

HITTING ROCK BOTTOM: READING MALE SYNCOPE IN KLEIST'S *DIE FAMILIE  
SCHROFFENSTEIN*, "MICHAEL KOHLHAAS," AND *PRINZ FRIEDRICH VON  
HOMBURG*

by

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## ABSTRACT

Susanne Gomoluch: Hitting Rock Bottom: Reading Male Syncope in Kleist's *Die Familie Schroffenstein*, "Michael Kohlhaas," and *Prinz Friedrich von Homburg*.

(Under the direction of Dr. Jonathan Hess)

This thesis examines fainting scenarios in three of Heinrich von Kleist's works: *Die Familie Schroffenstein*, "Michael Kohlhaas," and *Prinz Friedrich von Homburg*. In Kleist's oeuvre, fainting is portrayed as a gradual process that even reaches beyond the act of the physical fainting of the body. Depending on the fainting protagonists's degree of spirituality and acceptance of divine realms, syncope can also mean remedy. The first chapter provides an analysis of the Sylvester's syncope in *Die Familie Schroffenstein* and shows in what way Sylvester's fainting means remedy. The second chapter explores the fainting spells of the Saxon Elector in "Michael Kohlhaas" and focuses on the absence of spirituality. The third chapter investigates unconsciousness in *Prinz Friedrich von Homburg* which unlike the two previous places appears to be an example of continual syncope.

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## Introduction

"Der Moment, in dem der Mensch umfällt, [...] ist der erste, in dem sein wahrhaftes Ich sich aufrichtet."<sup>1</sup>

For generations fainting "has usually [...] been allotted to woman: it is she who sinks down, dress spreading out like a flower, fainting, before a public, that hurries forward."<sup>2</sup>

Fainting is clearly gendered. A fainting female protagonist is accepted and almost expected in literature around 1800. For instance, in her 1771 bestseller, *Das Fräulein von Sternheim*, Sophie von La Roche depicts a scenario of female fainting. The eponymous female protagonist faints when her virtue and reputation are in danger. Sophie von Sternheim's fainting does not necessitate an explanation. It is an appropriate way to express her dismay and being upset, and the public understands it as such. As a member of the weaker sex, the female protagonist is more likely to be overwhelmed by her emotions and less likely to regain control over her affects and therefore, female fainting does not transgress nearly as many conventions as male fainting does. Astonishingly, in Kleist's plays and prose it is male fainting that stands a good chance to outweigh female fainting not only quantitatively, but also in terms of dramatic significance, transgression of the norms, and figurative language.

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<sup>1</sup> E.T.A. Hoffmann, "Prinzessin Brambilla" in Sämtliche Werke, ed. Hartmut Steinecke, vol.3 (Frankfurt: Deutscher Klassiker Verlag, 1985).

<sup>2</sup> Catherine Clément, Syncope (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994) 1.

One of the most outstanding fainting scenes in Kleist's works is that of Sylvester in *Die Familie Schroffenstein*.<sup>3</sup> Accused of murdering his nephew, Sylvester loses his consciousness as a wordless answer to the accusations. After recovering from his short fainting spell, he states the following: "Was mich freut, ist, daß der Geist doch mehr ist, als ich glaubte, denn flieht er gleich auf einen Augenblick, an seinen Urquell geht er nur, zu Gott, und mit Heroenkraft kehrt er zurück" (FS 1.2.896-900). Sylvester's statement about his fit of *Ohnmacht* is unique as he is the only one among Kleist's characters to remember exactly what happened and what he was doing while being unconscious. Leaving the physical body behind, Sylvester's conscious spirit sets out to explore realms which lie beyond physical laws.

A second glance reveals that Sylvester's *Geist* acts almost autonomously. In his reflection on the state of *Ohnmacht*, Sylvester refers to the *Geist*, his own spirit, in the third person. On the one hand, the distance he creates bestows autonomy on the *Geist* and foregrounds Sylvester's dependence on his spirit. On the other hand, it grants independent agency to Sylvester's spirit and suggests that his spirit acts on its own resolution. In the moment of fainting, Sylvester's spirit flees his body. Driven out of Sylvester's body by fear and confusion, the *Geist* seeks refuge in its *Urquell*. Even though the *Urquell* is not further described, it alludes to the concept of a *locus amoenus* of the beyond, a place of safety and tranquility, a place like home. In the moment of unconsciousness the *Urquell* functions as a shelter. After all, the spirit flees the body which means that it does not act on free will entirely. It leaves the body to seek shelter elsewhere. The fact that the spirit instinctively runs

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<sup>3</sup> Heinrich von Kleist, *Die Familie Schroffenstein* in *Sämtliche Werke und Briefe*, ed. Helmut Sembdner, vol. 1 (München: dtv, 2001) 1.2.896-900. All further reference to this drama will be indicated parenthetically in the body of the text by the abbreviation FS.

to God positions Kleist's fainting within the discourse of the divine. Further, consciously seeking remedy at the *Urquell* attests to a very conscious and open way of coping with syncope. In this aspect, syncope, which originally means a cut or a gap, does not seem like an appropriate term for Sylvester's case – interlude appears to be more suitable.<sup>4</sup>

This thesis centers on scenarios of male fainting in three of Kleist's works: *Die Familie Schroffenstein* (1803), "Michael Kohlhaas" (1808), and *Prinz Friedrich von Homburg* (1811). Research on fainting scenarios plays a marginal role in Kleist scholarship. One example is Margarete Berger's 2008 article "Zu den Ohnmachtsszenarien Kleistscher Protagonisten."<sup>5</sup> Berger interprets male fainting as an expression of a narcissistic reaction to altering circumstances. The protagonists repress the progressing shifts in their surroundings due to their narcissistic blindness. At a certain point of time, however, the sum of repressed changes reaches a quantum which cannot be denied anymore and subsequently leads to fainting. In my thesis I oppose this reading by arguing that it is not the most fruitful method to approach fainting scenarios the way they are deployed by Kleist. Clearly, the actual moment of fainting is strictly related to a significant loss of agency and the protagonists' fear of losing their agency, to be *ohne Macht*, and this can easily be read and justified through the lens of Freud's concept of fear of castration. After all, according to contemporary definitions of fainting, fear, anxiety and pain are very likely to prompt it.<sup>6</sup> Moreover, a closer look reveals that in Kleist we deal with more than psychological processes such as the aforementioned fearful or anxious reaction. Rather, we encounter religious concepts such as

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<sup>4</sup> Clément 4.

<sup>5</sup> Margarete Berger "Zu Den Ohnmachtszenarien Kleistscher Protagonisten," Freiburger Literaturpsychologische Gespräche 27 (2008): 249-278.

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.synkope.at/wbs.php>

spirit or soul. For example in Sylvester's case, it is his *Geist* that flees his body and runs to God, while the spirit of the prince of Homburg explores visionary dream landscapes and divine beyonds. The spirit does not flee the body in order to repress or forget. Rather, it abandons "its" body in order to enter another realm, in Kleist's case that of a spiritual beyond.

Helmut Schneider's article "Standing and Falling in Heinrich von Kleist" is a study of corporeal gestures by stating that "the impressive register of body and expressions frustrates [...] any attempt to decode it unambiguously."<sup>7</sup> Accordingly, his reading of Kleist concludes that the effect of bodily involvement is "less one of sheer descriptiveness or psychological depth, but rather a kind of *mise-en-scène*, a singular combination of corporeal concreteness with choreographic stylization, of spatial depth with theatrical pattern."<sup>8</sup> Schneider believes that the function of a falling body is to stress a particular moment in the structure of a play or narration, rather than to communicate its own message in a dialogue with the world outside the body. The idea of a continual dialogue between the mind and body and the outside world is, however, an essential part of this thesis. As this thesis demonstrates, the significance of fainting far exceeds its structural role. As I shall claim, fainting should be regarded as an intersection of possibilities as to how to continue after a traumatic experience. It is a crucial instance in this dialogue as it can lead to an improvement or expansion of the existing horizons of the fainting protagonists.

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<sup>7</sup> Helmut J. Schneider, "Standing and Falling in Heinrich von Kleist," *MLN* 115.3 (2000): 502-518.

<sup>8</sup> Schneider 502.

The dialogue between the soul and the body is the topic of Gudrun Debiacher's monograph *Die Rede der Seele über den Körper*.<sup>9</sup> Debiacher explores Kleist's entire oeuvre and devotes major parts of her work to the analysis of medicine and the science of soul as deployed by Kleist. However, the vast quantity of Kleist's works and Debiacher's inclination to justify phenomena such as syncope or somnambulism with Kleist's personal interest in these concepts do not allow for a truly profound reading of these concepts. The bottom line of Debiacher's analysis is the conclusion that Kleist most likely introduced tropes of fainting as mitigating circumstances for irresponsible or even incomprehensible actions among his protagonists.

The theoretical framework of my thesis is based on Jean-Luc Nancy's *The Discourse of the Syncope*.<sup>10</sup> Nancy's work is not a reading of Kleist, but a philosophical reading of syncope based on readings of Freud and Lacan on the one hand, and Kant on the other. However, despite the theoretical discussion of syncope of philosophy, certain elements in Nancy's theory are suitable to investigate fainting scenarios in Kleist's work. Nancy argues that "the existence of a blind spot is constitutive of all theory."<sup>11</sup> What I take from this in my thesis is the idea that every paradigmatic system includes integral parts that remain hidden behind this blind spot. This concept is not only applicable to the great scope of the syncope of philosophy, but also to that of one single protagonist.<sup>12</sup> As my thesis illustrates, the notion of the blind spot is more subtle than interpreting fainting protagonists as narcissists; it is due

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<sup>9</sup> Gudrun Debiacher, *Die Rede der Seele über den Körper* (Wien: Praesens Verlag, 2007).

<sup>10</sup> Jean-Luc Nancy, *On the Discourse of the Syncope: Logodaedalus* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2008).

<sup>11</sup> Nancy 4. All further uses of blind spot will be referring to the definition taken from Nancy.

<sup>12</sup> Nancy 8-10.



to this blind spot that Sylvester is doomed to faint. Moreover, as I shall argue, the notion of the “undecidability” helps us understand Kleist’s fainting scenarios as intersections where protagonists receive a chance to negotiate a meaning for themselves according to the ongoing changes. As “undecidability” Nancy regards a problem or situation, for instance, which cannot be resolved due to a lack of suitable paradigms. No paradigm can be congruent with the problematic situation and the protagonists must decide whether they can embrace it or not.

An integral part of this work is the overarching idea that Kleist’s fainting scenarios reveal a gradual process of fainting rather than a sudden reaction to an individual trauma. According to 18<sup>th</sup>-century dictionary entries, medicine of those days distinguished two stages of unconsciousness: the first stage being “Ohnmacht ersten Grades,” the second that of “starcke Ohnmacht,” and lastly “Synkope.”<sup>13</sup> In addition, *Ohnmacht* was either “eigenleidend” or it was “mitleidend,” two concepts which referred to an autochthonous fainting, or to fainting as a symptom of a physical disease.<sup>14</sup> Based on this multilayered pattern of *Ohnmacht* I analyze not only the concept of gradual state of *Ohnmacht* in Kleist but also prove that the process of fainting itself is gradual as well. In this respect, my thesis adds a crucial historical dimension to current research. Rather than imposing medical definitions of syncope on Kleist and considering fainting a sudden and momentary occurrence, I analyze the concatenation of subsequent stages of fainting as a literary figure embedded in the framework of Kleist’s age.

Based on the aforementioned theoretical framework, the following chapters explore male fainting scenarios. I hope to expand current research on two different levels: I consider

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<sup>13</sup> Roland Galle, “Szenarien der Ohnmacht im Jahrhundert der Aufklärung” in Leib-Zeichen :Körperbilder, Rhetorik und Anthropologie Im 18. Jahrhundert, ed. Rudolf Behrens and Roland Galle (Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann, 1993) 110.

