Annette von Droste-Hülshoff and the Biedermeier Narrative

Anne-Kathrin Wielgosz, Walsh University, United States

The Asian Conference on Literature 2017
Official Conference Proceedings

Abstract
"Annette von Droste-Hülshoff and the Biedermeier Narrative" relates the aesthetic of the German Biedermeier period (1815-1848) to the life story of writer Annette von Droste-Hülshoff (1797-1848) and to her texts "Ledwina" (fragment/1820), "The Marl-pit" (poem/1841), "The Jew's Beech" (novella/1842), and "The Spiritual Year" (poetry/1851). Before all else, the Biedermeier cultivated the inner self through domesticity and its associated spaces and enclosures; for Droste, they were her ancestral home Hülshoff Castle, with its memories of generations past, and her mother's widow-seat Rüschhaus, with its collections of stones and fossils, in themselves compressed memory. Moreover, the Biedermeier also valued letter writing as part of its emphasis on closeness, and Droste told stories of her daily life (which included reading, writing, walking, collecting, knitting) in the correspondence with her mother Therese von Haxthausen, her sister Jenny von Laßberg, her uncle Carl von Haxthausen, and her friends Elise Rüdiger and Levin Schücking. Some of Droste's letters may well lay claim to being literary accomplishments themselves, but especially in her poetry Droste masterfully manages a jerky syntax and a dense barrage of words in a rigid grid of rhyme and meter. Regardless of the narrative, however, be it that of the Biedermeier period itself, Droste's life story as conveyed in her letters, or her literary works, stones appear throughout: in the shape of tomb stones in "Ledwina," as minerals in "The Marl-pit," as a quarry in "The Jew's Beech," and as boulders in "The Spiritual Year." They bind the narrative strands.

Keywords: Biedermeier, aesthetics, memory, enclosure, domesticity

Introduction

Few of Annette von Droste-Hülshoff's fragile scissor cuttings survive, but one such could well depict a scene from that fateful country wedding in the novella "The Jew's Beech" (1842), the reveling not yet intersected by the humiliation of Friedrich Mergel and the subsequent brutal murder of butcher Aaron, a ghastly business involving a blow on the head with a cudgel. Nothing so quaint as a scissor cutting, this quintessentially Biedermeier accessory, a meek yet unforgiving craft, its formation entirely dependent on the tracing of demarcations into a web of cuts whose density prohibits repair; one stroke gone astray, the entire work destroyed. Annette von Droste-Hülshoff (1797-1848) knew all about cutting, not only in paper- and needle work. She herself proclaimed to have "a gift for the most ruthless crossing-out" (*Historisch-kritische Ausgabe*, vol. IX,I, p. 257), aiming, with a dismissive gesture, at her editors, whose directives she rejected with imperturbable assurance, knowing full well that it "may occasionally harm me that I follow my path so rigidly…still, I wish this were at least acknowledged" (*Historisch-kritische Ausgabe*, vol. X,I, p. 136). Meanwhile, in the privacy of her home, she treated her manuscripts unsanctimoniously: sections cut and restitched together, passages thrown off the page, words swept into piles that turned into veering, dense towers of text.

Body

What followed in her poetry is the "packing of meaning" into a "rugged," "jerky" syntax, where "[w]ords…are wrenched apart," their "ungainly" angularity or "lapidary starkness" (Atkinson, p. 32, pp. 35-36) only compounding the overall effect of dislocation. Outright displacement is avoidable only by retracing one's steps and uncovering obscured rules of construction. Add to that the constraints of meter and rhyme, which must be respected at all cost, to fathom what it takes to manage so rigid a grid and dense a barrage of words. From this she broke the pieces for her poetry. If Droste had a reservoir for words not yet accommodated, surely it must have been her letters, the surviving ten to twenty percent of which make up over one-thousand pages in the minutest handwriting (Blasberg, p. 129). Possessed with filling the page to a point beyond repletion, until there seemed no blank morsel left, she knuckled down. Famous is her February 1843 letter to her sister Jenny. Droste wrote, like a garland around the margins of the paper, "You must turn my letter at all corners, otherwise you'll miss something, because I blotted everything from top to bottom" (*Historisch-kritische Ausgabe*, vol. X,I, p. 32). Letters, so integral a part of the Biedermeier aesthetic of closeness, what are they but little parcels of memory tied up with ribbon?

In June of the same year, she wrote to Elise Rüdiger: "I am alone today…dearest, have looked through and burnt papers and, with it left behind me a piece of the past, which, of course, had grown over with the years…but now it seems like half a murder. One reads old letters so rarely…there is nothing more painful. The dead…have to be buried a second time and the living…touch on…long since forgotten moments, which once made our heart beat faster, so that we want to cry over them and us" (*Historisch-kritische Ausgabe*, vol. X,I, p. 94). More than that, the power of recollection lies in invoking recognition, if only by suggestion. Upon her return to Rüschhaus in September 1842, Droste wrote to her love Levin Schücking: "I went away so soon after you that it felt as though you had left only yesterday and …books and papers had just been placed there by your hand" (*Historisch-kritische Ausgabe*, vol. IX,I, p. 361).

