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## Greed and Economic Self-Interest in Kleist's "Verlobung in St. Domingo"

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**A**fter nearly two hundred years of almost complete neglect, Kleist's novella "Die Verlobung in St. Domingo," first published under the title "Die Verlobung" in the journal *Der Freimüthige* in 1811, has recently enjoyed considerable critical attention. In his study, Denys Dyer singles out the "symbolic proportions" of the "conflict between black and white" (39). Petra Perry illuminates the "Grausamkeit und Unaussöhnbarkeit des Rassenkonflikts . . ." (23). Studies by Hans Jakob Werlen and Ray Fleming both focus on the question of the racial and social patterns predominant in Haiti and Europe in 1803. However, there are also inquiries that investigate the interplay of the two predominant themes of love and race in Kleist's tale. Sigrid Weigel examines the "Zusammenhang zwischen Liebesgeschichte und Rassenkämpfen . . ." (206). In a similar manner, Herbert Uerlings underscores the importance of Kleist's "Verarbeitung einer interkulturellen Begegnung" (186). Uerlings concludes that the "Zentralthema ist die Verlobung mit ihren tödlichen Folgen" (193), and, as Weigel notes, the German word for race, "Rasse," does not appear in "Die Verlobung in St. Domingo" (208). Wolfgang Mieder concludes that "das Thema der Novelle gilt nicht dem alles aufwühlenden Rassenkonflikt" (397). Hence, as intriguing as the issue of race may be, it also seems justifiable to illuminate the intricate central betrothal scene. As the title suggests, at the core of Kleist's work lies the question of why Toni Bertrand and Gustav von der Ried even become betrothed at all, and under what circumstances their fragile union fails. Thus, the motivations of Gustav and Toni during this crucial section of Kleist's story will be at the center of our examination.

Scholarship has often viewed Gustav as an egocentric person who undergoes no personal development and is concerned only with his immediate safety. As Mieder notes, his betrothal to Toni is often seen as a "Rückversicherung" (399), a guarantee of his safe passage to Port-au-Prince. Though this notion is certainly valid, Gustav's actions are informed by a constant attention to his economic interest. On numerous occasions, Gustav's material considerations and outright greed penetrate the narrative surface of the novella and then quickly vanish only to resurface again later. Gearey's study does not specifically mention economic concerns. However, he states that the reader of Kleist's "Die Verlobung in St. Domingo" will "sense a disparity of thought and action" (70) and that readers will encounter "conflicting and contrasting action" (71). I will attempt to clarify this muddled picture by demonstrating the extent to which economic considerations factor into the decisions and thoughts of the characters.

We would be well advised at this juncture to recall the financial dire straits that the author Kleist was in his whole adult life. His entire correspondence is ruled by an urgent plea for funds—either for trips, daily living expenses, property in Switzerland, or the ill-fated *Phöbus* project in Dresden. Kleist's half-sister Ulrike, to whom he frequently addressed these frantic pleas, personally suffered considerable financial hardship as a result of her soft heart and altruistic purse. Indeed, the picture of Kleist travelling across Europe and harried by economic uncertainty, his plans constantly thwarted by advancing Napoleonic troops, recalls images of Gustav and his entourage fleeing from the vengeful rebels. Also, as Bernd Fischer points out, Kleist's close friend during his stay in Switzerland, Heinrich Zschokke, devoted ten essays to the revolution on Haiti. Zschokke underscored "die ökonomische Bedeutung der reichen Plantagen Haitis für Frankreich" and wrote of the "für Frankreich nicht wieder gut zu machende ökonomische Schaden" (101). It is very likely that Kleist's attention was directed toward the economic situation in Haiti by his friend, who, as Fischer states, "sich wie kaum ein anderer europäischer Politiker und Journalist mit den Vorgängen auf Haiti intensiv auseinandergesetzt hat" (101). The circumstance that the material aspect can be traced in every level of the narrative of "Die Verlobung in St. Domingo" certainly justifies further exploration of this motif.

