

**Review Essay**

Eva Meyer, *Legende sein*. Frankfurt and Basel: Stroemfeld, 2016.

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Eva Meyer is a "legend" in the etymological sense of the word—her work always bears repeated reading. As you know: "Legende kommt von *legenda*: 'das, was zu lesen ist'"<sup>1</sup> In her most famous book, *Zählen und Erzählen. Für eine Semiotik des Weiblichen*, Meyer unfolds a theory of *Weiblichkeit* as neither a biological nor a psychological category. "Das Problem der Einschreibung des Weiblichen im Text," she wrote back in 1983, "ist das Problem der Einbeziehung von Subjektivität in die Theorie, bei gleichzeitiger Dekonstruktion von Subjektivität überhaupt."<sup>2</sup> I wish Judith Butler had read *Zählen und Erzählen* before writing *Gender Trouble*. Like the work of Monique Wittig and certain others, Meyer's pathbreaking readings and writings should be more widely known. In the contexts of semiotics and deconstruction as well as of Gotthard Günther's approach to cybernetics and logic, *Zählen und Erzählen* establishes not only a radical critique of notions of identity but also a way of writing, an *écriture* in the sense of Roland Barthes. Meyer's translations of Hélène Cixous (with Jutta Kranz) and Luce Irigaray (with Heidi Paris) were among the very few texts of female authors published by Merve in its heyday as a publisher of theory in the 1970s and 1980s in West Berlin.<sup>3</sup> To this day, her own writing is published by Stroemfeld, the publishing house that is best known for its critical editions of Hölderlin, Kleist and Kafka. As you may have already noticed, reading Meyer's writings is necessarily a matter of dialogue, a dialogue between Meyer and the texts she is reading. In response, you can either join study groups to discuss the texts' digressive reflections and movements from different angles, or you can read

them on your own, surrounding yourself with the texts Meyer refers to and draws from without paraphrasing them. Given this state of affairs, how can one and one alone write a review of *Legende sein*?

A few things, however, can be stated rather simply: the volume contains 15 texts, essays and dialogues between "I" and "you," which address a wide range of topics and authors. If these texts share a common ground or topic, it is the deconstruction of the "I" as image, agent of knowledge, instance of utterance or digital native. I might also give you a list of frequently cited authors such as Hannah Arendt, Gilles Deleuze, Susan Sontag, Gertrude Stein or Heinrich von Kleist (among many others). I might name topics the essays explore, such as secularization, seriality, the theatricality of theory and autobiography, feminist film theory and *Rotkäppchen*. But in order to describe and reinscribe Meyer's mode of writing, I need to follow the trajectory of at least one of the readings.

*Legende sein* is not only the title of the book but also the title of its first essay, beginning with the words "Es ist als ob ich versuchen würde, einen komplizierten Satz zu Ende zu schreiben—und die Geister der Bedeutung das zu verhindern wissen" (7). With the formula of fictionality, "als ob", the essay marks its own point of departure as contingent, its writing as a "Praxis des Wissens zwischen Reflexion und Kreation" (7) that moves constantly between entities, assertions and citations instead of coming to an end. In citing texts in order to think with them, Meyers' practice of reading-writing describes neither a hermeneutical nor a structuralist path. Instead, she uses what she reads, in order to think about something else. In reading Kleist's *Die heiligie Cäcilie oder die Gewalt der Musik*, for example, she does not present a solution to the riddles of the text nor a thorough description of the way these riddles are narrated. Instead, she uses it in order to work through complex intertwinings of the themes of secularization, fundamentalism and story telling.

