

Utah Valley University

From the Selected Works of Scott Abbott

2011

**Review of Stefani Engelstein, *Anxious Anatomy:
The Conception of the Human Form in Literary
and Naturalistic Discourse***

Scott Abbott, *Utah Valley University*



SELECTEDWORKS™

Available at: http://works.bepress.com/scott_abbott/66/

Officers of the Goethe Society of North America

Astrida Tantillo, *University of Illinois at Chicago*, President
Clark Muenzer, *University of Pittsburgh*, Vice-President
Claire Baldwin, *Colgate University*, Secretary-Treasurer
Patricia Simpson, *Montana State University, Bozeman*, Executive Secretary
Burkhard Henke, *Davidson College*, Newsletter Editor/Webmaster

Directors-at-Large

Elisabeth Krimmer, *University of California, Davis*
Andrew Piper, *McGill University*

Members of the Editorial and Advisory Board

Barbara Becker-Cantarino, *Ohio State University*
Benjamin Bennett, *University of Virginia*
Jane K. Brown, *University of Washington*
Stefani Engelstein, *University of Missouri*
Willi Goetschel, *University of Toronto*
Dorothea von Mücke, *Columbia University*
Simon Richter, *University of Pennsylvania*
Thomas P. Saine, *University of California, Irvine*
Heidi Schlipphacke, *Old Dominion University*
David E. Wellbery, *University of Chicago*

Goethe Yearbook

Publications of the Goethe Society of North America

Edited by Daniel Purdy

With Catriona MacLeod,
Book Review Editor

Volume XVIII



CAMDEN HOUSE

mit Caroline von Beust bis zu Marianne von Wedel. Die Vermittlertätigkeit dieser Hofdamen im Hinblick auf das Mäzenatentum biete "vielerlei Ansätze, einer noch ausstehenden Definition des Weimarer Hofes als ideelles und soziales Gebilde näher zu kommen und dabei zu erklären, in welchem Maße auch die Angestellten des regierenden und des erbprinzlichen Hofes zur kulturellen Blüte in Weimar und Jena beitrugen" (21).

Trotz des offensichtlichen Bemühens ums Detail stechen einige erstaunliche Mängel im Redigieren des Textes ins Auge. Zum Beispiel zu Dorothea Schlegel findet sich der Satz: "Unter dieser Herausgeberschaft erschienen auch Dorothea Schlegelsdie Übersetzungen der . . ." (303) (meine Hervorhebung). In einem bibliographischen Hinweis auf *Women Writers in German-Speaking Countries* fehlt im Untertitel das "s" im Wort "Sourcebook" (249). Einzelheiten wie diese legen die Überprüfungsbedürftigkeit auch anderer Details nahe. Insgesamt aber bietet *FrauenGestalten Weimar/Jena* einen fantastischen Überblick für die erste Orientierung zur Kultur- und Frauenforschung der Goethezeit. Darüberhinaus empfiehlt sich dieser Band durch seine Zusammenstellung wichtiger Sekundärliteratur bis zum aktuellen Forschungsstand vom Frühjahr 2008 und seine Aufnahme der ungedruckten Quellen, die für zukünftige Archivarbeit von unschätzbarem Wert ist.

Oakland University

Ingrid Broszeit-Rieger

Diana K. Reese, *Reproducing Enlightenment: Paradoxes in the Life of the Body Politic, Literature and Philosophy around 1800*. Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2009. vii + 183 pp.

1800 broadly marks a significant transition with regard to the concept of the human, emerging from the problematic relationship between the Enlightenment's identity of the body as the "self-evident" object of the self and the contingencies of cultural and historical change, the relationship between being and being-in-time. Who or what is the subject of rights and emancipation? The result is an uneasy tension between two bodies: the idealized human one and the particular, contingent, present one. For Diana K. Reese, this problematic at the heart of the Enlightenment project is particularly evident in the category of reproduction, both in the sense of biology and in the sense of cultural transmission: how do subjects seeking rights in an initial state of inequality "inherit" them? How does Enlightenment liberation grow? Drawing on a hint in Adorno and Horkheimer's *Dialectic of the Enlightenment*, she is concerned with the "reproduction of enlightenment," which she characterizes as "a kind of alien birth" (6) in which the demythologizing project of the Enlightenment reproduces itself as myth. Reese explores this problematic of reproduction in relation to three texts, Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein: A Modern Prometheus*, Kant's *Critique of Judgment*, and Heinrich von Kleist's *Penthesilea*, *Ein Trauerspiel*, the latter of which she juxtaposes with Goethe's *Iphigenie auf Tauris* and with Schiller.

