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 The Poetics of Deniable Plausibility in Rainer Maria Rilke's "Die Turnstunde"

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“Die Turnstunde”<sup>1</sup> opens abruptly: “In der Militärschule zu Sankt Severin. Turnsaal” (W 435).<sup>2</sup> Provided with only these two terse phrases of orientation — which replicate the harsh, clipped commands of the military<sup>3</sup> — the reader is already located in the space of action. The narrative begins immediately and relates Cadet Karl Gruber’s atypical athletic performance and consequent death. The brevity, scarcity, and seeming objectivity one finds in these introductory words also characterize the story generally, for it comprises only a few pages and seems to have remained a fragment. In addition, one might describe the narrative voice in terms of limitation or constraint, for the narrator reports only visual and auditory information, those concrete details that one might perceive if present at the narrated events. Yet this apparent objectivity makes for an inscrutable text resistant to interpretation and in which we have no unambiguous access to characters’ thoughts or motivations. The tension inherent in this ostensibly and self-consciously objective narrative that nonetheless evades a univocal interpretation is the result, at least partially, of anxiety regarding the possibility of homosexuality, which was often depicted by literary and professional discourses as a constant danger in same-sex institutions like the military boarding school. This tension finds expression in the narrative peculiarities of Rilke’s text.

The events of “Die Turnstunde” are easily recounted. After the curt introductory phrases, the gym teacher commands the cadets to go to various pieces of gymnastics equipment. Cadet Karl Gruber, the worst athlete, goes uncharacteristically quickly to the climbing pole and is already partway up when the others arrive. The teacher orders him either to come down or to finish the climb. He continues, eventually reaching the ceiling, and all eyes in the gymnasium follow him up. Karl then slides down the pole and inspects his injured hands. After failing to respond to the cadets’ jeering remarks, he retreats into a recess in the wall. Cadet Jerome, who seems to be Karl’s only friend, comes to him and offers solace and advice. Karl sinks deeper into the recess in the wall until his head hits the seat, apparently unconscious. Four cadets carry Karl’s body to an adjacent room and soon return, yet they have no answers for the others’ questions about Karl’s condition. On command,

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the cadets continue their exercises. Krix, another cadet, listens at the door of the room where Karl has been taken and then spreads the news among the cadets that the doctor has arrived. Everyone eventually stops their exercises to stare at the door that conceals Karl's body. An officer commands the cadets to line up, but they remain still. Another officer reemerges from the room to announce that Karl has died of a heart attack and then immediately orders the cadets to march out of the gymnasium. As the cadets exit, Krix jumps to Jerome's side and whispers that he has seen Karl's naked body and then bites Jerome's sleeve. With that peculiar action, the story ends as abruptly as it begins.

Much of the scholarship on "Die Turnstunde" focuses on the relationship between Rilke's works and his experiences as a student at the Austro-Hungarian military academies in St. Pölten and Mährisch-Weißkirchen.<sup>4</sup> Other research considers the structure of the text and its language and situates "Die Turnstunde" in Rilke's oeuvre generally and in relationship to his novel *The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge* specifically.<sup>5</sup> The crucial topic of sexuality remains, however, relatively unexamined. The intention of an analysis of the depiction of sexuality in the text is not to resolve its ambiguity; rather, it is to illustrate how sexuality serves as a point of convergence for other tensions in the text. The same tensions also inform Rilke's comments regarding the text's composition as well as its later reception. Each of these areas displays anxiety surrounding the status of knowledge, especially concerning sexuality, and in each this anxiety produces a characteristic move of simultaneous iteration and disavowal, a partial covering-of-one's-tracks or deniable plausibility.<sup>6</sup>