In the year 1803, Haiti, the setting of Kleist's novella, is the scene of unrest and revolt. The economic structure of France's richest colony

is shaken to the core. Wealthy white plantation owners are either murdered or escape with a murderous mob at their heels. In the wake of this slave revolt, a new political and economic system will arise. Kleist pays particular attention to the economic detail of the new order that emerges on this devastated island. The notion that the liberated slaves are merely securing their personal freedom and taking revenge on their former white masters simply does not stand up under close scrutiny. The actions of his characters are often consistent with the efforts of the black and racially-mixed contingent on the island to seek an economic advantage. For Congo Hoango, former slave and current leader of the revolt, it does not suffice to murder his master, Guillaume Villeneuve. Kleist informs us that the freed slave contributes to the removal of the economic basis of slavery as well by destroying "die ganze Pflanzung, worauf die Erben, die in Port au Prince wohnten, hätten Anspruch machen können . . ." (699).<sup>1</sup> Although Congo Hoango destroys the plantation, he inhabits the "Herrenhaus" a page later, a discrepancy often noted by critics. The destruction of the plantation signals the complete obliteration of the old ways. Out of the rubble, however, there arises not a "new order" but simply a reversed "old order." Significantly, after ousting his white master, Congo Hoango implements a similarly oppressive hierarchy by residing in the "Hauptgebäude" (700), while his own children Seppy and Nanky remain in the "Nebengebäuden" (701) with the other former slaves. Only Babekan and Toni are allowed to inhabit the "Herrenhaus" with Congo Hoango. They both play a vital role in luring the unsuspecting white refugees into a false security, so that Congo Hoango can butcher and rob them. Lilian Hoverland elaborates on this phenomenon as follows: "Die Rebellion galt vor allem dem Gegensatz zwischen Herren und Untergebenen, sie galt der ungleichen Machtverteilung. Bezeichnenderweise ergibt sich nach der Vertreibung der Weißen aber dieselbe Situation wie früher" (155).

Enter against this turbulent backdrop Gustav von der Ried, an officer in the French army sent to restore slavery on the island. As Roswitha Burwick notes, he is the "uncommitted soldier, fighting in the army of a people that had not only executed his fiancée but also suppressed his native country" (325). All outward appearances indicate that Gustav has adjusted quite well to necessity. Like a chameleon, he adopts the color that best suits his momentary and monetary purposes as well. Upon entering the robber's den, Gustav informs

Toni and Babekan that the two servants in his group were sent out the previous night to secure provisions. However, their dangerous mission failed because "Furcht, ergriffen und getötet zu werden, hielt sie ab, die entscheidenden Schritte deshalb zu tun . . ." (703). As Kleist's story unfolds, it becomes apparent that the Swiss refugees entrusted this delicate mission to the right person when they chose Gustav. In the end, however, Kleist's irony emerges, as the refugees are ultimately saved by Toni's "Gefühl" and not Gustav's "Verstand."

Like most white inhabitants of the island, Gustav and his party were only able to save themselves with "einigen Habseligkeiten" (706) during their escape from the rebels. In his fear, Gustav appeals to Toni and Babekan on an emotional level as "mitleidigen Menschen" (703) who do not share the "unerhörte Erbitterung, welche alle Einwohner dieser Insel ergriffen hat . . ." (705). On a cognitive level, however, he is well aware that economic considerations might outweigh altruism in assuring Babekan and Toni's aid. The idea of monetary compensation is present in Gustav's mind when he states: "Habt die Gefälligkeit, mir für reichlichen Lohn einige Körbe mit Lebensmitteln und Erfrischungen anzufüllen . . ." (703). It becomes apparent that he counts on their greed rather than on their human compassion to help him out. Gustav promises them "jede Belohnung, die ihr nur verlangen mögt," if they agree to harbor his party and grant them a day or two of rest in their house (704). In the same vein, Gustav speaks of a financially rewarding undertaking, of "das Geschäft, sie in die Niederlassung einzuführen . . ." (704). Note the equivocation in Gustav's approach to securing aid. On the surface, he appeals to the "good Samaritan" in Toni and Babekan. Deep down, however, Gustav remembers the razing, torching and looting of Fort Dauphin at the hands of the rebels. His true appraisal of Toni's and Babekan's sentiments is evident in the financial undertone to his altruistic plea.