Eschewing the conventional reading of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* in terms of a Faustian quest of knowledge or man becoming god, Reese focuses on the paradoxes of man becoming man. In this she sees Shelley responding to the Enlightenment projects in the form of Rousseau's declaration of the rights of man and to Kant's conception of the moral agent as rational being. Frankenstein's creation, frequently referred to by Shelley as his "daemon," a being that falls between the categories of man and god, challenges what is implied by the term "human" and

the ethical claims associated with human rights. The complexities of Shelley's position are most evident when framed in terms of reproduction. The creature is a rational being that is both outside of nature and yet the product of nature. In the problem of reproduction he challenges the usual self-evident notions of humanness. In this literary production, he is unique, yet by virtue of this uniqueness, universal, since he represents the only instance of his species. At the same time, in requesting a mate, he demands the right to reproduce, to form a community of his kind. On one hand, the creature represents the idealized human, an autonomous being claiming liberation, yet on the other a (would-be) citizen, demanding rights.

Reese treats Kant's *Critique of Judgment* as an important transitional work in which Kant struggles to negotiate the paradoxes of being in becoming. Kant argues that judgment is contingent on the temporality of the subject, even as judgment seeks to transcend time in the universal. For Kant this move in time toward universality is the basis for how beings understand and represent themselves. The result, again, is a problematic double body: the singular rational agent as an end-in-himself and the reproducing agent in history open to the possibilities of contingency. This open-endedness potentially subverts the possibility of any universality, thereby foreclosing self-comprehension. Reese compares this with modern poetics, specifically its propensity to undercut the claims of universality by opening the polyphony of language and the reproduction of meanings to the reader.

Reese's treatment of Kleist's *Penthesilea* is her most stimulating chapter, drawing on the paradoxes foregrounded in her discussions of Shelley and Kant. The eponymous heroine resists the various attempts to conceptualize her. Her presence is given, but Kleist constantly subverts any representation of her in language or harmonization of her with nature. In this way Kleist destabilizes the universalizing goals of Weimar classicism. There nature existed as an idea that joined the ideal with the real and sought order amid the contingencies of the actual. Penthesilea, however, in the inversions of her Amazonian culture, in her incomprehensibility, is unnatural. She exists as much in the imaginations of the other characters and the audience as in a bodily appearance. This points to the generative nature of language to produce and reproduce. In this, Reese sees Kleist confronting the issue of sexual difference in the Enlightenment, interconnecting biological and cultural reproduction. The claim of the universal human is replaced with a series of disjunctive coexistent descriptions, the reproduction of a myriad of bodies.

Reese's book offers an original and illuminating perspective on the Enlightenment and the texts of Shelley, Kant, and Kleist. At the same time, her book grows out of her dissertation on Shelley and Kleist, and is freighted with some of the problems typical of dissertations, including a need to touch bases with the usual theoretical suspects whether this illuminates the thesis or not, to show her thoroughness and erudition, and to write in a dense style often difficult to penetrate. This is unfortunate, for it will make it less accessible to many who would find it a valuable and stimulating contribution.

Armstrong Atlantic State University

Thomas L. Cooksey

Stefani Engelstein, *Anxious Anatomy: The Conception of the Human Form in Literary and Naturalist Discourse*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2008. 326 pp.

As its title suggests, this book works at the intersections of science and literature. Like an ecotone in nature, that's a fecund zone, especially when scientific

theories of the eighteenth century aren't used simply as tools with which to make sense of contemporary literary works. In Stefani Engelstein's fine book, both forms of discourse are seen as contributors to establishing the meaning of nature, and specifically the meaning of the human body.

For a reader like myself with an unsystematic background in eighteenth-century biology, Engelstein's book is rich with information. From competing theories of procreation to the origin of the word "mammal," from developments in grafting to amputation techniques, and from fears that nature might be mechanistic to relationships between the human body and societal organization, the book presents a wealth of primary material with a light and confident touch. "As we analyze the literary, naturalist, surgical, aesthetic, philosophical, and political interventions into the body," Engelstein writes, "the formative influence of human interpretive strategies will come under repeated scrutiny" (24). And where better to begin a study of interpretive strategies in science and literature than in the novel by a naturalist with a title from chemistry.