<sup>14</sup> Galle 110.

fainting as a gradual process rather than a sudden occurrence, and I explore the significance of the presence or absence of the divine. The chapters of my thesis follow the chronology of the publication of the three of Kleist's works. This structure not only outlines the elements of fainting which are pertinent for each individual piece of work, but also exposes a quantitative as well as qualitative increase of the use of fainting scenarios. The boundaries between *Diesseits* and *Jenseits* become gradually more indistinct and a clear demarcation between past, present, and future overlap.

The first chapter analyzes *Die Familie Schroffenstein*. Being Kleist's first completed play it contains only two moments of fainting. Pertinent to this paper is the second of the two scenarios which is the fainting of Sylvester von Schroffenstein. The chapter begins with a close reading of each of the stages of Sylvester's gradual fainting and highlights the factors which trigger his initial feeling of *Ohnmacht* and later lead to his physical *Ohnmacht*. In addition, this chapter points out that facing the accusations of being a murderer launches Sylvester's fainting process. Due to his inability to react and adjust accordingly Sylvester tries to deny the ongoing changes. The fact that during his *Ohnmacht* he takes refuge in the realm of the divine introduces Sylvester as a character with two focal points: one pointing at earthly matters, the other at divine ones. I argue that his access to a spiritual refuge is constitutive of his ability to rise above earthly woes and exceed his earthly boundaries. The inclusion of his spiritual beliefs and the greater picture which he gains during his unconsciousness facilitates not only a quick recovery but also the immediate actions Sylvester takes in order to solve his problematic situation.

The second chapter examines the fainting of the Saxon Elector in “Michael Kohlhaas.”<sup>15</sup> In light of the high amount of fainting scenarios in this novella, this chapter focuses on those of the Saxon Elector solely, who faints numerous times throughout the entire novella. The increase in the number of the Elector’s fainting spells goes hand in hand with a decrease of his mental and physical health. Unlike in *Die Familie Schroffenstein*, the significance of spiritual/divine realms and beliefs is emphasized here through its absence. There is no evidence of a connection between the Elector and any spiritual belief and realm he may have sought during his syncope. Even though the Elector’s *Geist* does flee his body, he does not have any recollection of this event. Moreover, every occurring syncope weakens the Elector’s health. The divine *locus amoenus* remains absent and the cure it can bring is not achievable for him. His perception or comprehension of the *Diesseits* does not allow for a space like a *Jenseits*. In the chapter I claim that the Elector’s focus on purely earthly matters is the most decisive difference between him and Sylvester, and should be considered a crucial point in the discussion of fainting scenarios in Kleist.

The last chapter is devoted to the play *Der Prinz von Homburg*.<sup>16</sup> The two previously discussed works depict fainting as a phenomenon prompted partially by internal and partially by external influences. Contrasting them, Kleist’s last play portrays its main protagonists as a hero whose syncope is a constitutive part of his identity. Thus, Kleist’s last hero expands the notion of gradual fainting into the state of continual fainting. The most striking and obvious

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<sup>15</sup> Heinrich von Kleist, “Michael Kohlhaas” in *Sämtliche Werke und Briefe*, ed. Helmut Sembdner, vol. 2 (München: dtv, 2001). All further reference to this drama will be indicated parenthetically in the body of the text by the abbreviation MK.

<sup>16</sup> Heinrich von Kleist, *Der Prinz von Homburg* in *Sämtliche Werke und Briefe*, ed. Helmut Sembdner (München: dtv, 2001). All further reference to this drama will be indicated parenthetically in the body of the text by the abbreviation PH.

elements in his personality are somnambulism, reveries, and fainting. These elements, however, fragment the prince's modes of perception and make it almost impossible for him to tell the boundaries between reality and dreams as he fails in reconciling these different modes. The gaps existing between these fragments belong to his profile to the same extent as do the actual fragments bearing pieces of his personality. In other words, parts of the prince are continually in syncope. The access to the spiritual beyond that he has in abundance cannot unfold fully as parts of the prince are continually cut off from the rest of the prince.

### **Like a Phoenix from the Ashes – Fainting Scenarios in *Die Familie Schroffenstein***

Kleist's first finished play is a tragedy revolving around a young couple. Like Romeo and Juliet, the lovers try to keep their love hidden from their families who, despite their kinship, are enemies. A murder case revives old and smoldering animosities, and in a blind race both patriarchs try to surpass each other in terms of power, authority, legal and private laws, and principles. The fight over power and control culminates in the play's great tragedy: in an attempt to avenge their harmed reputation and status, each patriarch mistakenly kills his own child. One of the two rivals is Sylvester von Schroffenstein, whose fainting occurs at the threshold of this tragedy when he is accused by his own brother of murdering the latter's son. The shock of this accusation has a deeply paralyzing impact on Sylvester's reason and senses. Struggling to keep his countenance, Sylvester endures several stages before he actually faints. His struggle not to faint makes Sylvester's actual fainting not a momentary event, but rather a concatenation of symptoms unfolding over several steps and stages. These stages are the process of gradual fainting which begins with an initial surprise and disbelief and leads in the end to the physical fainting of Sylvester's body. In between these first and final stages, Sylvester's spirit and body attempt a dialogue with the ongoing changes and paradigm shifts in order to prevent the later loss of consciousness. However, as it turns out, Sylvester fails in this dialogue. He cannot make sense of this trauma and tragedy in a meaningful way. Instead, he desperately tries to stop and even unwind the changes he witnesses. Yet by rejecting these new shifts Sylvester is unable to negotiate a new meaning

for the paradigms in his life. The failure to negotiate a new meaning and adjust to the changes is, I shall claim, the primary trigger for his fainting. Moreover, fainting occurs not solely in reaction to traumatic events, but at a moment in which common comprehensive processes, i.e., the ones provided by the human mind and body, turn out to be not sufficient in understanding such a situation. In this very moment, Sylvester's spirit leaves his body to seek refuge at his divine origin, the *Urquell*.

Examining the process of gradual fainting expands the current research on fainting scenarios in general, and with specific reference to the case of Sylvester von Schroffenstein, it illustrates his struggle for a renegotiation of his power, *Macht*, and the stepwise ceding of this power, which finally leaves Sylvester powerless, *ohnmächtig*. The actual fainting is the culmination of these negotiations and a symbolization of his failure to regain power over the situation. The moment of sinking to the floor means for the fainting protagonist a literal hitting rock bottom. It is a moment of powerlessness, hopelessness, and capitulation. Yet, as Kleist's plays show, fainting is also an intersection at which the protagonist has all the choices to decide how to cope with the ongoing paradigm shifts and how to move on. This intersection is a moment of chaos and bears the possibility of becoming anything the protagonist manages to make of it. As this chapter shows, Sylvester opts for divine sources to help him adjust to these changes. Unfortunately, research has paid little attention to this fact. Even though research on Kleist's oeuvre shifted from a focus on form and structure in the 1960s to a psychoanalytical reading through the lens of Freud and later Lacan, the syncope in *Die Familie Schroffenstein* barely is noticed. The only contribution in this field is Margarete Berger's article on "Zu den Ohnmachtsszenarien Kleistscher Protagonisten."<sup>17</sup> In her article,

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<sup>17</sup> Berger 254.

Berger explores fainting scenarios in all of Kleist's works through the lens of psychoanalysis, but pays little attention to the case of Sylvester. In essence, Berger argues that fainting protagonists strongly reveal narcissistic personalities. Accordingly, she regards fainting as a "Wiedergeburt nach einer Berührung mit einer väterlichen Instanz" in order to reestablish one's narcissistic self.<sup>18</sup> As this chapter shall point out, Berger's reading is questionable as it utterly excludes divine concepts such as the *Urquell*. Yet the presence of divine concepts, such as God and the beyond, are not only tangible but highly significant throughout the entire play. Ascribing Sylvester's fainting to his narcissistic personality and the resultant ignorance to ongoing changes minimizes syncope to one of many symptoms and simultaneously excludes concepts such as soul, divine energy, or simply the beyond. Further, as this chapter shall illustrate, diagnosing Sylvester von Schroffenstein as a narcissist may be too harsh and crude of a reading.

The theoretical framework, on which this chapter draws, derives from the concept of the blind spot put forth in Nancy's monograph *The Discourse of the Syncope*. As mentioned in the introduction, the blind spot is a constitutive part of every concept one holds and therefore functions as selective perception. It influences the construction of opinions or beliefs in harmony with one's wishes and desires in order to maintain an unambiguous synthesis of all the elements upon which these beliefs are based. It helps create the feeling of being in power and control, and yet it is only a feeling. According to Nancy, syncope occurs when one experiences "the exact superimposition of the blind spot and the center of vision."<sup>19</sup> In other words, all disturbing parts of the beliefs and opinions one maintains and

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<sup>18</sup> Berger 256.

<sup>19</sup> Nancy 8.

suppresses become clearly perceivable and can no longer be negated. The synthesis breaks, or in Nancy words it “syncopates” and cannot take place.<sup>20</sup> In its stead there is now a “disequilibrium” which brings about a drastic change in perception.<sup>21</sup> Those parts that have been rejected must now be acknowledged and evaluated. The agent is forced to include them in his paradigm or philosophy, meaning that he has to attach a meaning to it. The problematic part of this disequilibrium is that it reveals a multiplicity of possible meanings. In order to maintain the established philosophies or paradigms the agent must decide on what these changes denote. However, the impact of these changes renders the meaning for the agent “undecidable” and thus brings him to collapse.<sup>22</sup>

The case of Sylvester shows that if the protagonist is not able to negotiate this meaning, and therefore unable to decide what to make of these shifts, he faints. The ongoing changes that prompt Sylvester’s fainting are those related to the perception of his brother, Rupert. Until this point, Sylvester is portrayed as a benign and rational person, who, as the head of his county and as the head of his family, truly believes in the law and order of the tide of the events. His peace of mind and undaunted belief in the truthfulness of his paradigms and standpoints are hardly to be disturbed. Addressing his wife’s mistrust and equivocalness he distances himself from any uncomfortable and negative interpretation of life (FS 1.2.515-517). The rigidity with which he keeps all unwelcome pieces of information at bay may at first be interpreted as self-confidence or devotion to optimism. Yet, at second glance, it is clearly a trait in Sylvester’s personality that keeps him from perceiving the whole

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<sup>20</sup> Nancy 11.

<sup>21</sup> Nancy 4.

<sup>22</sup> Nancy 7.



situation. He does not opt for optimism, but rather for a falsified and blurred picture of his surroundings, especially his brother. By doing so, Sylvester almost consciously enforces his blind spot. All negative information relating to his brother is easily dismissed as his wife's negativity and pessimism. These pieces of information are missing puzzles in the mosaic constituting the true picture of Rupert. The moment the messenger voices these accusations for the first time is the moment of the "superimposition of the blind spot on the center of the vision."<sup>23</sup> Confronting Rupert's accusations has such a devastating impact on Sylvester because he refuses to see them and include them in the picture of his brother. This recognition initiates Sylvester's fainting (FS 1.2 589).<sup>24</sup>

Sylvester's reaction to this overwhelming chaos is a gradual and slow shutting off of his perception and comprehension, which eventually results in his loss of consciousness. Kleist does not suggest whether Sylvester suffers from "Ohnmacht ersten Grades" or from "starcke [*sic*] Ohnmacht."<sup>25</sup> Schneider, however, argues that Sylvester falls into a "prolonged state of unconsciousness."<sup>26</sup> Indeed, the intensity of this experience speaks in favor of a case of syncope.<sup>27</sup> Further, if we take a close look at Sylvester's fainting, we see that it takes place slowly, as if performed in several stages, which again strengthens the argument for a case of syncope. The revelation that he is being accused of murdering his young nephew initially

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<sup>23</sup> Nancy 8.

<sup>24</sup> According to the medieval German tradition, a *Hochgericht* can only be summoned in order to decide whether the culprit should be sentenced to death or mutilation as a punishment for his murder and treason. Even though Rupert calls on juridical authorities he does not intend to investigate the truthfulness of his accusations. Rather, he wants to ensure Sylvester receives the appropriate, lethal, punishment.

<sup>25</sup> Galle 110.

<sup>26</sup> Schneider 512.