Indeed, "[t]he Biedermeier [was] infused with [a] culture of memory" (Ottomeyer, p. 76), spatially expressed in an aesthetic of interiority: domesticity and proximity combined, as if memory could be reached for like an embroidered bell rope. Droste was at home in it as she was in moated Hülshoff Castle, the house that bound all her memories, including that of her first poem about a chicken. Later in life, she tested it by listing and cataloging not only her various collections but also occasional items of the everyday, such as her stockings or the nicknames of people in her acquaintance (Beuys, p. 428). In March of 1835, she wrote to Carl von Haxthausen "Listen, Uncle, I will make a list of…some…coins that are more interesting to you than me…under condition that you respond…as I obediently write this despite a serious headache" (*Historisch-kritische Ausgabe*, vol. VIII,I, p. 163).

Collecting and storing away one's gems, be they coins, which have always belonged to the canon of reminiscence, fossils, minerals, pebbles, or shells—Droste collected them all—is Biedermeier under the magnifying glass, devoted to the cleaning and sorting of its world. From the many walks she took for steadfastness, often through the bogs around Hülshoff where first "the thought of sinking in began to form" (Ledwina, p. 12), joined by the image of "a human…craw[ling] out of its four-thousand year old crust" (*Historisch-kritische Ausgabe*, vol. IX,I, p.66), Droste brought home her exploits, then spent much time dusting and neatly arranging her collection, so long as it securely fit into drawers you could keep shut. Always on its guard, the Biedermeier favored to enclose for safekeeping the potentially dubious or precarious. Thus, Droste "redoubled [the] belonging" (Sallis, p. 8) of her stones and in the process reassured herself of a comforting order in which every detail was understood. Though the collection is "a spatial and material phenomenon…seek[ing] a form of self-enclosure…[and] maintain[ing] its integrity [through] boundary, the past is at [its] service…lends it authenticity" (Stewart, p. 151-153). Forever peering, either with a telescope into the landscape to draw its elements near or, attentive to the small and inconspicuous, bent deeply over single stones: isolation grants intensity and alters our perception of surface, roughens it.

This focus allowed Droste to view rubble, catapulted along its journey by immediacy, a "prod [o]f toe-tip" ("The Marl-pit," p. 181), with the same reverence as she did erratic blocks, "foundlings" (*Gedichte*, p. 51) of the earth and its compressed memory, and she "harkened as if intoxicated" (*Gedichte*, p. 52) to boulders that "could split all lightning" (*Gedichte*, p. 300). More than their eminent presence and stark impermeability, such stones speak with certainty of arid hardness, taciturn obstinacy, and an enviable indifference born of their remoteness from human concerns. Still, their permanence has made them ideal markers of human life; you decide whether to step over or stretch out on them. Ledwina (heroine of the 1820 story by the same name) though forewarned by her guide during their nocturnal walk through the cemetery declares "that she would always remain here [lying on this gravestone] until she [too] were dead" (Ledwina, p. 12) wasn't "what was dearest in the world to her…buried here? She knew no names and had no more exact shape for it…but it was certainly her dearest and she tore herself away with a dreadfully confused whimpering…and began…digging up the earth here and there with a little spade" (Ledwina, p. 11). "Ledwina" remained unfinished, but had its heroine lived, she would have been doomed to "drag behind her the gravestone fastened to her ankle" (*Gedichte*, p. 485). The megalithic tombs and rune stones of her native northern Germany, bearing witness to an earlier people, regularly appear in Droste's poetry as

do fossils, the impressions of small dead bodies that are more than a residue of the past but a lock-up, a compression, an actual "binding of time" (Goldsworthy, p. 6) that provides cohesion in dispersion. This, Droste addressed in "The Marl-pit" (1841/1842): "the schist-plate…amidst that rushing, [was]/Flung from the bosom of the sea, just yielding,/While mountains sank, to the oppressive crushing" (The Marl-pit, p.183), and to Christoph Bernhard Schlüter she explained, "I…admire crustaceans…whose fragile existence has been preserved through thousands of years, and I feel quite odd at times when some stalk or shell reemerges in the form into which death [once] bent them" (*Historisch-kritische Ausgabe*, vol. IX,I, p. 66). Thus, Droste declared fossils the objects of her passion.

