of Kleist's story because she is living at home with her

parents, although she is herself grown up and even already a mother (Dyer 71-2). This young widow, it is said, needs a new husband in order to be fulfilled; this need or desire then is what leads her to being at the right (wrong?) place at the right/wrong time for the Count to do what comes naturally to him. In Freudian terms, the woman desires the man because she desires to have his child, which, for her, means having the phallus. Indeed, at the end of the story, the Marquise is said to bring her new husband "a long series of little male Russians": they are, then, just so many little phalluses for her to raise and play with.

Yet, as Kristeva points out, to see woman's desire simply in terms of a passive desire for intercourse only in order to have boy children leaves quite a lot out of the story, namely the entire aspect of maternity, unknown perhaps to Freud because impossible for him, as a man, to experience, and therefore outside of language, unspeakable. As Kristeva says, "Freud offers only a massive *nothing*" when it comes to real explanations of childbirth which have nothing to do with "male phantasms" ("Stabat Mater" 178-9).

ESTRANGEMENT FROM THE BODY

Indeed, the real estrangement the Marquise undergoes has less to do with the Count's penetration of her body and more to do with what then happens inside her body. At one point in the story, the Count claims that he is convinced of her innocence because he is omniscient when it comes to matters concerning herself; he says he is so convinced "as if my soul resided in your breast" (Kleist 129). Now, this is a rather coarse and inept attempt to co-opt the Marquise in soul just as he already has done in body, to re-write the act she has forgotten about as a love story in order to exculpate himself. Not unlike the angel Gabriel with the Virgin Mary, he seeks to impregnate the Marquise through his words, his meaning, the Logos of the patriarchy. The Count is motivated in part here by an ideal of honour: he feels regret for what he has done and is seeking to make amends by persuading the

Marquise to marry him and so save her honour and his own. Yet this explanation goes nowhere to explain just why the act the Count has committed seems such a "natural" one and why his society has just this ideal of honour which is in need of saving. What are the effectively real meanings of rape and of paternity? The Count is afraid that what he has deposited in the Marquise's body now has very little to do with him anymore, and he wants to repossess. He risks career and gives up considerable material wealth in order literally to buy back the thing he has given the Marquise, and which, at this point of the story, she shows no signs of giving up to him.

This episode occurs when the Marquise, disowned by a very angry and indignant father, has retreated to her own manor-house to raise there her two daughters by her previous marriage plus the new one, which somehow at this point of the story seems to promise to be a *female* child. Rejected by and rejecting the patriarchal order, the Marquise creates a feminine idyll in isolation; here her maternal process has nothing to do with the desire to bear the child of the father, to gain the symbolic phallus and the modicum of feminine power that comes along with it. Kristeva says:

And yet through and with this desire [for the phallus], motherhood seems to be impelled also by a nonsymbolic, nonpaternal causality. [...] Material compulsion, spasm of a memory belonging to the species that either binds together or splits apart to perpetuate itself, series of markers with no other significance than the eternal return of the life-death biological cycle. How can we verbalise this prelinguistic, unrepresentable memory? ("Motherhood" 239).

This desire on the part of the Marquise is totally alien to the Count, and to most of the critics of the story.² It is the feminine jouissance of maternity, a jouissance which is invisible because unspeakable. It is not that the Marquise can "pull herself up by the bootstraps" and find her putative "real self" in isolation, as was long argued in the reception of the story (Müller-Seidel) and later criticised by readers who understood that there is no self outside of society that can be independently pulled up (Horn, 83). For she is not really alone even during this "bootstraps" phase: she always already has with her an Other, the child within her. This is the "catastrophic-fold-of 'being'"; or that which is herself and not herself, the growth of another

being in her womb. Indeed, it is the realisation that she is not impregnable. She is not so much fleeing her role as wife as giving herself up completely to her biological role as mother.

"By giving birth, the woman enters contact with her mother", Kristeva says ("Bellini" 239) and indeed the Marquise's own mother eventually spurns the dictation of her husband to follow her daughter into this feminine idyll. Away from the patriarchy, the Marquise enters, however briefly, the "homosexual maternal facet" of feminine desire, and leaves completely the "symbolic paternal facet" ("Bellini" 239). Here she experiences what it is to be "enceinte", the pun which Kristeva plays out, both pregnant, and excluded and alone (at least in terms of the patriarchal order): a condition "separating her from the world of everyone else. Enclosed in this 'elsewhere,' an 'enceinte' woman loses communital meaning, which suddenly appears to her as worthless, absurd, or at best, comic--a surface agitation severed from its impossible foundations. Oriental nothingness probably better sums up what, in the eyes of a Westerner, can only be regression. And yet it is jouissance, but like a negative of the one, tied to an object, that is borne by the unfailingly masculine libido" ("Bellini" 240).