Kleist's novella, which he himself subtitled *A Legend*, tells the story of a miracle. In an act of iconoclastic fury in the midst of the Reformation, four brothers are planning to invade the Cloister of Saint Cecilia. In the course of their assault, they are stopped by music the nuns are playing under the direction of Sister Antonia, a piece by an old Italian master. But Sister Antonia, it turns out, cannot have been the one conducting, because, as Kleist's narrator informs us, she was ill and unable to leave her bed. The four

brothers and their army of iconoclasts are struck by the music and do not attack the convent and its art. The ensuing explanations of this remarkable event in Kleist's text, Meyer writes, do not explain it, but make it even more incomprehensible. The story of the convent ends with the notice that, although the convent survived the Reformation, it was eventually secularized. What remains is not the cloister, but its stones and the origination of the legend, "die Entstehung der Legende" (8): Kleist's story about the power of music over the human spirit, music that changed the minds of the brothers and turned them either into fools or into believers, depending upon whether you believe in the religious miracle being narrated or find therein the secularized fabric of a modern text.

After presenting Kleist's novella, Meyer broaches a dialogue over the meaning and forces of secularization between Kleist und Hegel. While Hegel's "Versöhnung seiner selbst" focuses on the "Präsenz des Geistes" as a goal of secularization, Meyer emphasizes with Kleist the disruption of this 'Geist' by music—or by a legend. With Kleist's legend, the modern subject begins to exist in the world, "fängt an, in der Welt zu sein" (11).

In the context of Kleist's story about the confrontation of Catholic legends with the reformatory difference between fact and fiction, Meyer turns to Hannah Arendt's theory of story-telling as an act that presupposes plurality and therefore the world. Telling stories, and thereby building a world, is for Meyer "das Werk der Vielen, in dem sich die Einzelnen wechselseitig versprechen und auf die Zukunft einlassen können" (11). Telling stories as sharing with others, as 'mit-teilen', is also—as Meyer writes with reference to Walter Benjamin—always in danger of losing its ground, namely the experience people are able to accumulate. But as Meyer remarks with reference to Karen Armstrong's *A History of God*, religious stories need to be open to a certain extent: they need to allow of recitation and of alteration in the retelling. The legend allows for a flexibility of repetition that contributes to the success of religion. Fundamentalism in turn can be considered as a way of cutting off repetition, as a denial of the historicity of religious accounts and the narrative mode of legend. Is this also true, asks Meyer, for the narrative of secularization and enlightenment we are a part of? Do we have to think of secularization as a new story about God (13)?

In opposition to the narrative of secularization, the legend confirms the fact that "everything is possible." It deals with stories that are unbelievable, such as stories of God in a secularized world. Given that the legend has to be shared by many and that it has to be read or told again and again, it resembles the force of communication in the political realm. In the public sphere, the difference between truth and lie cannot account for political decisions. If the lie is enormous, Meyer writes (drawing here on Hannah Arendt), it may be successful. It builds a new world, but a world that denies the differences of reality ("Tatsächlichkeit"), a new, fictitious world. This world of fiction, as Meyer puts it, is "jede Welt, die keine Welt der Vielfalt und des Zusammenlebens von kulturellen und religiösen Unterschieden ist" (14). There are only two options here: one can either be part of it or be excluded, but one cannot tell a different story within the fictitious world itself. In reducing human beings to a solid identity with a set of predictable reactions, we forget "dass alles möglich ist"—according to a claim by Arendt that Meyer repeatedly cites.

In Meyer's argument, it is the legend that can disrupt the distinction between truth and lie, that can tell a story of pluralistic reality. "Zwischen Trugbild und Wunder aber webt die Legende ihre Macht der Unterbrechung und Wiederholung, deren Quelle der Schock der Verunsicherung ist: Man fragt sich "Wie ist das möglich?" und begreift doch zugleich, dass alles möglich ist" (15). Common sense perception, rational modes of inquiry, and indeed the realm of knowledge itself, are established, as Foucault demonstrated in so many different ways, in and through power relations. The legend, as Meyer understands it, has the power to unsettle, irritate and disrupt these boundaries. In Kleist's *legend*, "we secular ones ["wir Säkulare"]" (16) are being confronted with such a disruption of our common sense and of the way we think about causality. The legend does not aim at knowledge, but, as Meyer writes, transforms and translates. It transforms and translates history into a story, and in this sense another story of secularization always has to be told.