<sup>27</sup> "Ohnmacht," Johann Heinrich Zedlers Großes und vollständiges Universallexicon aller Wissenschaften und Künste, 992. Zedler considers syncope to be *Ohnmacht höchsten Grades*.

causes some confusion and troubling of his senses. Yet it does not immediately force Sylvester into syncope. Even though the blind spot forces itself into the center of the perception, Sylvester is not willing to give up the theories and beliefs he holds relating to his brother. As terrible as these accusations are, the idea that his brother postulates them is too difficult to be simply accepted as part of Rupert's personality and therefore it does not fit in Sylvester's constructed world. In this moment, Sylvester finds himself at an intersection where he must decide which conclusions have to be drawn from this situation. The choice is either to integrate the newly gained insights to create a more realistic and complex picture of his brother or to adhere to the old picture and thus to the blind spot and thus render the fainting inevitable.

Sylvester chooses to hold on to the old picture. This initiates the first phase of his physical fainting. The first symptom marking the initiation of his fainting spell is losing his ability to communicate in a coherent way. Consequently, the previous eloquence with which he welcomed Rupert's messenger Aldöbern gives way to disoriented stammering such as "Nun setz dich. Wie war schon dein Name? Setz dich, setz dich. – Nun, sag an, ich hab's vergessen, wo, wo bist du her?" (FS 1.2.594-597). It is especially the duplication of the "wo" as well as the phrase "ich hab's vergessen" that demonstrates Sylvester's stark reactions to Rupert's accusations. The same question proves furthermore that there is a break in Sylvester's cognitive skills. Asking the messenger where he originally comes from does not appear to be what matters most in such a situation and therefore stirs surprise on the side of Aldöbern. In his surprise Aldöbern replies in a curt manner: "Aus Oppenheim" (FS 1.2.588). The communicative interaction misses its point. Sylvester's utterances are not meant to communicate a particular content or convey a meaning. Rather, he stammers something as if

somehow driven by a mechanism to react. In order to bridge the first moments after the shocking revelation, which apparently causes a feeling of emptiness in Sylvester, he forces himself to simply continue as if he hoped this cacophony would soon be over. His instinctive mechanism tells him to do or say something to bridge this period of time, yet his mind is lost to any kind of coherent verbal reaction. Sylvester's communicative mechanism is *ohnmächtig*. He fails to negotiate a new meaning or a new paradigm according to the new pieces of information that floods his life as he cannot be convinced that his paradigms are wrong. Instead of venturing a renegotiation of meaning, he comes to a halt. Sylvester's decision-making ceases as his only initial strategy is to withstand this chaos. His interaction with Aldöbern shows that his initial question is nothing more than a crude displacement activity utilized in order to gain time and collect himself.

Only moments later, Sylvester's process of fainting reaches the next stage. For Gertrude and Aldöbern Sylvester is utterly "von Sinnen" as they are not able to make sense of the words Sylvester utters. Sylvester concludes that "einer von uns beiden muß verrückt sein" (FS 1.2.625-627). During the span of the previous interaction with Aldöbern, Sylvester manages to come to a conclusion he can accept. After trying to make sense of what he has just heard Sylvester stops the process of comprehending and decides that the message simply does not make sense at all. He denies its validity and he rejects even more all incongruous pieces of information about his brother. He refuses to accept that he erred and that his views and beliefs now have to be redefined according to new paradigms. Instead of engaging in a dialogue with this situation, Sylvester concludes that he has to get to the bottom of the misunderstanding and seeks clarification with his brother. For Sylvester's analytical nature

there is no other way to comprehend the incomprehensible (FS 1.2.643).<sup>28</sup> In that matter, Sylvester indeed appears to have regained his senses and control because he takes actions again to clarify this situation. Yet the apparent stabilization of Sylvester's composure and the attempt to seek out his brother functions here as a delay of the ultimate fainting and contributes thus to Sylvester's painful experience of gradual syncope. It means that Sylvester's actions pursue the wrong goal. Instead of committing to a meaningful dialogue, he wants to restore the old paradigm and exclude all new developments and shifts. Therefore, these steps do not bring Sylvester closer to a resolution, but rather they impair the process of comprehension and readjusting to the paradigm shifts.

Sylvester's belief in the orderliness of the events and his deep trust in the world do not allow for an acceptance of these accusations and shifts. There simply has to be a logical explanation and a means to render them futile. Flying into a rage, condemning Rupert, swearing revenge, and finally indulging a personal kind of war would be more adequate reactions, or at least more common for a male protagonist. Yet, this again means that Sylvester would have to abandon his own paradigms. Sylvester's inability and reluctance to face and embrace the truth, i.e. to abandon his blind spot, is the cause for this deeply traumatizing situation. Sylvester's attempts to annihilate rather than solve this problem delay his understanding and acceptance of the changes. In order to truly regain control over the situation, Sylvester's worldview must be adjusted. The new facts which constitute the paradigm shifts have to be processed and understood. Yet the reason why Sylvester seeks out his brother, Ruprecht, serves only one purpose: to restore everything as it was before. Sylvester shields his inner core from the devastating impact of the changes. However, the

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<sup>28</sup> To Aldöbern Sylvester says: "Wer kann das Unbegreifliche begreifen?"

protective shield he tries to establish contributes greatly to his syncope and even prolongs the process of gradual fainting.

The entrance of Jeronimus, one of Rupert's confidants, becomes a turning point in Sylvester's endeavors to reestablish the old paradigm. Sensing the pending crumbling of his world, Sylvester struggles to maintain his blind spot as a symbol for his ideal world. Yet Jeronimus brings about a clearing for Sylvester's blurred vision and the strongest blow to him at the same time. Coming directly from Rupert's court where Rupert convinces Jeronimus of the truthfulness of his accusations, Jeronimus evidently does not doubt that Sylvester has committed the murder of Rupert's son. Facing two opponents who make an identical claim, Sylvester's emotional *Ohnmacht* becomes physical: he faints. The changed paradigm is pushed into Sylvester's view, the blind spot thus radically removed. He now must face the glaring facts. The double impact exceeds Sylvester's capacity to make sense of what he hears, sees, and finally tries to understand. All of Sylvester's attempts to reestablish the initial order are rendered futile in this moment. After the staggering and disorientation, Sylvester's protective shield breaks, and his body finally sinks unconsciously to the floor.

The agony seems to be over and Sylvester seems to be dead for a moment. His soul abandons his body and seeks refuge at its *Urquell*. Lying unconsciously on the floor his body becomes useless in its role as a conduit for the dialogue between the soul and the world. Those features and skills which are particular to the human body do not suffice in maintaining communication, as they fail Sylvester in the attempt to disentangle the chaotic mass of facts and information. All of his senses, which Sylvester could have used in order to adjust to the situation, have reached their limits. The spirit, Sylvester's soul, terminates communication to seek other means of finding a new meaning at the *Urquell*. The immediacy

of the event freezes his ability to comprehend. The rupture between the old and new sense of things cannot be bridged and leads to syncope. The discrepancy between Sylvester's perception of the world and the actual events taking place in this moment are the root of Sylvester's problem. The reason for his fainting is the loss of his agency and the fear of something Margarete Berger calls "psychische Desintegration."<sup>29</sup> Berger understands fainting to be triggered by the "Konversion unbewusster psychischer Inhalte/Konflikte [...] bei drohender psychischer Desintegration und dem Aufkommen psychotischer Ängste."<sup>30</sup> For Sylvester seeing the content of what thus far has been hidden behind the blind spot, constitutes a fearful and traumatizing situation. Berger further considers the fainting protagonist to be a victim of the circumstances as well as that of his own repressed fears. I however claim that this disaster is self-made. As evidenced by his various attempts to mute Gertrude's objections, Sylvester consciously turns a blind eye to his brother's negative side. His actual fainting is therefore a toll which he pays for his own ignorance and blindness (*Verblendung*).

In Berger's analysis, this fainting scenario is a "Wiedergeburt nach einer Berührung mit einer väterlichen Instanz."<sup>31</sup> Accordingly, Sylvester's excursion to the *locus amoenus* of the beyond facilitates a reidentification with his own self following the disintegration of his own narcissism. Yet are these details significant enough to stigmatize Sylvester as a narcissistic being? Sylvester himself answers this question in the negative. Briefly after his

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<sup>29</sup> Berger 254.

<sup>30</sup> Berger 254.

<sup>31</sup> Berger 256. After all, Sylvester's fainting is partially prompted because he refused to acknowledge opposing opinions and thus failed to realize certain processes in his surrounding.

resurrection from his syncope, Sylvester muses quietly: “Was mich freut, ist, daß der Geist doch mehr ist, als ich glaubte, denn flieht er gleich auf einen Augenblick, an seinen Urquell geht er nur, zu Gott, und mit Heroenkraft kehrt er zurück” (FS 1.2.896-900). Clearly, Sylvester’s, or Sylvester’s spirit’s, return to his body is marked by a new level of ease and composure. Sylvester appears replenished with new insights and ways of perception. After initial disbelief about having fainted at all, Sylvester’s eloquence reassumes its function and voices his musing on the divine nature of the human *Geist*. The semiotic discontinuity which, apart from the motionless body, is the most expressive of all concomitants of fainting is revoked and Sylvester’s fainting does not appear as a reaction to trauma or fear, but rather a remedy to his overwhelmed perception. Reading this scenario as “eine Berührung mit einer väterlichen Instanz” is only fruitful if this encounter’s psychoanalytically narcissistic dimension is substituted by a religious or divine one. Yet, psychoanalysis by definition excludes a higher divine authority. Berger’s reading of Sylvester’s syncope can only be maintained if Sylvester is considered an atheist, or indeed a narcissist who believes himself to be the highest authority, yet evidence for Sylvester’s reflections on God occur several times throughout the play.

This presence of divine concepts is essential to understanding the different facets of Kleist’s fainting scenarios. To Jeronimus Sylvester says: “Ich bin dir wohl ein Rätsel? Nicht wahr? Nun, tröste dich, Gott ist es mir” (FS 2.3.1213-1214). To his wife Gertrude he responds: “Bin ich Gott, daß du mich fragst?” (FS 2.2.1015). In both examples, Sylvester mentions God as a higher authority. It is an authority which can potentially give answers to all his questions, yet at the same time it is an instance which raises uncounted questions and which occupies Sylvester’s mind. Evidently, Sylvester recognizes God as a higher authority,

yet it is questionable to what extent God should be acknowledged as a “väterliche Instanz.” A fatherly authority in a religious discourse imposes a radically restrictive perception of God. An elderly bearded god-figure is hard to imagine as the formula to regain one’s shattered identity, whereas an *Urquell* is. An *Urquell* unlocks a realm of universal spirituality rather than religious dogmatism as this term is a creation of an origin, *die Urquelle*. Its grammatical gender is originally feminine. Kleist however, plays with the two natural genders, feminine and masculine, in order to conceive of a divine origin as being neither or both at the same time. If we accept the *Urquell* as a spiritual concept of the beyond we must apply the parameters that are valid for spiritual being. Angels, for example, are considered pure spirits, which means “they are neither male nor female,” or both at the same time.<sup>32</sup> This same pattern is valid for the divine as a mixture of feminine and masculine markers the *Urquell* underlies biblical patterns of a spiritual/divine element. This however not only exceeds the limits of psychoanalysis, it also expands fainting as an encounter with a fatherly figure. Sylvester’s spirit seeks refuge at its divine origin, focusing on the spirituality solely, excluding any signs of earthly or dogmatic restrictions.