On a fair day, her destination was a local quarry, her tool a small hammer, her work "knocking stones" (*Historisch-kritische Ausgabe*, vol. IX,I, p. 61), as she called it, while "forgetting food and drink" (*Historisch-kritische Ausgabe*, vol. IX,I, p.61) in order to seek what she most deeply longed for. Where else could you find it but at a precipice or in a pit, where the earth is wounded and may give way without warning. Out here, there is nothing to overcome. You "disappear into the deepest cleft" (*Gedichte*, p. 368), into a subterranean surge of dust and rubble. The narrator of "The Marl-pit" relates how "onto [his] hair/And clothes grit trickled, till [he] grayed like some/Corpse in the catacombs" and that he "had been transmuted into a mummy, dust now constituted/[His] linens, gray [was his] countenance and pale" (The Marl-pit, p. 183). More than a refuge from the wind, the quarry offers up a cave to lean yourself into…let come what may after. Still, the terse break and second half of the poem prove that Droste, a little tongue in cheek, was dallying, still. In the "Jew's Beech," however, the weather has decidedly changed for the worse. At the country wedding, both Friedrich Mergel (the surname means "limestone/marl") and his double Johannes Niemand (the surname means "nobody") have both been exposed: Friedrich as being unable to pay off the watch with which he boasts in front of his rival, Johannes as having stolen half a pound of butter that melted in his pocket when he stood by a kitchen fire. That very night, both disappear, and twenty-eight years pass before the now crippled fugitive Friedrich Mergel returns in the guise of Johannes Niemand (who remains unaccounted for) and relates their escape to the squire. "And so we fled as far as Heerse; it was still dark and we hid behind the great cross in the churchyard to wait until it grew a bit lighter, because we were worried about the quarries at Zeller Meadow…we suddenly heard a sound of stamping and snorting above us….We leapt up and ran in God's name as far as our legs could carry us" (The Jew's Beech, p. 122). Indeed, they had been chased, but not by Kapp, clerk of court, who then knew nothing of the affair but still remembered the night: "At last the rain stopped and we drove again, trusting to God, pressing on in the direction of Zeller Meadow; you could not see your hand in front of your face. Then the coachman said: 'We'd better not get too close to the quarries!'….All at once we heard the bell ringing….I leapt from the carriage….And so I stood there in the mud and rain without moving….And where had we halted? Close to Heerse Cliff….If we had driven another twenty paces, we should have been killed.'-'That was no joke, indeed,' replied the Squire" (The Jew's Beech, p.116-117). "'A strange thing…you were so near each other!'" (The Jew's Beech, p. 122). The edge of life caves in the space between what once were unyielding irreconcilabilities into a forbidding and tightening ledge that stifles much too close at hand. No longer does proximity here suggest the cozy comfort we call "Biedermeier." When the edge breaks away, rumbles down, and washes out, none of us clambering nobodies will ever return.

Droste knew that the last means of self-preservation compels us to ossify, to forge ahead the rigor our body will one day assume. In a cycle of poems called "The Spiritual Year" (1851), petrification permeates everything, from the "stony ether" (*Gedichte*, p. 405) we breathe to the "sparks…[of]…stone" (*Gedichte*, p. 392) we bleed. The landscapes of desperation invoked in these religious poems, where boulders ever hang ready for the crash, do not let you breathe, lest you exhale and they plummet. All you can be sure of is what securely fits into the palm of your hand, be it a "languished heart" (*Gedichte*, p. 487), this "little lump of earth" (*Gedichte*, p. 597), or the blunt menace of a rock, the densest form of rage you can close your fist around. Droste did not throw it but withheld in an act of volition, a perfect suspension of compressed emotion equal only to "the pent-up energy" (Goldsworthy, p. 95) of the stone itself. In the October 1820 letter to her mother that prefaces the first edition of "The Spiritual Year," Droste wrote: "Now this book is in your hands….though downcast my work is complete, only veering in itself….it shows the traces of a depressed and divided spirit….as I did not spare…even the most private thought" (*Historisch-kritische Ausgabe*, vol. VIII,I, p. 47-48). Droste's entreaties to her God remained unanswered, just "as though [she] had been calling out to rocks" (*Gedichte*, p. 366). When stones came to her as a gift, however, they were accepted as tokens of a shared delicacy of feeling. With like-minded collector friend Scheppe she exchanged, as she put it, "precious presents of fossils and shells because, like me, he is creeping about…[in search of them] has, in fact, been creeping long before me" (*Historisch-kritische Ausgabe*, vol. IX,I, p. 282). In November of 1843 she wrote of one such excursion: "a storm broke lose…each gust took hold of my thick, padded dress…I crawled more than I walked…most of the time I sat huddled up like a little lump…in only a few minutes I was soaked…my skirt turned into a sponge and pulled me down like lead" (*Historisch-kritische Ausgabe*, vol. X,I, p. 106-107). Earth calls when setting out for stones, but it takes the hems of layers of clothing, your stockings and boots in squelching clods of mud and your frozen body lowering into it to truly recognize that, indeed, the matter "[s]tone is of the earth" (Sallis, p.5).