Ottillie's catastrophe in Goethe's *Wahlverwandtschaften*, Engelstein argues, arises out of her reaction to various relationships and resemblances. Ottillie rejects talk of human kinship with monkeys, but obstinately lives a passive life resembling a vegetable graft. Here, as elsewhere in the book, Engelstein deftly situates her discussion within the critical context, laying out Gundolf's and Benjamin's thoughts on Ottillie as plantlike before moving to her own analysis of Ottillie on the basis of contemporary writing about plant grafting (Reichart, Holyck, Henne, Elßholtz, etc.). If the "germ is the soul of the eye [bud]" (43), according to Henne, and if grafting takes place somewhere between sexual bonding and parenting, then "Ottillie combines all of these traits of the graft: an indeterminate generational position, an extreme dependence, and an asexual productivity regulated through the eyes" (45). Violence arises in the novel when characters attempt to control or gloss over nature with false analogies, and even the novel's title is seen as problematic on those terms.

In her second chapter, Engelstein writes about connections between organic reproduction and the artistic reproduction of the human form. William Hunter's *Anatomy of the Human Gravid Uterus, Illustrated Tables*, based on an aesthetic that saw nature as superior to art and that thus preferred exact reproductions in the service of a fixed and lawful nature, is challenged by the reproductions of another engraver, William Blake. Emphasizing multiple histories of development and a variety of possible futures for the human body, Blake's *Book of Urizen* becomes, for Engelstein, an alternative obstetrical atlas. And as scientists debated the newly discovered regenerative polypus as a key to the secrets of reproduction, Blake worked to unsettle scientific certainties about reproduction by insisting on integrative regeneration over divisive generation like that exhibited by the polyp.

Engelstein moves in her third chapter to a discussion of aesthetic and prosthetic discourses that "shared an insistence on the maintenance of a visually whole human form that was in fact a sleight of hand masking a wound at their foundation" (113). Kleist's participation in battles against Revolutionary France in the Rhineland exposed him to ferocious fighting and to the resulting wounds and amputations. Engelstein works through a fascinating set of medical treatises on amputation (Bilguer, Alanson, Brünninghausen), focusing on the ambivalence that arises from a life-saving but maiming operation and on the subsequent attempt to create artificial limbs that return integrity to the human form. It's a

short step from there to Kleist's essay on the "Marionettentheater" and to the question of how damage to bodies relates to damage to narratives. Engelstein reads the anecdotes of the essay to conclude that "the ultimate failure of bodies to cohere becomes a visible and disturbing symptom of the precarious coherence of the world of meaning" (129).

In chapter four, Spallanzani's discovery that a decapitated snail could regenerate its own head is investigated in terms of questions about a "paradoxical nature that simultaneously depends on and suppresses its intrinsically mechanical functioning" (157). Engelstein then interprets E.T.A. Hoffmann's "Der Sandmann" as a story that reveals that even reason lies "within the perishable machinery of nature" (171). Chapter five argues that Mary Shelley's creature "becomes monstrous by exposing the animality of the natural human" (196); and the book's final chapter examines Jane Austen's work in the context of debates about race and slavery, concluding that Austen's happy endings are called into question by allusions to slavery, "which expose the violence lurking behind the presumed legibility of the body" (247).

This brief synopsis doesn't begin to get at the complexity and power of Engelstein's arguments; but perhaps it will lead readers to an important and often delightful book. My single complaint is that the book doesn't provide much summary of the works discussed, leaving readers unfamiliar with them in a partial vacuum.

Finally, the book includes a striking set of figures—details of a prosthetic leg, drawings of regenerated newt limbs, twins in a womb, illustrations of methods of grafting including copulating and ocellating grafts, just to give a few examples—and each figure is skillfully woven into the discussion.

Utah Valley University

Scott Abbott

Andrew Piper, *Dreaming in Books: The Making of the Bibliographic Imagination in the Romantic Age*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010. 303 pp.

We have spent over two hundred years living in and through books, and the ways in which we have done so were essentially the invention of a short span of time straddling the turn of the nineteenth century. Such is the central thesis of Andrew Piper's *Dreaming in Books*. And Piper adds another, perhaps more surprising guiding thesis: at what seems to many observers—though not to Piper, to be sure—the twilight of the book era, many of the concepts used to describe what is supposedly new about communication in the internet age map quite snugly onto the forms of communication that were established by, and in turn helped establish, the dominance of the book in the late eighteenth century.

Piper, surprisingly sanguine about the future of the book, argues that not only have we not left the book behind; instead the very terms we turn to mourn or celebrate the book's demise actually harken from the world of the book itself. As a result, Piper tells the story of the book "not as a narrative of rise and fall, but . . . as a series of social, historical, and technological negotiations" (236). This is a set of exciting and ambitious claims, and Piper's rather detailed case studies don't entirely manage to vindicate these claims with quite as much force as staked out by his introduction. But Piper is breaking new ground here, and he seems quite content to forge ahead and beckon others to follow—and, given this erudite, lucid, and altogether thrilling book, I am quite confident that they will.