Traditionally, Babekan and Congo Hoango are viewed as ideologically pure. They are portrayed as revolutionaries who have shelved personal desires in favor of a higher cause, as freedom fighters who selflessly advocate the annihilation of all whites on the island. Burwick sees Babekan as an idealistic revolutionary "who fights for her cause without any compromises" (325). Ray Fleming claims that she is "the most frighteningly consistent character in the story" because she is indeed "personally and politically committed to her cause . . ." (315).<sup>2</sup> Uerlings states: "Alle Teilnehmer der haitianischen Erhebung rächen

sich für in der Vergangenheit erlittenes Unrecht, an keiner Stelle tauchen eine davon abweichende Zielvorstellung oder ein anderes Motif auf" (193). These testimonies to Babekan's "pure" character do not account for her greed, however, and the lengths to which she will go to satisfy it. Babekan's remarks to Toni, in which she instructs her to sexually entice the "Fremder" so that he does not flee, are very telling: "Sie bemerkte, daß die Sache wichtig sei, indem die Familie wahrscheinlich beträchtliche Habseligkeiten mit sich führe; und forderte die Tochter auf, sie aus allen Kräften in dem Vorhaben, das sie ihr angegeben, zu unterstützen" (711). Her interest in the "beträchtliche Habseligkeiten" of the Swiss refugees would indicate that she does not view the slave revolt solely as an opportunity to ensure her freedom or take personal revenge (711). For Babekan, as for other revolutionaries on the island, political chaos presents an excellent opportunity to ensure their economic future.

Babekan's intermediate position as a mulatto between the white refugees and the blacks as represented by Congo Hoango is precarious at best. When Gustav first sees her countenance in the door his thoughts are "ganz von Mohren und Negern erfüllt" (705). Though Congo tolerates the "kreolische Halbhuende" Toni and Babekan in his house for their role in murdering and plundering whites (704), Babekan points out to Gustav that he begrudges them "das kleine Eigentum, das wir hinterlassen würden" (704). Critics have often called attention to the fact that Toni and Babekan's skin color places them squarely between the whites and the "pure" blacks. As Almute Wedekind underscores in an historic study, the mulattoes' intermediate position in Haiti had economic as well as racial reasons. Wedekind states that the mulattoes "were generally treated as second class citizens, much like the American Negro in the southern states until recently. Since they could not advance socially or professionally, they concentrated on the only activity open to them: the acquisition of property" (27).

Babekan notes that Congo Hoango is totally committed to the "business" at hand of ridding the island of the white race, that he "an dem Geschäft Teil nimmt, das ganze Geschlecht derselben von der Insel zu vertilgen . . ." (704). Here again, the economic side of the slave revolt surfaces. The term "Geschäft" in Kleist's short fiction is by no means limited to "Die Verlobung in St. Domingo." This word is also prominent in "Der Findling," "Michael Kohlhaas," "Die heilige

Cäcilie," "Die Marquise von O.," and "Das Erdbeben in Chile" (Lenders 168). As demonstrated by Kohlhaas' wife Lisbeth, characters in Kleist's works frequently risk life and limb to further the "Geschäft" of those close to them.

Perhaps nowhere in Kleist's fiction are the concepts of body and business linked more closely than in the central betrothal scene in "Die Verlobung in St. Domingo." As Mieder says, Gustav's engagement to Toni is typically viewed as a decision made by his "Verstand" (398). Toni, on the other hand, is guided by her "Gefühl." It is true that Gustav's thoughts revolve around his immediate personal safety. Following his assination with Toni "sah er so viel ein, daß er gerettet, und in dem Hause, in welchem er sich befand, für ihn nichts von dem Mädchen zu befürchten war" (710). To be sure, however, Toni also represents a singular opportunity for Gustav to immediately regain the financial losses that he and his group have suffered at the hands of the black looters. Just as Babekan's beau Bertrand denied his parentage of Toni to marry a "junge reiche Braut" (706), Gustav, at least in part, woos Toni for her financial assets. Toni's financial potential is crucial to Gustav's attraction, even before their betrothal is physically consummated. Robert E. Glenny remarks on Gustav's treatment of Toni as an object, not a human being, as follows: "Gustav's private world does not incorporate Toni as a person; he has a conception of Toni that is flat and lacks differentiation" (146). Toni is acquired by Gustav as "property" through the sexual act. Perhaps this is also a collaborating reason that Toni is forbidden on pain of death to have sexual intercourse with strangers. The sexual transaction assures Gustav the right to Toni's "dowry" in Europe, as well as eliminating Hoango's and Babekan's trust in her for any further financially lucrative murder schemes. Hence, Toni guarantees both Gustav's short-term physical safety and his long-term financial security.