Conclusion

On the exotic backdrop of lava and melting rock, that is to say, in front of the hand-painted wallpaper called "Vue d'Italie," manufactured by Dufour of Paris and depicting a Naples harbor scene with a smoking Vesuvius in the background, the one small but true Biedermeier luxury Droste afforded when settling into her mother's widow-seat Rüschhaus in 1826 (Springer, p. 95), she arranged herself, without disdain, in the corner of a life that no longer held much promise after tradition and duty had worked themselves off and whose reach she estimated at "1000 steps around my settee" (*Historisch-kritische Ausgabe*, vol. X,I, p. 389). Still, the enclave that is domesticity cultivates the inner self, as her daily routine attested: "I read, write, care for my collections, go for walks, and knit" (*Historisch-kritische Ausgabe*, vol. VIII,I, p. 267). In her private entresol rooms, the entrance to which you may well pass without being the wiser, Droste withdrew for repose and contemplation onto her ugly black sofa, "on which [she] s[a]t or l[ay] (you may call it what you will)" (*Historisch-kritische Ausgabe*, vol. IX,I, p. 56). This habit, in fact, caused some stir in Münster society, as the Fräulein was rumored to "sit like a Turk" (Films Media Group). Today, both Rüschhaus and Hülshoff Castle are museum spaces with lovely Biedermeier rooms dedicated to the poet's memory. Charming Rüschhaus, especially, appears to

belie Droste's own assessment that "[she] did much violence to [her]self when [she] wrote" (*Historisch-kritische Ausgabe*, vol. VII,I, p. 153). The merciless cuttings to which she subjected her texts shared their edge with the stones she knocked from the quarry rubble. Her writing happened in the cut, with an elemental matter-of-fact exactitude that looked words straight in the eye—before they fell to the ground. At the end of her life, she remembered her first poem, written at age seven: "I stole away to where they said I should not go…unhesitating…I climbed up to the tower and in the rafters, sly, I hid for a distant hour, when all should fall to dust, my secret to be found" (Films Media Group). As though it were an act of immurement, she offered her first poem to her ancestral home Hülshoff Castle, the house that not only grounded her memories but that of all Drostes since 1417 (Bieker, p. 21).

(All translations are the author's.)

References

Atkinson, M. E. (1964). Introduction. In M. E. Atkinson (Ed.), *Annette von Droste-Hülshoff Poems* (pp. 9-39). Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Beuys, B. (1999). "*Blamieren mag ich mich nicht." Das Leben der Annette von Droste-Hülshoff*. Frankfurt: Insel Verlag.

Bieker, J. & Romeis, U. & Wollheim, U. (2006). *Auf Annette von Droste-Hülshoffs Spuren*. Hamburg: Ellert & Richter Verlag.

Blasberg, C. & Grywatsch, J. (2010). Nachwort. In C. Blasberg & J. Grywatsch (Eds.), *Annette von Droste-Hülshoff. Aus ihren Briefen* (pp. 128-134). Münster: Aschendorff.

Droste-Hülshoff, A. von (2004) *Gedichte*. In B. Plachta & W. Woesler (Eds.) *Sämtliche Werke* (Vol. i). Frankfurt: Insel Verlag.

Droste-Hülshoff, A. von (1978-2000). *Historisch-kritische Ausgabe. Werke. Briefwechsel* (Vols. I-XIV). W. Woesler (Ed.). Tübingen: Niemeyer.

Droste-Hülshoff, A. von (1997). The Jew's Beech. In A.J. Webber (Ed.), *Eight German Novellas* (pp. 83-127). Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Droste-Hülshoff, A. von (2011,09 28). *Ledwina.* http://www.lwl.org/LWL/Kultur/Droste/English/Works/

Droste-Hülshoff, A. von (1984). The Marl-pit. In R.M. Browning (Ed.) *German Poetry from 1750-1900* (pp. 178-187). New York: Continuum.

Films Media Group. Films for the Humanities and Sciences (Producer). (1997). *Annette von Droste-Hülshoff* [Electronic Resource]. Available from http://www.films.com/producer/1/Films_for_the_Humanities & Sciences/

Goldsworthy, A. (1994). *Stone.* New York: Harry N. Abrams.

Ottomeyer, H. (2006). *Biedermeier. Die Erfindung der Einfachheit.* Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz Verlag.

Sallis, J. (1994). *Stone.* Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

Springer, M. (2007/2008). Verbotene Räume. Annette von Droste-Hülshoffs *Klänge aus dem Orient. Droste-Jahrbuch, 7.* 95-108.

Stewart, S. (1993). *On Longing. Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection.* Durham: Duke University Press.

Contact email: awielgosz@walsh.edu