Eve Sedgwick addresses such anxiety in *Epistemology of the Closet* where she claims an incommensurable but forever shifting and unpredictable divide in Western culture between prescribed homosocial bonds and proscribed homosexuality for men. However, the sorts of prescribed male bonding that play an integral part in "male heterosexual entitlement" — such as "male friendship, mentorship, admiring identification, bureaucratic subordination, and heterosexual rivalry" — also and at the same time include "forms of investment" that resemble those of an always proscribed homosexuality (185-86). Therefore, "it appears that men enter into adult masculine entitlement only through acceding to the permanent threat that the small space they have cleared for themselves on this terrain may always, just as arbitrarily and with just as much justification, be foreclosed" (186). Sedgwick further argues in *Between Men* that homophobic violence has the effect of controlling all men; that "no man must be able to ascertain that he is not (that his

bonds are not) homosexual” has resulted in “a structural residue of terrorist potential, a *blackmailability*, of Western maleness through the leverage of homophobia” (88-89). Sedgwick terms this structure of constant uncertainty “homosexual panic,” the internalized form of homophobic social violence (*Epistemology* 185). The concurrent prescription and proscription of male homosocial bonds, not to mention the stakes involved in the exceedingly unpredictable task of determining and remaining on the sanctioned side of the arbitrary definition of homosexuality, make life in a military academy one especially charged with homosexual panic (*Epistemology* 186).

The peculiar tone of “Die Turnstunde,” one of mystery and rapt attention, turns on the thematics of the limits of knowledge and the anxiety caused by expressing or knowing too much or too little. Miscommunication, uncertainties, secrets, revelations, and anomalous, enigmatic behavior abound in the narrative. Each stage is structured around an epistemological irregularity: the first is dominated by Karl’s inexplicable physical effort and by the cadets as astounded onlookers; the second recounts the process of Karl’s death which goes largely unnoticed; and the last is marked by the cadets’ intense, hushed interest in discovering his fate.

One can understand the pivotal act of the first section — Karl’s climb — either as insubordination against a command, an unusual physical feat, or the expression of desperation (Kayser 45). That is, Karl is either acting against the authoritarianism of the military academy, in accordance with it (but to an exaggerated degree), or he is rejecting the situation and the institution completely. The text supports all three interpretations of Karl’s climb, respectively: he notices the officer’s anger “mit besonderem Vergnügen”; he manages to do something which “er sonst niemals begreifen konnte,” yet he does so “unwillkürlich” (W 435); and he strives for the ceiling “als hätte er einen Ausweg in der Decke des Saales entdeckt und strebte danach, ihn zu erreichen” (W 436).<sup>7</sup> The narrator expresses the inscrutability of motivation and the opacity of Karl’s action by placing it “in einer etwas dämmerigen Ecke des Saales” (making it difficult for others to see) (W 435) and by depicting the pole as “unermesslich” (emphasizing Karl’s own inability to understand his act) (W 436).<sup>8</sup> It remains undecidable whether Karl acts willfully or is under the control of some unknown (and perhaps unknowable) power.

Another epistemological issue is the ambivalence of human interaction. Characters repeatedly pay one another too little or too much attention. The cadets and officer on duty fail to notice Karl until he is

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already clinging fairly high up the pole (W 435). He returns the favor with his own willful inattention to the officer's commands. All the cadets' eyes then follow Karl's movements. Apparently sensing, but not actually turning around to see, their collective gaze, "macht er hoch oben unter der Decke eine Bewegung, als wollte er sie abschütteln; und da ihm Das [sic] offenbar nicht gelingt, bindet er alle diese Blicke oben an den nackten eisernen Hacken."<sup>9</sup> Having diverted their attention to the hook, "saust [er] die glatte Stange herunter, so daß alle immer noch hinaufsehen, als er schon längst, schwindelnd und heiß, unten steht."<sup>10</sup> Despite the rapt attention with which the cadets watch Karl's climb, they fail to notice his movements. Then Karl stares "mit seltsam glanzlosen Augen in seine glühenden Handflächen" (W 436).<sup>11</sup> He beholds his hands with the kind of attention the others give his climbing: one which excludes everything apart from the specific object of interest yet nevertheless fails to yield the understanding it seeks. That his eyes are "glanzlos" merely stresses the failure of perception.