With regard to the notion of transforming and translating, Meyer cites Gertrude Stein and her use of the word "legend" in *Wars I have seen*. In Stein's way of writing about war, Meyer sees a model of a certain way of telling stories. This model takes into account not only the things the storyteller knows, things the biographer can remember, but opens up to incidents and occurrences that one does not remember. Stein's

memories deal with her early years, years she herself cannot remember but that have become stories being repeatedly told by others. Stein, Meyer writes, becomes a legend to herself. She does not remember herself in order to develop an identity. The issue Stein addresses in her writing is not the notorious question of a given reality and its representation in (auto-)biography. It is not a question of referentiality or likeness, but of a story that continues to change the speaking "I" as it listens. The legendary childhood goes on and on by being repeatedly imagined and retold. With regard to the wars to come, Stein also thinks about taking into account how they will be remembered or retold again and again. Stein's way of telling and remembering takes up the mode of "als ob" that initially opened Meyer's reading trajectory and now gives way to a kind of conclusion: "Man erlernt im 'Als Ob' den Ort und die Stelle zu finden, wo einem andere Personen und Zeiten zufallen und man erlernt es, mit dem Zufall zu leben. Das hat nichts mit Einfühlung zu tun und auch nicht mit der Leugnung von Wirklichkeit" (18). In *Legende sein*, Meyer develops a new theory of story-telling by presenting different notions of the term *legend*. In bringing together Kleist and Stein, Arendt and Benjamin she affirms the religious heritage of *legend*, but affirms also its historicity and its open future—as an undefined discourse beyond the difference between truth and lie, or as a secularization of a literary form. Narrating without identity in Meyer's terms means being a legend and not a character. "Die Kriege, die Stein 'gesehen' hat, sind die Ansichten vieler Personen, mit denen und unter denen sie sich selber begegnet" (19). One might also conclude that Meyer replaces the term *fictionality* with *legend*, thereby affirming the history and heritage of secularization—the legend and its communicative function in a (religious) social community. The legend by definition never loses its relation to reality, but transforms reality into a (social) process of *Mit-teilung* via story-telling. This, Meyer writes, is a way of thinking about history as being contingent without a framework.

In providing this account of Eva Meyer's *Legende sein*, I have tried to establish the outline of an argument, a line of thought, whereas Meyer herself speaks rather of 'Einfälle.' Going from one text to the other, from Kleist's *Legende* to Stein's 'being a legend,' from Arendt's to Benjamin's notions of story-telling, Meyer affirms and displays the arbitrary character of the connections she establishes with the formulation: "Dabei fällt mir [...] ein" (44). The logic of her texts, the principle of their composition, is the 'Einfall,' literally something that falls into your text, into your eyes and mind. Meyer

prefers contingency at the heart of writing, disruptive ideas, 'Einfälle': her texts are written readings rather than the work of an author in the modern sense. Her books constitute a *legend* in this way too—I highly recommend their reading.

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<sup>1</sup> Eva Meyer, *Legende sein*. Frankfurt and Basel: Stroemfeld, 2016, p. 7. Unless indicated otherwise all further citations are taken from this text.

<sup>2</sup> Eva Meyer, *Zählen und Erzählen. Für eine Semiotik des Weiblichen*. Frankfurt und Basel: Stroemfeld/Roter Stern, 1983, p. 23.

<sup>3</sup> Hélène Cixous, *Die unendliche Zirkulation des Begehrens*. Translated by Eva Meyer and Jutta Kranz. Berlin: Merve, 1977.; Luce Irigaray, *Waren Körper Sprache. Der ver-rückte Diskurs der Frauen*. Translated by Eva Meyer and Heidi Paris. Berlin: Merve, 1976.