It has often been noted that Gustav teasingly questions Toni about the qualifications of a potential future husband: "ob es vielleicht ein Weißer sein müsse, der ihre Gunst davon trage?" (709). It should come as no surprise, however, that his first question is concerned with the financial assets of her potential groom. Concerning the slighted black suitor, Kornelly, Gustav inquires tellingly: "Fehlt es ihm denn an Vermögen, um sich häuslich, wie du es wünschst, mit dir niederzulassen?" (708). This question is indeed revealing, for it assumes that Toni, like he himself, places more emphasis on the financial situation

of a future spouse than on feelings of affection. As Toni informs Gustav, Kornelly too has profited from the general economic upheaval on the island: "Kornelly ist, seit der letzten Wendung der Dinge, ein reicher Mann geworden; seinem Vater ist die ganze Niederlassung, die sonst dem Planzer, seinem Herren, gehörte, zugefallen" (708). Only after eliminating economic considerations as a reason for Toni's rejection of Kornelly does he inquire "scherzend" into the issue of race (709). When Gustav is told that Toni's father is "ein reicher Marseiller Kaufmann" (705), his interest, both on a physical and financial plane, is immediately aroused. He expresses what can only be an opportunistic desire to help her in claiming the position and inheritance that is rightfully hers. Gustav tells Toni . . .

indem er ihre Hand faßte: daß sie ja in diesem Falle ein vornehmes und reiches Mädchen wäre. Er munterte sie auf, diese Vorteile geltend zu machen, und meinte, daß sie Hoffnung hätte, noch einmal an der Hand ihres Vaters in glänzendere Verhältnisse, als in denen sie jetzt lebte, eingeführt zu werden! (706).

Gustav is not building castles in the air. As Hans Jakob Werlen notes, "his paternity guarantees legitimacy to the daughter's quest to return to Europe" (463). We can also imagine that Gustav von der Ried, a mercenary adept at adjusting to various political and social circumstances, would not be easily dissuaded from staking his legitimate financial claim once he has wedded Toni. Part of the reason why Toni is not wise to Gustav's economic reckonings is surely rooted in the fact that she reacts to Gustav on the basis of feeling. As Hans Holz correctly states, however, Gustav's tragic misreading of Toni and her actions is also due to "den durch die Unzulänglichkeit der Sprache bedingten Irrgang des Menschen" (104).

The parallels between Toni and Gustav's former fiancée, Mariane Congreve, which stem from both characters' willingness to sacrifice themselves for their beloved, have often been noted. However, one similarity has not been mentioned: both women are daughters of "Kaufmänner" (709). Gustav, in keeping with his financial interests, felt "glücklich genug" when he became engaged to Mariane (709). When wooing Toni, he immediately emphasizes the extent of his financial assets: "Er beschrieb ihr, welch ein kleines Eigentum, frei und unabhängig, er an den Ufern der Aar besitze . . ." (710). He obviously feels that such security as he is able to offer will be a deter-

mining factor in making up her mind.

Only Toni acts on truly altruistic or romantic sentiments. She expresses her disagreement with the plans that are in store for Gustav even while realizing that this dissent could cost her her life. She laments her compatriots' wish to "nach Art der Räuber, über ihn herfallen, ihn töten und ausplündern . . ." (712). Toni's labeling of Babekan and Congo Hoango as "Räuber" certainly excludes them from the category of "pure" revolutionaries. Toni, however, is truly free of greed. Her transformation from accomplice to caring bride is underscored when we are informed that she "sah den Jüngling, vor Gott und ihrem Herzen, nicht mehr als einen bloßen Gast, dem sie Schutz und Obdach gegeben, sondern als ihren Verlobten und Gemahl an" (715). No longer is she merely concerned with the physical welfare of Gustav; in her mind, he has already become her future husband. It can be speculated, however, that even before she encountered Gustav, Toni's actions were guided by her "Gefühl" rather than material concerns. Had Toni been motivated by greed, she would have surely married the newly-rich Kornelly. In contrast to Gustav, Babekan, and Congo Hoango, Toni's decisions are guided by her heart, not her head.

As stated earlier, Gustav's actions are ruled by his concern for safety as well as material gain. His belief that Toni has betrayed him is tragic but not illogical. These thoughts are consistent with his character and cool, opportunistic nature. By becoming a mercenary, Gustav has shown that his primary loyalty is not with his country, but is for sale to the highest bidder. His mistrust of Toni is rooted in the assumption that, if paid enough, she too would exchange loyalties and betray her husband. Gustav savagely murders Toni, with the narrator commenting that he "stieß sie mit dem Fuß von sich, und warf sich, indem er sie eine Hure nannte, wieder auf das Bette nieder" (723). Gustav, having sold himself as a mercenary to the French army, hypocritically denounces Toni as a whore.

