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Narratives of Obedient Agency, 1700-1900

In response to the large-scale crimes committed by states in the mid-20th century, social scientists and philosophers have emphasized the need to overcome cultures of obedience and to foster a sense of human agency as resistance. However, the exclusive emphasis on the familiar model of agency as resistance potentially prevents us from exploring the at least equally urgent question of how we can uphold individual agency within existing structures of legality and authority. How can we retain a sense of freedom within the governmental systems that, under normal circumstances, constitute a part of who we understand ourselves to be? This question is urgent not only because the alternative discourse of resistance often remains a disingenuous rhetorical exercise, but also because—as G.W.F. Hegel argued—there might not be any true freedom outside of the support for a legally organized state. What is at stake here is how—and whether—we are free in our everyday lives as law-abiding citizens.

Against the background of these reflections, my project starts from a reconsideration of Hegel's model of what I call 'obedient agency'—a type of agency that does not rely on the resistance to established laws. However, taking seriously the common-sense reaction that Hegel's claim that we can realize our freedom through obedience to existing laws remains strikingly counter-intuitive, I turn to European fictional narratives from the 100 years before and after Hegel to look for possible representations of Hegel's thought. This search for literary representations and negotiations of a Hegelian model of obedient agency is interesting not only because it answers the question of how literary writing contributes to foundational political discourses about modern citizenship, but also because these stories enrich our understanding of the possibilities of narrative.

Such stories have to break with the range of established plot structures that rely on the resistance to – and transgression of – a set of structure rules.

This project will lead to a monograph on German literature from the time around 1800 that lays out three narrative models of obedient agency—three distinct ways of telling a story about a hero who realizes his freedom in obedience to the law. Specifically, I will prepare close readings of works by J.M.R. Lenz (1751-92), Heinrich von Kleist (1777-1811), and Gustav Freytag (1816-95) and explore how these texts embody models of obedient agency as 'over-fulfillment' of the law (Lenz), resistance within the confines of the law (Kleist), and the free decision to act lawfully in a social environment where disobedience prevails (Freytag). Moreover, building on the close collaboration with a Ph.D. student and on my own archival research, I will assess the importance of these three works as paradigms of more widespread political and narrative models. This monograph will be accompanied by an edited volume that broadens the scope of the project to 18th and 19th-century literature in the wider European context. Finally, I will promote this research through a graduate student symposium at the University of Calgary.

In sum, this project will assess how literary writers contributed to foundational philosophical debates about freedom and citizenship. Additionally, this project will enrich our understanding of the mechanisms of storytelling by analyzing narratives that function without the tension between the protagonist and the legal structures of his/her environment.