Yet such exclusive dedication to female jouissance, as Kristeva admits, leads only to psychosis; for it is by definition excluded from the social order. In the end, the Marquise places the ad in the paper in order to find a father for her child, for she realises that a father it must have, and no divine one, but a real, corporeal one. The child is a third term which brings back together man and woman: Kristeva says: "through it and not you". The woman admits a connection with the man, but only as mediated through the child (Dietrick 97).

The Marquise's mother mediates a reconciliation between her daughter and her husband, a reconciliation that the Marquise is all too willing to participate in, for she is not really one to want to go the lonely route to which she has been forced by circumstance. The Marquise submits quite docilely to her father's "hot, passionate kisses of a lover", and so she lets herself passively become again the property of the

father, despite the earlier marriage and despite the violation of her chastity which has since intervened and made her so strangely pregnant. Now all is ready for the Marquise to be given a second time in marriage: the only glitch remaining is that the Count, the man she thought had saved her from shame, is in fact the one to have brought it about. The Marquise must accept this comparatively minor aporia--that angel equals devil--and eventually she must forgive the Count and forget the deed.

Yet the exaggerated element of "Die Marquise von O..." has not yet been explained: just why has Kleist chosen such an 'unheard of experience'³ for his story? What truth or truths are supposed to reside there? One truth is: marriage in the patriarchy, where women are not allowed jouissance, is by definition rape, and so the Marquise and the Count have only played out this reality in a more graphic manner than is usually the case.

But why the play on the madonna-like purity of the Marquise? Why is it so important in this scenario that the Marquise was unconscious, that she didn't enjoy the act of sex and that she gives up the enjoyment of motherhood to reenter the symbolic order? That the Count, her new husband, believes her innocence in the deed which he did to her while she was passive; that she can, with some justification, claim to be like the Virgin Mary and like no other woman? Why is the Marquise portrayed in such virginal naïveté, such loving passivity? Kristeva asks:

"What is there in the portrayal, of the Maternal in general and particularly in its Christian, virginal, one, that reduces social anguish and gratifies a male being; what is there that also satisfies a woman so that a commonality of the sexes is set up, beyond and in spite of their glaring incompatibility and permanent warfare? ("Stabat Mater" 163).

Marina Warner explains the lengths the churchmen have gone to throughout the ages in order to explain that the Annunciation involved no pleasure on the part of the Virgin Mary, for pleasure would involve death, impurity and ungodliness (Warner 34-49). Mary, like the Marquise, also renounces maternity by giving up

her child to the patriarchy with his meanings as a god. Kristeva adds that the maternal Virgin Mary has long provided Western Civilisation, in the absence of a mother goddess, with an authority that is not so unforgiving as the paternal one; one that loves undividedly because the love is based on something that comes before language and rationality, because it is based in biology. In the body of the Virgin Mary is where Nature confronts Culture.

In order to identify with this woman "alone of all her sex", the Marquise has had to ignore or forget the completely feminine jouissance she experienced alone with mother and daughters in the idyll, as well as the two masculine acts visited upon her, the rape and the incestuous kiss, which make her an obvious item of exchange between father and husband-to be. It all boils down to her renouncing the rights to any jouissance at all, either in act of sex or in maternal isolation where she was willing to bear and raise children without the meaning-giving provided by the patriarchal order outside. She becomes a seemingly desireless object, but consoles herself by pretending that she is above desire.

The loss of memory, the estrangement from her own body: these are not things which the Marquise overcomes in the course of the narration, but rather things she comes to terms with, perhaps only by ignoring their existence. She has forgiven the Count and forgotten his deed which victimised her; but she has also had to forget the jouissance of motherhood, which made her something quite other than victim.

In the end, things are much the same as at the beginning: no longer subject to a demanding father, she is subject to a rapist (if contrite) husband. But by depicting unspeakable things, Kleist has been in fact quite revolutionary. The normalcy of rape is described in a way that is hard to ignore as merely harmless fun. The incest scene shows graphically the exchange of women between men. The story is in fact one that tells of the founding of culture in the repression in the female child not just of Freudian father-love but of Kristevian mother-love as well. In the Marquise, the loss of self and the repression of the memory eventually lead to her exchange to

another man and to the reproduction both of the biological species and of the social order. Kleist doesn't change anything about these facts: his story leads necessarily neither to a condemnation of the events as they happen nor to approval of them: rather it makes more or less conscious in the reader the structure that underlies the events.

¹ The psychoanalytic critics from the end of the 1970's argued this point, for example, Dorrit Cohn, Erika Swales and Heinz Politzer, and following them, more recent critics such as Schmidhäuser.

² The psychoanalytic critic of the story unsurprisingly saw only the desire for the man/phallus and therefore for his child, but even a feminist like Mary Jacobus finds the Marquise desireless, whereas Kristeva finds the mother desiring but unable to express this desire.

³ Goethe's famous recipe for the novella genre runs: "eine sich ereignete unerhörte Begebenheit" ["an unheard-of occurrence which has taken place"] (225).

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