Sylvester’s syncope, which initially appears to be a defensive reaction, turns out to be a refreshing break for his *Geist*. For the bystanders, this break is comparable to a blackout. As far as their perception of this situation is concerned, the body and mind of the unconscious person seem to be lifeless. The eighteenth-century Zedler Lexikon describes Ohnmacht as “die plötzliche Verringerung oder Ausbleibung derjenigen Verrichtungen [...], die so wohl zum Leben, als zur Empfindung gehören, und dabei der ganze Leib schlapp, fast

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<sup>32</sup> Joan Carroll Cruz, *Angels and Devils* (Rockford: Tan Books and Publishers, 1999) 18.



totd, und ohne Bewegung lieget. □<sup>33</sup> This short excerpt depicts exactly what Gertrude and Aldöbern witness while Sylvester lies unconsciously on the floor. For the person concerned, however, it is quite a contrary experience. From the point of view of the fainting person the break is more of an interlude rather than a break in terms of a cut or section. During this interlude Sylvester does not experience a break but a continuation in or an elevation into a different dimension. He is afforded an opportunity to restore his senses and reestablish dialogue with the outside world he leaves behind. Sylvester is afforded an opportunity to reestablish his perception. To put it in Friedrich Nietzsche's terms, Sylvester's soul reaches "heights from which even tragedy ceases to look tragic."<sup>34</sup> What this means for Sylvester is that from the height, which also is implied in the term *Ohnmacht höchsten Grades*, he can gain enough distance in order to see his situation from an almost neutral position. The notion of height is also implied in the term heaven, which is likely to be the space in which the beyond is situated. Heaven is for one part understood as the dwelling place of deities, but also as "the expanse of space that seems to be over the earth like a dome."<sup>35</sup> This strengthens the contention that Sylvester's beyond is situated in heaven or a place like it. Additionally, when looking at the aforementioned quote, Sylvester indeed seems to have had a divine revelation. The fact that he now knows that the "Geist ist mehr als es scheint" is a new piece of information and a soothing revelation that Sylvester brings from the beyond (FS. 1.2.897). Gaining distance and gaining height is the pivotal element in Sylvester's recovering from his "horizontal" syncope. The distance and height provide an opportunity to cast a panoramic

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<sup>33</sup> "Ohnmacht," Zedler. 992-1004.

<sup>34</sup> Thomas Weiskel, The Romantic Sublime: Studies in the Structure and Psychology of Transcendence (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986) 6.

<sup>35</sup> "Heaven," Merriam-Webster Collegiate Dictionary. 552.

bird's eye view of what just happened and thus Sylvester can puzzle together the shattered pieces of his identity and knowledge anew. Even though Sylvester is not coming back to a world restored according to his visions and wishes, he nonetheless returns with a soul that has made good use of the chance to reconceive the meaning of the world and reestablish the meaningful pieces of it. Though by fainting he publicly transgresses social and gender norms, his fainting is not a problematic element in the delineation of his personality and his perception by others.

This quick adaption to the new circumstances facilitates a life without further damage to Sylvester's reputation and it does not decrease the quality of Sylvester's life. The ability to adapt so successfully revolves around Sylvester's *Geist*. The *Geist* appears not only as a container of the soul, of Sylvester's innermost essence, but also as a receptacle which he can use to absorb strength, energy, and power from a *göttlichen Urquell*. In this case, Sylvester's loss of consciousness serves as a remedy or a moment of healing. He returns "gestärkt mit Heroenkraft" and can now reassume his life (FS. 1.2.900). The volume of the *Geist* is the decisive factor in this resumption. The more the *Geist* can contain, the stronger its positive impact on the fainted body. The weakened, fainted body is now in the position of renegotiating and reestablishing its agency.

As this chapter illustrates, divine and spiritual elements are pivotal to Kleist's fainting scenarios. The focus on spaces lying beyond the earthly world proves to be a remedy in fits of fainting, which helps the spirit readjust to the new paradigms. The following chapter strengthens this argument by mapping out the opposite case. The fainting protagonist in "Michael Kohlhaas," the Saxon elector, is a character who exclusively focuses on the material world. His fainting takes a drastically different turn and as a consequence achieves

results significantly different than in Sylvester's case. I argue, however, that the only difference between Sylvester's fainting and that of the Saxon elector is the absence of God in the case of the latter. Even though there is only one differing element, it outlines a completely different pattern of fainting as it embeds Kleist's fainting scenarios in the discourse of spirituality. Fainting becomes a kind of divine panic room in which not codified spirituality and divinity supersede restraining dogmatic norms.

### **Faint at Heart – Syncope in “Michael Kohlhaas”**

In his novella “Michael Kohlhaas,” Kleist depicts the main protagonist’s fight for personal and political freedom, his struggle with injustice, absolutism, corrupt morals, and his pondering religion. Regardless of the fact that these themes encompass such differing concepts as politics or religion, the discourse of power, or as this chapter shows, the absence of power, dominates them all. The story centers on the character of Michael Kohlhaas, a horse trader from Brandenburg, and his struggle with political and religious authorities. His quarrel begins with unjustly imposed taxes he is required to pay in order to pass through an adjacent German land. Kohlhaas’s feeling of becoming the victim of arbitrary greed for money and power sparks his riot against authority. Kohlhaas’s riot soon turns into an avalanche of wrath and deadly violence covering the authorities as well as civilians in the lands of Saxony and Brandenburg. It culminates in the last scene of the novella in which Kohlhaas, who is just about to be executed, faces the Elector of Saxony. In such a moment, one would think the power is clearly articulated. One might expect the Elector of Saxony, who represents the highest authority of his country, to be the character who holds the reins of power. On the other end of this binary is Kohlhaas, who stands on the scaffolding and is only moments away from his own beheading. The distribution of power seems evident, and yet it is not. Seconds before Kohlhaas is decapitated, the distribution of power takes a dramatic turn. Looking straight in the eyes of the Elector, Michael Kohlhaas unfolds a small piece of paper and eats it. In turn, the Elector faints.

This scene and this scroll in particular maintain an ambivalent position in the research on Kleist's "Michael Kohlhaas." On the one hand, both have been assigned utmost importance and esteem in German literature. On the other hand, however, research only discusses this scene as the climax of revenge and hatred embodied by the character Michael Kohlhaas and therefore focuses solely on Kohlhaas. More than twenty years ago, Mathieu Carrière called "Michael Kohlhaas" Kleist's "haßerfüllteste [...] Novelle" and current research still explores the nuances of hatred in this novella.<sup>36</sup> Wrath is one of the most dominant leitmotifs in the research on Kleist's work. Leitmotifs in turn constitute the most active part in the latest research on "Michael Kohlhaas." The importance of the themes of hatred and wrath lead Roman Möhlmann to explore the leitmotifs of birth, coincidence, and the fall of man through the lens of a juxtaposition of the new versus the old world order, with Michael Kohlhaas as the advocate of old values.<sup>37</sup> In analogy, Seàn Allan explores the leitmotifs of hatred and revenge in his article "'Der Herr aber, dessen Leib du begehrst, vergab seinem Feind': The Problem of Revenge in Kleist's 'Michael Kohlhaas'." He interprets Kohlhaas's role in the last scene as a pedagogical one through which Kohlhaas demonstrates the righteousness of the moral values free from their aristocratic and ecclesiastic interpretations.<sup>38</sup>

Reading the character Kohlhaas in this light may be a different approach, yet in a way it tames Kohlhaas's wrath. Allan sees Kohlhaas's violent and destructive force as a controlled and channeled element, which he uses in order to teach a lesson. Allan's suggested

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<sup>36</sup> Mathieu Carrière, Für eine Literatur des Krieges, Kleist (Frankfurt am Main: Roter Stern, 1981) 46.

<sup>37</sup> Roman Möhlmann, Sündenfall, Zufall, Katastrophe und die "alte" und "neue" Ordnung in Heinrich von Kleists „Michael Kohlhaas“ (Grin Verlag, 2008).

<sup>38</sup> Seàn Allan, "'Der Herr aber, dessen Leib du begehrst, vergab seinem Feind': The Problem of Revenge in Kleist's 'Michael Kohlhaas,'" The Modern Language Review 92.3 (1997): 3.

reading further deprives the novella of its wild force and power that the act of the eating of the text scroll exhibits. As Clayton Koelb notes in his article “Incorporating the Text: Kleist’s ‘Michael Kohlhaas’,” by eating the document which the elector desires the most, Kohlhaas finds a way to overcome his struggle by not only deciphering the marks of the documents, but also by becoming one with them. Kohlhaas and the text become one and, as Koelb suggests, this text “goes beyond this world” and takes out of this world “anything or anyone which incorporates it.”<sup>39</sup> In his article, Koelb sees the possession of authoritative documents as the central concern in Kleist’s novella. Strengthening his thesis is the fact that documents of all kinds mark Kohlhaas’s path of violence and rebellion and are reified symbols of his struggle for and against power.<sup>40</sup> In *Passions of the Sign*, Andreas Gailus’s likewise emphasizes the importance of textual documents as symbols of power. Yet unlike Koelb, Gailus conducts an analysis of “Michael Kohlhaas” strictly in the context of the French Revolution, which led Kleist among others to the creation of “a new, and indeed revolutionary model of history, language, and subjectivity.”<sup>41</sup> Further, he locates his project alongside recent discussions about the performativity of language. The chosen medium of the verbalization of the three models is a so-called “energetic sign” which he sees fulfilled in nonverbal gestures and action conveying meaning and thus substituting language.<sup>42</sup> The

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<sup>39</sup> Clayton Koelb, “Incorporating the Text: Kleist’s ‘Michael Kohlhaas.’” *PMLA* 1005 (1990): 1105.

<sup>40</sup> Koelb 1102. “There are contracts, writs, letters, receipts, petitions, edicts, declarations, resolutions, notices, proclamations, certificates, inquiries, passports, notes, reports, dispatches, sentences, verdicts, and more.”

<sup>41</sup> Andreas Gailus, *Passions of the Sign. Revolution and Language in Kant, Goethe, and Kleist* (Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006) 11.

<sup>42</sup> In light of Kleist’s philosophical texts such as “Über die allmähliche Verfertigung der Gedanken beim Reden“ the notion presented by Gailus clearly exceeds the scope of this chapter.

importance of electoral documents and decrees of any kind as well as the notion of going beyond (this world) are indeed two major aspects of my reading of “Michael Kohlhaas.” Evidently, analyses of the character of Michael Kohlhaas dominate the research. However, the power struggle, even in the last scene, is based on the opposites of Kohlhaas and the elector. The elector’s fainting, which is an essential contribution to this struggle, is oftentimes marginalized as a reaction or a symptom triggered by trauma, shock, or an overwhelming fear. This chapter, however, looks exactly at this moment as pivotal for the discourse of power -- the discourse of *Macht* and *Ohnmacht* -- in the underlying novella. Further, it analyzes the symbolic culmination of religious devotion and spirituality, which again are indispensable for the space of the beyond. The present analysis is based on the duality of presence and absence of spirituality as the dominant element in “Michael Kohlhaas.” In addition, the following chapter explores the two concepts of political as well as spiritual power embodied by the elector in “Michael Kohlhaas.” In its course, the chapter explores the analogy between Kohlhaas’s rise to power and the elector’s fall, in actual as well as symbolic terms.

Kohlhaas’s rise to power culminates paradoxically in the scene on the scaffolding when Kohlhaas, a prisoner convicted of multiple crimes, awaits his decapitation. In this hopeless situation, he strikes his greatest blow by conveying to the elector that true power lies beyond this world. Yet in opposition to current research, this thesis focuses on the character of the elector rather than Michael Kohlhaas. It is the elector who enables Kohlhaas to develop such a great power over him and who enables Kohlhaas to release the cumulated power in his final blow. Further, as already laid out in the previous chapter, this chapter too outlines the gradual decline of the elector’s authority and health, which here must be read as

a progressive, or gradual, *Ohnmacht*. The gradual character of the elector's fainting is even more striking than Sylvester von Schroffenstein's, as he faints twice and, moreover, suffers from the deterioration of his physical and mental health. The concept of gradual fainting takes a drastic turn in the aftermath of this event: while Sylvester von Schroffenstein awakens from his unconsciousness to a new life, the elector steadily becomes weaker and finally fades away, "zerrissen an Leib und Seele" (MK 103).