After Gustav's murder of Toni and his suicide, the only course of action remaining to Herr Strömli is to return to Switzerland, purchase a house, and subsist on "dem Rest seines kleinen Vermögens . . ." (725). It is certainly not accidental that Herr Strömli uses Congo Hoango's son as a hostage, a sort of "Rückversicherung," in his retreat. Although the virtue of trust plays a considerable role here, the pledge of a hostage to ensure a safe flight should not be overlooked.

It is clear that economic considerations influence characters at every juncture and at every level of Kleist's novella. Furthermore, characters view and treat each other as possessions from the beginning to the end. This is no chance occurrence: as Dyer notes, "Die Verlobung' is very carefully and closely constructed" (33). As previously noted, Kleist's economic preoccupation in "Die Verlobung in St. Domingo" has its parallels in his own life. The end of the novella is no exception. By killing Toni, Gustav removes the financial basis of his existence. He then shoots himself in the head. The similarities between Toni's death and Gustav's subsequent suicide, on the one hand, and the death of Henriette Vogel and Kleist's suicide at the Wannsee, on the other, have often been noted, but few have noted the economic parallel. As Curt Hohoff indicates, Kleist is threatened by "völlige Mittellosigkeit" towards the end of his life (163). Like Kleist, Gustav is financially impoverished. Like Kleist, he is betrayed by his senses and cannot obtain the final truth here on earth. Like Kleist, he shoots a woman through the heart and himself through the head, thereby punishing the organ of "Vernunft" that has betrayed him. Once more, life imitates fiction as economic hardship and faulty reasoning cause tragedy in Kleist's personal fate and in his Dominican "Verlobung" as well.

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### Notes

<sup>1</sup> All references to Kleist's novella in this text are taken from Sembdner.

<sup>2</sup> Ray Fleming states that, "in the case of Babekan the personal has so completely become indistinguishable from the political" (317 n. 10). In view of the economic motivating factors underlying Babekan's actions, I find it more compelling to side with R. K. Angress, who states that Hermann in Kleist's *Die Hermannsschlacht* is "the only consistently political being in all of Kleist's works" (26).

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## Franz Kafkas *Der Prozeß*: Die Problematik des Schriftstellerseins als sozialer Konflikt

Chris Prang

**I**n der Auseinandersetzung mit Franz Kafkas Roman *Der Prozeß* hat sich die Germanistik bislang weitgehend auf die Behandlung vornehmlich einer Frage konzentriert, nämlich der Frage nach K.s Schuld. Eine Annäherung an den Roman von dieser Seite, je nach Standpunkt mit Verweis auf jüdische bzw. christliche Elemente oder Kafkas Biographie, wird scheinbar dadurch provoziert, daß innerhalb des Romangeschehens dem eigentlichen Grund, der zur Verhaftung K.s führt, nie wirklich nachgegangen wird. Stanley Corngold meint, daß Kafkas Schriftstellersein eng mit Schuld zusammenhängt (229).<sup>1</sup> Hieraus leite sich ein Rechtfertigungszwang gegenüber einer Umgebung ab, die anderes als Schreiben von Kafka erwartet.

Was eine solche Einschätzung von vornherein problematisch erscheinen läßt, ist die Tatsache, daß keine eigentliche Differenzierung zwischen objektiver Schuld und verinnerlichtem Schuldgefühl vorgenommen wird. Nur so kann Corngold mit Bezug auf den *Prozeß* folgern, "Kafka puts a guilty persona of himself on trial for having decided against marriage and for that bachelorhood in which he could apply himself to literature" (239).<sup>2</sup>

Im *Prozeß* geht Josef K. aus der Überzeugung der eigenen Unschuld heraus selbst der Schuldfrage gar nicht nach. Statt dessen beschäftigt er sich von Beginn an damit, hinter die Natur des Gerichts zu kommen und dessen Autoritätsanspruch zu klären. K. formuliert selbst: "die Hauptfrage ist, von wem ich angeklagt bin?" (15).<sup>3</sup>

Gerade da die Schuldfrage ungelöst bleibt, wurde sie von der Literaturwissenschaft als offenbar entscheidend aufgefaßt und in der Hoffnung, hier den Schlüssel zum Verständnis des Romans zu finden, ins Zentrum verschiedenster Interpretationsansätze gerückt. Dabei sind