In the investigation of the reasons for such a crucial and decisive difference, this chapter departs from previous research and lays out the vital role of divine concepts as encountered in *Die Familie Schroffenstein*. The abundance of divine traces in Sylvester's reflection on God and spirituality is in stark opposition to the absence of spirituality the case of the elector. Yet it is the universality in experiencing God and the divine origin of the human spirit, the knowledge of the fact and the ability to fall back on this knowledge, that are decisive as to whether the protagonist benefits from his fainting or not. The beyond, which in *Die Familie Schroffenstein* exists as a space and a shelter where the soul finds refuge, is not available for the elector. This spiritual space, however, is a decisive element in the recovery after fainting. In her article "Dancing with Words: On Kleist's Marionette Theater" Bianca Theisen elaborates on souls as occupying marked or unmarked spaces.<sup>43</sup> This chapter expands Theisen's notion and claims that fainting is such a space and whether it is a marked or unmarked space is strictly related to the degree of spiritual belief and the incorporation of divine presence in the character's life.

In his reading of "Michael Kohlhaas" Koelb points out that:

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<sup>43</sup>Bianca Theissen, "Dancing with Words: On Kleist's Marionette Theater" *MLN* 121.3 (2006): 522-523.



[p]aradoxically, the outcome of Kohlhaas's execution, in which the horse dealer's body is literally dismembered, is that the elector becomes "zerissen an Leib und Seele" 'physically and mentally a broken man' (103; 213). Kohlhaas, in other words, becomes whole while the elector falls apart.<sup>44</sup>

The notions of dismembering and falling apart have already appeared in the first chapter devoted to the fainting of Sylvester von Schroffenstein. Here, Kohlhaas's body is ripped apart in the last action of the Saxon authorities and, simultaneously, as a response to their inability to take apart Kohlhaas's spirit (*Geist*). However, what can be read as a moment of liberation of his *Geist* from its mortal and physical oppression alludes to the beginning of the end for the Saxon elector.<sup>45</sup> While to a certain extent it is applicable in Sylvester's fainting scenario, it fails in the case of the Saxon elector. The latter faints repeatedly, or as Kleist puts it "fällt von einer Ohnmacht in die andere," without ever gaining insight into his situation. Ultimately, he is left "zerrissen an Leib und Seele." Both quotations foreground the elector's frailty and instability.<sup>46</sup> The elector's syncope illustrates a downward spiral into a higher degree of fragmentation and blindness. This motion enhances the blind spot in the elector's center of perception. In addition, it not only inevitably leads to but also can only be resolved in syncope. The elector's further life, which Kleist describes merely as "das Weitere," is captured in a vicious circle that he does not have the power to break.<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> Koelb 1104.

<sup>45</sup> Dismembering or falling apart of identity are discussed in Jean-Luc Nancy's work on syncope as well as in Margarete Berger's article on Kleist's fainting scenarios. According to Nancy, it is "syncope that decides self-identity" as it is only in unconsciousness that consciousness "can allow itself to be grasped." In other words, Nancy understands a blackout of the consciousness as the only chance to gain actual consciousness, a true and reliable perception of the self-identity.

<sup>46</sup> This being torn, however, contradicts what Nancy foresees in his perception of syncope.

<sup>47</sup> MK 103: Der Kurfürst von Sachse kam bald darauf, zerrissen an Leib und Seele, nach Dresden zurück, wo man das Weitere in der Geschichte nachlesen muß. "

We may wonder why. Being the symbol and representative of the highest level of power and authority does not save the elector from a gradual decrease of his *Macht* and a subtle segue into a growing *Ohnmacht*. After first hearing Kohlhaas's concern, the elector does not hesitate to proclaim his adamant power, authority, and will to take drastic actions against Kohlhaas on numerous placards distributed across the country. This is interesting insofar as it states that by seeking the elector's judgment, Kohlhaas acknowledges his authority and power. Moreover, it also illustrates the elector's undisputed will to exert this authority and power. The verdict is clear, and yet, not nearly as devastating for Kohlhaas as the elector hopes. Rather, it sparks Kohlhaas to respond with drastic actions to the words communicated by authorities. That is, he answers with deeds marked by brutality, rebellion, and violence. Kohlhaas's initial acknowledgement of the elector's authoritative power is now rendered futile. By disregarding the verdict, Kohlhaas denies the power and authority, the *Macht*, that office and position bestow upon the elector and initiates the long and gradual process of segueing into *Ohnmacht*. Believing in the irrefutable authority of his words, judgments, and verdicts, the elector reveals his blind spot. Prior to the first encounter of these two characters, the elector is already familiar with Kohlhaas's rebellion. Kohlhaas's zest for action must have come to the elector's attention, yet not to his awareness. Instead of adjusting his further actions against Kohlhaas he adheres to the traditional method of communicating and exerting power through verdicts set on paper. The last scene of this novella proves that the belief in the power and impact of written words leads the elector to an unfortunate misconception of his life and surroundings.

Embedded in the historical setting of feudalism, the elector's blind spot and his narcissism remain unshaken. The documents that he passes represent not only a visualization

of his authority; they assume the role of a narcissistic glance in the mirror. Spelled out and distributed across his country, his power is widely known. On the basis of electoral insignia, the elector's presence penetrates all strata of the Saxon society. Further, while traveling through Saxony the elector catches a glimpse of the symbols of his power, just like one catches a glimpse in the mirror. One may consider the elector's perception as a state of complete blindness (*Verblendung*).<sup>48</sup> The penetration of the reality is not only inhibited by the blind spot, but prevented from reaching the elector's awareness.

As the elector sees the constitutive part of his identity in a textual expression of his authority, it is only through the texts that he comes into contact with his narcissistic and fatuous construction of reality. A prophecy made by a gypsy fortuneteller and written on a small piece of paper shatters the elector's perception and worldview. His belief in textual evidence combined with an equivocal proof of the fortuneteller's prophetic skills threatens the elector's stability and self-perception.<sup>49</sup> For the first time, the elector faces a situation in which he is forced to make a decision which impacts both his private and his public self. He falters. The equivocal nature of truth and the resultant indecision about how to further proceed maneuver the elector into a condition Nancy calls "undecidability."<sup>50</sup> These circumstances can be interpreted as an intersection of possibilities, a crossing of paths of life.<sup>51</sup> In other words, it is the moment in which the constructions and schemas of the

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<sup>48</sup> These documents are constitutive of his identity and therefore exceed by far Nancy's notion of the blind spot.

<sup>49</sup> MK 92-93. The prophecy concerns the elector's lives and prosperity of him and his descendants. Following the fortuneteller's allusion she knows exactly when the elector's dynasty was meant to fall and who would be the opponent who seizes Saxony. The proof of true is a roe buck crossing a market place.

<sup>50</sup> Nancy 8.

<sup>51</sup> Nancy 8. "An undecidable proposition is one that cannot be the object of any demonstration, neither by deducing it nor by excluding it from the system; it can neither be derived nor refuted; it does not submit to the logic of a system, though neither does it oppose it."

elector's life, which Nancy refers to as theories, have to be renegotiated. Their meaning changes due to a twofold impact: one coming from outside and the other revolving around the blind spot which blurs the character's perception.

Facing this situation the elector finds himself forced into an immediate reaction, in other words, into making an immediate decision. The disbelief in what he himself just witnessed supersedes his initial attempt to hoax the fortuneteller's prophetic skills. A battery of witnesses willing to take the runaway stag as a living proof for the gypsy's truthfulness pressures the elector to acknowledge her skills as well. The event that just took place cannot be repressed into the margins of the elector's awareness. The urge to blind it out is halted by the possibility of the stag being an actual and truthful piece of evidence. The elector's ability to make a decision appears to be paralyzed in this situation. At the same time, his blind spot is deprived of its function as a tool to create a selective and distorted perception, which might protect him from such undesirable sights. Since Nancy's notion of "undecidability" incorporates the superimposition of the blind spot and the center of vision, this incident restricts Nancy's theory of syncope. Here, the situation implies that the blind spot, which has been a constitutive part of the elector's perception of his surroundings and his self, receives the first fissures. The elector faces facts which his blind spot is not able to cover; hence he cannot turn away from this occurrence.

The elector's state worsens. The rupture in his blind spot and narcissism induces another stage in the process of his gradual fainting. Not being able to get hold of the written prophecy proves to be an essential turn in the elector's physical and mental state. Possessing the prophecy supersedes everything else to such an extent that it can easily be regarded as a new blind spot. In analogy to the growing desire for the prophecy, which at this point already

bears traces of being dependent on the prophecy, the elector's medical condition deteriorates.

After various attempts to retrieve the prophecy and after failed attempts to prevent

Kohlhaas's execution, the elector's *Ohnmacht* manifests as follows:

Aus Gram und Ärger über all die mißglückten Versuche, verfiel [der Kurfürst] in eine neue Krankheit; und da der Kämmerer ihn an einem Morgen besuchte, zeigte er ihm die Briefe, die er, um dem Kohlhaas das Leben zu fristen, und somit wenigstens Zeit zu gewinnen, des Zettels, den er besäße, habhaft zu werden, an den Wiener und Berliner Hof erlassen (MK 59).

Kohlhaas, who is in the possession of the prophecy, and who was previously chased by the authorities, is now to be saved simply because of the prophecy he wears in a capsule around his neck. The elector is also willing to sacrifice the safety of his population, who suffers from Kohlhaas's violent rage and attacks. In other words, he is willing to pay whatever it takes.

His initial zeal to take decisive measures against Kohlhaas gives way to desperate attempts to stop the irrevocable machinery of the elector's own authorities. His change does not remain unnoticed. Both the emperor as well as the elector of Brandenburg describe his changed behavior as "aufs äußerste befremd[lich]" (MK 89-90). There is, however, no textual evidence as to what extent the changes that others around him perceive are also noticed by the elector. The elector identifies himself with the missing prophecy to such a high degree that it becomes an essential part of his self-image. In analogy to former decrees and documents which served as visualization of his authority and power, this piece of paper appears to bear essential elements for the creation of his narcissistic self image. It is striking how highly the elector values written texts in the construction of his own identity and self-image. Not being able to find the prophetic text equals not being able to construct a certain part of his identity. From the elector's point of view, texts are reality and convey to him what and who he is. He knows that the prophecy holds some information about his future,

something he cannot produce himself. Without this piece of information the elector is deprived of a mirror-like tool in which he can see his reflection.

The elector's initial actions against Kohlhaas and his ensuing decision not to prosecute Kohlhaas, illustrate his inability to decide and renegotiate the altering meaning of his surroundings and thus demonstrates his *Ohnmacht*. The fact that the elector "in eine neue Krankheit verfiel" is a strong signal for his general weakening. Further, the term "neue Krankheit" implies that it is another illness, one in a series of illnesses the elector has been suffering from since his encounter with the fortuneteller. Indulging in sickness alludes to the hypochondriac nature of his condition. According to Robert Tobin, "hypochondriacs [around 1800] are those who falsely believe themselves sick. [...] The patient is constantly concerned about his own state of health."<sup>52</sup> Moreover, medicine around 1800 considered hypochondria a "fanciful disease," and "a kind of early white-collar, stress-related ailment."<sup>53</sup> Indeed, the elector's condition appears to be stress-related as something so utterly important to him remains irretrievable. His state of health is described simply as a new disease, one without any distinctive symptoms or feature. The doctors called to cure him do not have a remedy, which strengthens the concept of a hypochondriac reaction to stress and fear. According to Tobin, however, hypochondria was believed to originate "in excessive introspection."<sup>54</sup> Yet an "excessive introspection" does not seem to be the elector's primary occupation and contradicts the notion of the blind spot. The situation is quite the opposite, as the elector's orientation points outside of himself as he bases the construction of the self-image radically

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<sup>52</sup> Robert Tobin, Doctor's Orders. Goethe and Enlightenment Thought (Lewisburg, PA: Bucknell University Press, 2001) 100.

<sup>53</sup> Tobin 100–101.

<sup>54</sup> Tobin 102.

on the sources that come from without rather than from within. Ultimately, the elector is constantly concerned not with his state of health but with the state of his identity and the way he is perceived by others, which evidently disqualifies him as a hypochondriac.

On the day of Kohlhaas's execution, the elector is rather an apparition of his former self than anything else. The decrease of power is now visible, almost tangible, as all the failed attempts to save Kohlhaas prove. In addition, his physical appearance contributes greatly to a weakly depiction of the elector. For instance, unlike his first encounter with Kohlhaas, when he is more than eager to present his power and authority and to surround himself by visualizations of his power fixed on paper, he now surrounds himself with knights, "die ihn mit ihren Leibern halb bedeckten" (MK 102). First, this alludes to a smaller height and body size of the elector, as if the growing *Ohnmacht*, which translates into a diminishing of his *Macht*, has also diminished the size and aura of his body. Shortly before the actual fainting, the progression of the fainting process manifests itself on the basis of the elector's physical appearance. The phrase "mit Leibern halb bedeckten" creates a picture of a monarch who seeks protection and fencing-off. Simultaneously, it puts forth the idea of rejecting the incurred situation. The elector clings desperately to the remains of the construction of his world and image. The new documents all prove that his power, his *Macht*, is decreasing as they all state that Kohlhaas's decapitation is irrefutable. In other words, if we cling to the idea of documents as mirrors of the monarch's self-image, these (new) mirrors reflect an image of weakness and powerlessness, his *Ohnmacht*. Yet at a second glance we see that the human shield covers him only halfway. His weakness and fear are not yet stronger than his desire to read the prophecy and thus redefine his identity and reconstruct himself. The elector's entire identity, the image that he bears of himself, is strictly dependent

on this text. Facing the shattered remains of his world and his self-image, the prophecy serves as the missing piece that remedies his seemingly hopeless situation. He is *ohmächtig*.

In the moment his body faints, the elector has to witness how Michael Kohlhaas eats “his” prophecy. In response to these stimuli he faints. His faculties of perception shut off and he can no longer process the information and impressions. The negotiation of power and attaching a new meaning to the ongoing paradigm shift fail. The aforementioned notion of “undecidability” also leads the elector to syncope as he does not manage to choose a meaningful way to handle the shifts. The elector proves to be as fossilized as the paradigm he applies to himself and his life. The inability to make an actual decision in order to be able to move on prevents a successful rehabilitation and continuation on another level. He is unable to adjust to the paradigm shifts he establishes and regards as irrevocable. In addition, this paradigm is now altered to a degree that it cannot convey any kind of meaning to the elector. The tedious process of negotiating power with Kohlhaas culminates in the elector’s fainting. The inability to make sense and to express a reaction to what he experiences forces the *Geist*, or soul, out of the elector’s body.

Yet, once the *Geist* abandons the elector’s body where does it go? With Sylvester von Schroffenstein the case is clear. Sylvester goes back to his divine *Urquell* in order to return with “Heroenkraft” and confront the incidents anew. The Saxon Elector, on the other hand, never discloses where his *Geist* goes when it leaves his body, even though it does so several times throughout the text (MK 82). There is no space for his *Geist* during in his unconscious state, it simply has knows no place to go. Further, his recovery from his loss of consciousness is not nearly as successful as Sylvester’s. The elector returns to Dresden “zerrissen an Leib und Seele, [...] wo man das Weitere in der Geschichte nachlesen muß” (MK 103). Weakened



from the obsession with the prophecy, the elector does not have enough strength to recover from his irretrievable loss, the ultimate loss of his identity. His object of desire, which in the final stages of the novella becomes the center of the elector's world, is gone for good. As Koelb points out, by eating the text and through dying, Kohlhaas takes the prophecy out of this world. Tragically, anything lying beyond this world is definitely not part of the elector's world, or rather not part of his comprehension of it. Therefore, the prophecy is doomed to remain irretrievable for the elector. Losing this prophecy strikes a devastating blow, but so is the accusation of being a child murderer in Sylvester's case. Hence, both men face an ordeal with a comparable potential impact. The manner in which they deal with it, however, is completely different. Sylvester completely recovers both in terms of his physical health as well as his social status, whereas the Saxon Elector does not recover either. His medical condition is described as "zerrissen an Leib und Seele," which evidently shows an even graver decrease in mental and physical health. In addition, his further life story, or "das Weitere" as Kleist puts it, has to be read in the annals. Evidently, his further reign and actions are not sufficiently important to be remembered by the people. The impact of his fainting transforms the elector's existence into something inconspicuous and meaningless. Yet what could be the reason? As stated before, these two cases share many parallels, but the aftermath could not be more different. To reach a satisfactory reason for this, it is crucial to get to the bottom of what both men, Sylvester and the Elector, determine to be the center of their focus, or in other words the cause of their fainting. For both men their focus is a riddle, a mystery so to speak. For Sylvester, God is the mystery, for the elector it is a scroll containing a prophecy made by a fortuneteller. In other words, Sylvester's focus revolves around spaces of the beyond, *das Jenseits*, while the elector's focus remains attached to

earthly spaces, das *Diesseits*. Hence, the striking difference between these two men is the fact that one of them holds the door open to a space or realm that appears to be strictly connected with God, or at least a divine or spiritual presence. The *Urquell* Sylvester seeks serves as a universal way to reestablish his shattered identity.

Sylvester's unconsciousness leads him to the beyond, which enables him to experience and benefit from divine revelations. This equips him with sufficient trust, strength and inspiration in order to reflect on two things: first, the factors that led to his fainting, and secondly, the factors that are decisive for a successful reintegration in his life. His fainting takes him beyond this world and elevates him into spaces which exceed earthly, i.e. restricted, understanding of life and matters. The central element in the Elector's fainting, however, is a text written on a piece of paper. This piece of paper is in Kohlhaas's possession before and after his death. Further, it is physically graspable, and it contains the prophecy from an elderly fortuneteller, who is also not in the beyond, *im Jenseits*. Hence, while Sylvester makes use of some kind of divine archive of insight and reflection, which is situated right at the "göttlichen Urquell," the Elector exclusively focuses on the material world, the *Diesseits*. It is his earthly existence that impels the Elector to his deeds, actions, and reflections, and that proves too insignificant and futile in his attempt to gain knowledge about his future. From the Elector's earthly and materialistic point of view, the prophecy symbolizes absolute knowledge about his future. Moreover, in the course of time the elector has come to perceive this prophecy as a constitutive part of his identity, of his self. The elector is only able to be what the scroll reflects. Through this, however, he cuts himself off from the divine spaces which facilitate a convalescing from altering paradigms and adjusting to new circumstances. The elector mistakes the scroll of paper for his *Urquell*; he glorifies it

as if it contained a message scribbled by a divine entity. Since the Elector's comprehension of it is strictly and utterly based on earthly concepts, his *Geist* cannot exceed earthly conceptions, it cannot rise to the heights to gain an overview like Sylvester does. He therefore fails to function as a receptacle to absorb strength, energy and power from a *göttlichen Urquell*. Earthly scales, measures and concepts are not made to grasp divine dimensions. Thus, they are not capable of absorbing divine and absolute concepts. The only way out of this situation is by turning one's considerations towards the divine realm -- a path the elector fails to recognize. A lack of a divine space forces the elector to faint without grace, physically and spiritually.

The following chapter illustrates the intricate case of the prince of Homburg. The prince's fainting spells reveal analogies to those of Sylvester and the elector, yet at the same time it opposes both of them. Like Sylvester, the prince recollects worlds lying beyond the physical world. He explores them through dreaming, sleepwalking or fainting. He has a precise idea of what the thereafter looks like and all these spaces are part of his consciousness. As with the elector, however, the prince makes no use of them and appears to be entirely caught up in the corporeal world. The reason for this difference lies in the quality of their syncope. The prince's syncope is a part of his character and personality and he carries it *within*. The incorporation of the syncope shall be the focus of the following chapter.

## **The Fragmented Prince of Homburg – Fainting Spells in *Prinz Friedrich von Homburg***

Kleist's final play, *Der Prinz von Homburg*, is seemingly set up to tell the story of the prince of Homburg and his battle at Fehrbellin. Yet even though the title may imply a dramatic reproduction of the prince's biography during the time of the battle, Kleist abandons factual loyalty and creates instead a gloomy, Romantic hero who wanders the thresholds of the realms of this world and the hereafter. Although the battle provides the central narrative structure of the play and serves as the decisive moment in the prince's fate, it is not the focus of the entire work. Rather, it is the prince's mysterious somnambulism, reverie, vision-like dreams, and frequent fainting that make him a unique character among his contemporaries. Like many other of Kleist's characters the prince is at war. As a character he is regarded as ambivalent, and effusive, but most of all he is in despair because he is struggling against the authority of which he is part.<sup>55</sup> As a prince he is an official member of the electoral court with representative as well as executive functions and powers. He represents and executes the laws, which he himself violates and thus evokes the great tragedy that almost costs him his life. Yet this is not what makes him so exceedingly unique. Apart from his superficial struggle with laws and authorities, the prince fights a battle with his consciousness which, paradoxically, is wide awake during his states of unconsciousness or sleepwalking and opaque when he is conscious and awake. It distinguishes the prince from other characters in so far as it means that parts of the prince's personality are always unconscious, while others

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<sup>55</sup> Carrière 39.

are always conscious. While sleepwalking the prince has the most vivid and active dreams that border on visions and reveries. Yet while conscious and awake the prince is lost, confused, and disoriented as to what is true and real.

The foundation of his reality rests on three binaries: waking and dreaming; life and death; and sanity and insanity. These three levels constitute equal parts of the prince's consciousness and reality and thus create the framework in which he attempts to negotiate his identity as a public persona, a private man, a spirited warrior, and a romantic lover. Yet his struggle to unite all of his personae on one level of consciousness fails. His fall results from his failure to combine his personalities, and even though it is not a deadly one, it is still tragic as the prince cannot indulge in the fame and glory he thinks he deserves. The prince loses this battle which reinforces the gaps between these levels of consciousness. These gaps are what constitute the prince's syncope, since he is composed of these realities to the same extent as he also consists of the syncope between them. In other words, he consists of fragments which he fails to bridge. Living between these fragments and simultaneously in all of them not only challenges his perception and reasoning; it alienates the prince from his social surroundings. The actual physical fainting becomes almost a marginal phenomenon and is therefore greatly neglected by research. Yet interestingly, the two fainting scenarios frame the whole play in *Prinz Friedrich von Homburg*. The first one occurs in the first act, and the second in the very last. For Gudrun Debriacher the prince's fainting in the final scene is a clear case of an open ending, which indicates that the "Konflikt, der dem Drama zugrunde liegt, noch nicht ausgestanden ist."<sup>56</sup> Without a doubt, the ending in *Prinz Friedrich von Homburg* does not deliver a resolution. However, it is more than a purely open

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<sup>56</sup> Debriacher 103.

ending. It is again a clear message that the prince experiences something he is not able to process and understand and thus seeks advice in one of the realms accessible to him. This “Verfallenheit in die Welt der Träume” is a misdemeanor. Accordingly, the prince is not responsible for his deeds and actions. This means that the instances of somnambulism serve here as mitigating circumstance’s for the prince’s disobedience towards the state. While Debriacher sees them as an excuse for the prince’s disobedience, this chapter explores the possibility of reading them as the prince’s deliberate means to make his way to fame, glory, and success in the public sphere. Every transgression of the norms committed by the prince is an attempt to renegotiate a new meaning for his life as he is not able to do so by conventional means.

A similar tenor dominates Helmut Schneider’s article on “Standing and Falling in Heinrich von Kleist.” He analyses the prince’s fainting and somnambulism as a metaphorical fall and the prince’s struggle with and later acceptance of the death sentence as an appreciation of “the self as part of a higher order, that of the state.”<sup>57</sup> The concept of a “higher order” is one that figures prominently in this research, yet unlike Schneider, I do not relate it to a higher legal order, but rather a spiritual one. Further, Schneider sees this play as a “new dramatic form of Schauspiel [in which] the interiorized fall makes the tragic death superfluous.”<sup>58</sup> He understands the metaphorical and interiorized fall to be an attempt to “appreciate the self as part of a higher order, that of the state.”<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> Schneider 502 – 518.

<sup>58</sup> Schneider 507.

<sup>59</sup> Schneider 507.

This chapter deviates in this aspect from Schneider's standpoint. Indeed, Kleist's last play is a "new dramatic form of Schauspiel" yet not simply because it makes the tragic death superfluous. Rather, I shall argue, Kleist here forfeits the conventional dramatic death, which traditionally means the physical death, and substitutes it with an interiorized death analogous to the interiorized fall. As this chapter demonstrates, the prince's splintered identity, which is scattered over numerous realms of existence, makes it impossible for the prince to participate fully in his life. This leads to the prince's longing to die and his fainting is an expression of this longing. In analogy to the two previous chapters, fainting here symbolizes the decision to flee the corporeal world and take refuge in the hereafter. It is only there that the prince can flee the mockery and failure, and finally indulge in fame and glory as "Ruhm das größte der Güter der Erde."<sup>60</sup>

In previous chapters of this thesis fainting and unconsciousness have been clearly associated with realms in which the human spirit (*Geist*) takes refuge at its source of origin (*Urquell*). Whether syncope becomes a remedy for a problematic situation is strictly dependent on the extent of religious and spiritual concepts as part of the protagonist's world view. In addition, in both previous scenarios fainting has been introduced as a gradual occurrence rather than a momentary event. Yet *Prinz Friedrich von Homburg* is different in many ways. The gradual fainting illustrated previously reaches here the paradoxical state of constant yet partial state of unconsciousness. As I shall argue, parts of the prince's personality are unconscious due to the exclusive and binary structure of his perception of life and himself. His confusion while awake and his clear visions while sleepwalking do not allow for a complete unconsciousness in terms of a blackout, neither do they allow for complete consciousness and awareness. Parts of the prince's reality are always impaired.

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<sup>60</sup> Heinrich von Kleist, letter to Ulrike von Kleist, 26 October 1803.

Further, as the set up of the fainting scenarios may insinuate, the prince finds himself trapped in a vicious cycle of events. In the end he is just as unconscious as he is in the beginning. This further implies that the prince cannot resolve his situation by earthly means. He therefore grasps for means that lie in the beyond. Yet the fragmentation of his personal features, aims, and perceptions make it impossible for him to release himself from this truly vicious circle.

A close look at the way Kleist introduces his last hero reveals a man who can hardly be taken seriously by his aristocratic and militaristic surroundings at court. Even before the action in Kleist's play begins, the image of the prince of Homburg is defined in negative, almost lunatic terms. In the middle of the night the prince of Homburg "sitzt mit bloßem Haupt und offner Brust, halb wachend halb schlafend, unter einer Eiche und windet sich einen Kranz" (PH 1.1.). That he is bareheaded and unbuttoned, as he is described in the stage directions, clearly violates the courtly sartorial protocol. The fact that the scene takes place during the night does not dismiss the prince from his duties as a public figure representing the court at all times and by all means. Moreover, he not only transgresses the dress code, but he also deviates from the norm in his state of consciousness as well as that of his behavior. In the improper garment, with his consciousness captured somewhere between the waking and sleeping, he sits under an oak and weaves a wreath, like a young girl. The decay and destruction of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, in which Kleist chose to set his last play, dissolve in almost enchanted heathen scenes. The oak, the wreath, and the disheveled garment create an atmosphere of an unspoiled and innocent primal communion between the protagonist and his dream world. The outside world does not play a role at all, and only gets the chance to interfere by manifesting itself in his reveries.



In the moment of fainting, the sound of his given name (Arthur) being called from the corporeal world hits the prince like a bullet. His final fainting, prompts his beloved Natalie to say “Himmel! Die Freude tötet ihn” (PH 5.11.) Both scenarios show the prince in a sudden, death-like moment, and the witness’s descriptions of the events play with words and concepts of death. Hearing his name, or respectively, learning about his reprieve, cuts him loose from whatever keeps him functioning and upright. His body sinks powerlessly to the floor, and thus demonstrates the loss of power, control, and evidently his upright position. According to Helmut Schneider,

for the eighteenth century [...] standing upright, rising to one’s feet in order to confront the world and face one’s fellow human, distinguished man from animal and symbolized his moral autonomy. Correspondingly, falling [...] designated the failure to live up to this distinct position and served as a reminder of human frailty.<sup>61</sup>

Due to his frequent fainting and frequent benighted and aimless sleepwalking, the prince is a common object of falling or sinking. Ultimately, this is how Kleist introduces him, in a casual sitting position under an oak tree. If we apply Schneider’s reading to the prince’s frequent fainting, stumbling, and falling, deeming the prince to be a respected human being becomes difficult. The fits of unconsciousness and somnambulism foreground the prince’s vulnerability. They break through the thick layer of public norms, laws, and rules which entrap the prince’s private being. Ruptures in this layer offer a rare insight into his other persona, the private one, the one that makes him humane.

His vulnerability is also the key factor in the depiction of the prince as a private human being. The prince’s given name (*Rufname*) is Arthur. In its Celtic origin Arthur means the bear. A bear may be an awe-inspiring animal, yet it is an animal. During the

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<sup>61</sup> Scheider 504.

fateful battle of Fehrbellin the prince is described as fighting “dem Bären gleich” (PH 2.6. 551). He develops stunning and literally awe-inspiring powers and skills, and he appears to gain the victory due to instinct-driven action and tactics. Animals are instinct-driven, not princes and commanders. Hence, after introducing him as a dreamily sleepwalker, after accusing him of being mentally ill, Kleist now plays with the notion of the prince not being entirely reasonable and responsible. By placing the instinctive and driven animalistic feature not only into the prince’s deviant (not-upright) behavior but also right into his core, Kleist obstructs the prince’s possibility to find his way back into normality. The prince will never be able to fully realize himself, either as a private or as a public figure, which is the reason for the prince’s constant fleeing reality.

The prince’s instincts and drives are not the only barricades, which obstruct his way back into a successful normality. In previous chapters, the cases of Sylvester von Schroffenstein and the Saxon elector foreground a possible way out of *Ohnmacht*, into the state of control and power. The way leads through a readjusting of perception in accordance with the paradigm shift that takes place. God and realms of divine sources are the decisive elements of a successful readjustment and reintegration into the daily life. Their absence leads inevitably into a mental and physical withering, or even atrophy, as the case of the Saxon elector proves. Even if the elector does not make use of it, he still has at least a theoretical chance for a reintegration by eliminating the blind spot from his vision, and then shifting his focus, or refocusing his vision onto an *Urquell* that lies beyond this world. It is one that takes the elector’s perception and comprehension beyond this world, or simply above earthly matters.

The prince's focus is indisputably directed on the realms of the beyond. He has dreams and visions, has knowledge of what paradise looks like, and talks several times about his *Geist*. The degree of the prince's belief in God or other religious concepts does not play as much role as the mere fact that these concepts are parts of his perception of life and his surroundings. And yet, the prince is not able to find a balance, to readjust his perceptions to all the ongoing changes and shifts. To unlock this riddle, we have to go back to Nancy's blind spot as it has been shown to be the trigger element for fainting in the two previous cases of male fainting discussed.<sup>62</sup> In the prince's case this is not unproblematic. The problem with applying Nancy's notion of the blind spot to the prince of Homburg is that unlike in the cases of Sylvester and the Saxon elector, the prince has something one may call multiple visions, congruent with his multiple roles, or identities, that the prince has to unite in his life. Even though Sylvester as well as the elector are public as well as private figures, their roles are not divided by such a yawning gap as in the case with the prince of Homburg. As a private man, he has to bear his reputation of a lunatic and a sick person. The electoral princess's first reaction after seeing the sleepwalking prince is "Er braucht des Arztes!" (PH.1.1.33). Moreover, this reputation is aggravated by his disoriented and troubled, at times even quixotic, behavior. It is not only emphasized by stage directions or other characters's comments but also by the prince's own remarks such as: "Ich weiß nicht liebster Heinrich, wo ich bin" (PH 1.4.111). At the same time, he is evidently a fabulous and driven commander in battles, a respected warrior, as evidenced by the long list of petitions for his reprieve. Unfortunately, his enthusiasm almost earns him a death sentence. Hence, while for

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<sup>62</sup> Nancy 15.

Sylvester and the Saxon elector the blind spot is merely a weakness in their perception of the world, a kind of blindness (*Verblendung*) relating to one phenomenon, it is the compilation of several perceptions of phenomena occurring either at the same time, or within a short period of time, which constitutes the prince's blind spot. Or rather, the case of the prince of Homburg reveals numerous blind spots since he has several centers of perception.

It is the multiplicity of the prince's centers of perception, and accordingly of the blind spots, that diminishes his ability to explore and benefit from a divine beyond. The distinctiveness of this ability simply drowns among all the other fragments constituting the prince's whole as it crumbles into one focus out of many and contributes to the scattering of the prince's self. Trying to unite these fragments within one person and one life places the prince in a constant battle with at least one of his centers of perception. The simultaneity of their existence involves multiple views and perceptions of all of them as a whole, as well as each every one of them individually. Not only does this inevitably lead to exactly the kind of confusion the prince experiences on daily basis, but more importantly, this leads to a fragmentation of his self. Yet this fragmentation is constitutive of the prince's syncope. Unlike in the two previous cases of gradual fainting, the prince represents a case of constant syncope of fragments of the self. After all, the prince himself states that he feels "zerstreut" and "geteilt" (PH 2.2.420). Concerning this fragmentation of his life, the prince says in a moment of musing: "Träum ich? Wach ich? Leb ich? Bin ich bei Sinnen?" (PH 2.10.768). It is this statement that mirrors all of his levels of existence, that is, levels of perceptions, and ultimately fragments of his life. Moreover, it mirrors all of the battlegrounds that constitute his life and persona. These battlegrounds are caused by blind spots disabling him from dealing with truthful facts. Ultimately, the struggling on so many battlegrounds not only

constitutes his life, but also his *Ohnmacht*. The prince's being "geteilt" scatters him over numerous fragments, like mosaic pieces. Unfortunately, the prince fails to bridge them. In other words, the gaps between the fragments determine his life to the same extent as the fragments themselves. Gaps however are syncope, which means, that parts of the prince are almost doomed to be in constant syncope unless the prince finds a means to bridge and unite these pieces within his one body and one spirit. This also explains why the prince appears to be unconscious even though he actually is conscious.

The largest gaps, i.e., the most significant syncopes, the prince experiences, are those existing alongside three binaries in the aforementioned statement: the first between life and dream ("Träum ich? Wach ich?"), the second between life and death ("Leb ich?"), the last one between a life ruled by sanity and one by insanity ("Bin ich von Sinnen?"). The first binary defines the reciprocity between waking and dreaming. "Träum ich? Wach ich?" the prince truly cannot tell himself. Confusion like this occurs several times throughout the text. Arthur's dream in the very first scene is a perfect example of such a confusion which is caused by an inseparable mutual dependence of the two concepts of waking and dreaming. The inseparability of these two elements also entails an overlapping of them. In the first scene of the play, the sleepwalking prince weaves certain elements of the reality into his dreams. The wreath that he dreams about has an actual material counterpart. The elector along with his wife and daughter is another real life counterpart to the "Reigen" the prince sees approach. The prince's entanglement in the dream-waking confusion goes even further as he seemingly communicates with his surroundings. Once truly awake, however, the prince has no recollection of this incident and communication as an actual event. Rather, he recalls only fragments of his dream. He is surprised to find himself where he is and does not recall

arriving there. He concludes he must have sleepwalked again. The overlap of waking and dreaming leaves the prince somehow as if in syncope. Although his dreams are very vivid and ample, and his waking life full of ongoing ups and downs, the prince fails to indulge in either one of them fully. He does not explore the realm of dreams without the intervention from the waking world, and analogously he cannot experience his waking life because he cannot see reality for itself, without elements from his dreams. One element of this binary is always exists in an unconscious way, as if it had sunken in syncope. Through the simultaneity of these realms, parts of the prince's life are inaccessible, in a comparable way to somebody who faints. The negotiation of meaning cannot begin to take place as this situation offers too many opportunities to attach a meaning to a particular event.

A further source for a misperception of his life is the fact that the prince is not only unable to disentangle the levels of dream and reality, but also the different levels of time as the present and the past segue into one another. The dream in the initial scene can also be regarded as a piece of evidence for the prince's ability to cross the boundaries of time and cast a view on the future. The dream's initial resemblance to the actions occurring at that point in time around the partially unconscious prince turns out to be a forecast of the events which occur in the final scene of the play. The superficial congruence between the dream and the present is easily understandable. The prince sees the elector with his wife and daughter, accompanied by pages carrying torches. Accordingly, the translation into the prince's dream symbolism is that of an illuminated *Reigen*. The wreath the prince weaves during his sleepwalking/unconsciousness finds its counterpart in the laurel wreath of which he dreams. Almost every detail in the prince's dream has a counterpart in the ongoing reality. And yet, the wreath he is weaving is not a laurel wreath. Kleist does not disclose which plants the

prince uses for his wreath, yet Kleist also refrains from stating that it indeed is a laurel wreath. The only laurel wreath to be used in this play, however, is deployed in the very last scene. Further, a party of three accompanied by some pages in the distance constitute a rather poor *Reigen*, which is defined by a throng of people who dance, sing, or make music. A party of three could theoretically become a throng in a dream. Yet the play's last scene is described in the stage directions as follows:

Der Kurfürst mit dem Lorbeerkrantz, um welchen die goldne Kette geschlungen ist, Kurfürstin, Prinzessin Natalie, Feldmarschall Dörfling, Obrist Kottwitz, Hohenzollern, Golz, usw. , Hofdamen, Offiziere und Fackeln erscheinen auf der Rampe des Schlosses (PH 5.11).

This indeed does look more like a throng of people than a group of three. Further, the scenery is “von Gold und Silber strahlend” as the prince reports right after awaking from this visionary dream. Hence the scenery is gloriously beaming in colors of gold and silver, which evidently alludes to a great festiveness of the occurrence. Again, the coincidental gathering of the elector and his family is not festive and overwhelming enough to serve as the only possible interpretation of the two scenes. It is true that in his immediate report on his dream, the *Reigen* withdraws leaving the prince with nothing but a glove. This is a strong piece of evidence that the prince alone intertwines the events of reality with those of dreams. Yet it does not dismantle the notion that Kleist may also be playing with a notion that the prince is foreseeing the future. This, however, complicates the prince's life and aggravates his confusion, and this aggravates in turn his state of *Ohnmacht*. A life covered with intersections and overlaps between life and dreams cannot take place in an unobstructed manner. The perception of it is utterly disturbed as the prince is unable to draw a clear line between waking and dreaming. This overlap disables at least one element of the binary. His vision is not troubled by one single blind spot, but by a multitude of spots completely

distorting his view. Thus, the prince cannot focus anymore, and accordingly, he cannot readjust according to paradigm shifts as it is impossible to determine which of them are truly taking place. Despite the fact that his body is awake, some parts of the prince faint every time a dream like this blurs his perception. His body continues as if he was awake, yet his perception faints. Parts of the prince's personality are thus constantly in a state of unconsciousness.

The second binary is that between life and death. "Leb ich?" calls for the counter-question: am I dead? During his life, the prince reports or recollects from a dream, what the paradisiacal beyond looks like. He states that the sun

scheint dort auch,  
Über buntre Felder noch, als hier:  
Ich glaubs, nur schade, daß das Auge modert,  
Das diese Herrlichkeit erblicken soll (PH 4.3.4.1293-1296)

This thought comes clearly from a this-worldly point of view as he distinguishes between *hier* und *dort*. However, the eye of the beholder is doomed to decay, and in fact is already in the process of decaying here in this world, while still alive. The two levels overlap and contradict each other at the same time. It is in death that he gets to see paradisiacal glory, and in life that the organ of his vision, the one the blind spot primarily revolves around, decomposes. How is the blind spot ever to be compensated for in this case? The prince understands well that life and death are inseparable, yet his blind spot in this area of his perception of life forces him to fail to see that in life these two concepts have to be separated. Even though in these moments of revelation the prince does not faint, syncope still lingers: the failure to embrace life solely and the exaggerated focus on death bestow syncope on his ability to live his life and see it as it is. It is his life that faints. Or in other words, it is this fragment of his whole that faints.



The third binary, of sanity and insanity, centers on the prince's inability to trust his senses. "Helft Freunde, helft! Ich bin verrückt!" is only one of many exclamations the prince makes during his ordeal of imprisonment and the impending execution (PH 2.10.772). This exclamation is the prince's reaction to the revelation that his defeat of the Swedish army is officially considered a violation of law and order. His initial reputation for being a lunatic and a mentally sick person, or simply "des Teufels" becomes thus an element of his own self-perception (PH 1.4.92). His reluctance to believe and accept this drastic turn of fortune worsens until he finally comes to reason and understands why his actions must be punished in this fatal way. Yet this state only lasts for a short while. Interestingly, the verdict, which sentences the prince to death, evokes only a verbally expressed loss of senses. That means that the prince merely voices an assumption, a precipitous conclusion that he had lost his mind (*Sinne*). The actual loss of senses, not in terms of sanity necessarily, but in the literal meaning of senses does not occur until the final scene, when the prince learns of his reprieve. There, he faints and for a short moment all of his senses are gone. Hence, in the case of the prince, the loss of *Sinne*, senses, happens on a physical rather than mental level. It is through the senses that humans see, hear, feel, taste, and smell; simply put, experience the world. Losing them means being eliminated from living thus and symbolizes syncope of these senses.

The aforementioned blind spot which in Nancy's version obstructs only one's vision, exists in the case of the prince of Homburg in an extended version. By losing his senses, or the mere thought of losing them, the prince grants the idea of a blind spot a far larger area in his life because he perceives and comprehends his world through all of his senses. Every sense that is "lost" is impaired, at least for the moment of fainting, which leads to the

conclusion that impaired senses can also be considered obstructed by a blind spot. Here, the blind spot does not necessarily refer to vision, but rather the blind spot encompasses greater parts of the prince. Every single obstructed sense leads to a deeper misconception of the world, an ill-conceived theory, which then inevitably leads to another, traumatizing paradigm shift. One such ill-conception is the idea to accept the death penalty as an irrefutably correct and good decision. The turn in the prince's opinion happens quickly, yet once he has come to accept this opinion it becomes as irrefutable as the elector's verdict appears to be. The prince internalizes the elector's verdicts as if they were of his own creation. The internalization and utmost acceptance of his death sentence go as far as to cause syncope in the moment he learns about his reprieve. The blind spot that caused his acceptance of his sentence is one that obscures the prince's senses. The swift yet drastic switch from being desperate about the verdict, to accepting the full scale of its consequences can only be explained with a deep mistrust concerning his senses. His profound fear of losing his mind, to be *von Sinnen*, leads to a complete mistrust of anything he perceives. The German term, *von Sinnen sein*, alludes to the notion of being without senses, *sinnlos*. If he lives a life without senses, it means, he leads a senseless, meaningless life.

The constant that these binaries share is the idea of life, which the prince could only define clearly through a definite demarcation, a boundary between these worlds. Yet he fails to do so. The incorporation of all these personae and all levels of perception, comprehension, and ultimately existence reveal an insuperable obstacle in the process of disposing of his blinded perception. In defining one of the levels or realms as the true one, the one he must relate to, he negates the other half of this binary. The prince is trapped in a vicious cycle, which he has all the means to break, and yet he fails to see how he might do so. His ability to

access the realm of beyond and gain a greater knowledge and a more comprehensive view of his problematic situation is there. Yet, the abundance of these opportunities hinders the prince's ability to discern them. The prince, however, is not simply overwhelmed, but rather he is lost. Parts of him are constantly unconscious. To the same extent, which he constitutes of the binaries he also consists of the gaps which divide them. In other words, the prince not only faints twice, but syncope is a constitutive part of his self, which means he will not be able to solve his situation and break the vicious circle. No matter which beliefs he fosters, and which decision he makes, in the final scene the prince again expresses his decision through fainting: he opts for the other world by fleeing this one. When his dream of fame and glory finally comes true he still decides for the other side because he knows that just like everything else in his life, this fame and glory is also only a delusionary dream. He does not trust his senses and he is at odds with his life. The only instinctive solution he knows is to seek refuge in the beyond. His earthly skills to renegotiate a new meaning for the current situation however fail him and thus he is not able to benefit from his focus on the thereafter. It is his abundance of foci on the beyond which allows him to serve as the clear counterpart of the Saxon elector in "Michael Kohlhaas," who does not have a focus on the beyond at all. As always, both of the extremes fail in pursuit of a happy ending and the search for Kleist's "goldene Mitte" continues. The hope for a revelation, for knowledge is has not been fulfilled in neither of the fainting scenario. However, E.T.A. Hoffmanns quotation: "Der Moment, in dem der Mensch umfällt, [...] ist der erste, in dem sein wahrhaftes Ich sich aufrichtet" may give some direction in this aspect.

## Conclusion

For the biblical Daniel, who after an apocalyptic vision falls first in a trance and then in unconsciousness, the remedy comes in the form of Archangel Gabriel. It is the messenger of God who helps Daniel to understand his vision, and subsequently, who helps him to his feet again.<sup>63</sup> Daniel's confusion and loss to finding a meaning of his vision can only be remedied through an encounter with a divine figure. In a way, Sylvester von Schroffenstein's encounter with his *Urquell* indeed bears great resemblance with Daniel's encounter with Gabriel. The influence of divine clarification after a devastating revelation turns out to be soothing for both, Daniel and Sylvester. Sylvester's ability to discern the open door leading to a divine space is crucial for his recovery after the fainting spell. The lack of the divine space and consecutive recovery is what distinguished the elector's case from Sylvester's. The elector places his *Urquell* in the corporeal world here and misses the opportunity to enter a dialogue with divine energy. The third case analyzed in this thesis is that of the prince of Homburg. His syncope deviates from the two others because it is a constitutive part of the prince's identity. He is torn between different realms that the prince encounters during his dreams, reveries, and somnambulistic visions, and more importantly he fails to unite them

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<sup>63</sup> Daniel 8.15-8.18. The New Oxford Annotated Bible (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007). "When I, Daniel, had seen the vision, I tried to understand it. Then someone appeared standing before me, having the appearance of a man, and I heard a human voice by the Ulai, calling, "Gabriel, help this man understand the vision." So he came near where I stood; and when he came, I became frightened and fell prostrate. But he said to me, "Understand, O mortal, that the vision is for the time of the end. As he was speaking to me, I fell into a trance, face to the ground, then he touched me and set me on my feet.

into a connected one. His identity consists of fragments, yet also of the gaps and breaks lingering in between these fragments. The multiplicity of divine spaces turns out to be disadvantageous in the attempt to locate the *Urquell*, which for one part is the only space to go in Kleist's fainting scenarios, yet for the other it is a space highly neglected by ongoing research.

As this thesis has proven, reading fainting spells as gradual processes but also embedding them in a spiritual discourse is a new yet valid way to interpret syncope in Kleist's oeuvre. This, however, is by no means the end of the story. A comprehensive analysis of the aforementioned divine spaces could provide interesting insights not only for the role of spiritual discourse in Kleist, but also for the constitution of the divine spaces. I would like to address Bianca Theisen's aforementioned concept of marked vs. unmarked spaces by asking: if we assume that these spaces are marked, then how are they marked and by what?<sup>64</sup> What constitutes exactly the spiritual spaces Kleist creates for some of his protagonists? Sylvester's description of his *Urquell* implies that it underlies Christian ideas of divine or angelic creations. Yet if we turn to the prince of Homburg's description Christian ideas do not appear to be the prominent ones. In his reflections on the paradisiacal beyond the prince mentions "buntre Felder" which may allude to Elysian Fields and thus introduce Kleist's divine spaces to a Hellenistic discourse (PH 4.3.4.1293). A thorough analysis of Kleist's oeuvre and that of his contemporaries may reveal whether these "panic rooms" are exclusively divine in nature or whether there are other "shelters" for distorted spirits.

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<sup>64</sup>Bianca Theissen, "Dancing with Words: On Kleist's Marionette Theater" *MLN* 121.3 (2006): 522-523.

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