Other failures of communication in the first section compound the difficulties of (in)attention. Karl is a silent figure. After he slides down the pole, the cadets around him inquire about his irregular action (W 436). He appears to want to answer, but then hesitates and quickly lowers his eyes. He censors himself, having internalized their contempt. By the time he thinks of a response, the others have lost interest and gone away (W 436). The only word Karl utters in the entire story is a frightened "Was?" ("What"). The word is a condensation of the story's many confusions and attempts at discovery, all the more so because of the quality of Karl's voice. He responds "mit seiner gewöhnlichen, in Speichel watenden Stimme" (W 437).<sup>12</sup> This quality of Karl's voice — as if it were wading in saliva — is not the result of overexertion but his *usual* voice. It is as if Karl were always drowning in his own saliva. He struggles to utter this single word, even to Jerome, the only character with whom he has any sort of caring, personal contact.

In the story's second section, we encounter two similar (non)exchanges. Jerome speaks to him, but it seems Karl fails to hear; instead "er schaut geradeaus in den Saal hinein, aber so, als sähe er etwas Unbestimmtes, vielleicht nicht im Saal, draußen vielleicht, vor den Fenstern, obwohl es dunkel ist, spät und Herbst."<sup>13</sup> Again, it is as if Karl is in a trance-like state and thus cannot see or communicate with others. As he gradually loses consciousness, Jerome does not notice until he hears Karl's head hit the seat, and this despite their physical proximity and conversation (W 437). The characters alternate between intense concentration and distraction: the single-mindedness of military

discipline readily slips into obliviousness. Perception seems inadequate, even for a sharply defined object of interest which nevertheless remains inscrutable.

The story's final two sections present additional epistemological issues, namely the relationship between circulation and knowledge, and the nature of secrets and their discovery. There is a double move of circulation here. First, it seems imperative to remove Karl's body from sight. What had been the figure of a highly visible inscrutability is now altered into a hidden one, the figure of a secret. Second, the information that Karl has collapsed travels quickly among the cadets in the gymnasium, causing a great deal of curiosity: "Dann hastige Fragen: 'Was? Was? Wer? Der Gruber? Wo?' Und immer mehr Fragen."<sup>14</sup> These questions float in the story, neither attributed to nor directed toward a particular character. Another anonymous cadet says loudly, "Ohnmächtig" ("unconscious"), but otherwise no information is exchanged. Upon their return from removing Karl's body, the others naturally press them with questions, since these four have had direct contact with Karl. They ask: "Wie sieht er aus? Was ist mit ihm? Ist er schon zu sich gekommen?" (W 438).<sup>15</sup> But these four know nothing.

The impetus to discover what has become the (now concealed but ultimately ascertainable) secret of Karl's body continues, despite—and because of—the four cadets' ignorance. On command, the cadets resume their exercises but with a change in the atmosphere and in their movements, "als hätte ein Horchen sich über sie gelegt."<sup>16</sup> The group is overcome and unified by the drive to discover Karl's secret. Even their voices undergo a transformation: "Die Stimmen sind weniger verworren und ihre Summe summt feiner, als ob alle immer nur ein Wort sagten: 'Ess, Ess, Ess...'" (W 438).<sup>17</sup> Their noises are unified and uniform. The language is accentuated here: the repeated "mm" in "Stimmen," "Summe," "summt," and "immer" reproduces the cadets' humming onomatopoeically, and the "wor" found in "verworren" is literally *entangled* in the *word* "Wort." The cadets' voices are joined in a confused, intertwined, and oppressive unity. The form the noise takes also changes from the 1899 to the 1902 version of the text under consideration here. In the former, the cadets' word was "Es" (SW 599). The shorter spelling seems to refer to an unknown but specific "it," that is, the secret something they all want to discover about Karl. The addition of a second "s," however, lengthens the fricative, thereby making it a hiss, an ominous, threatening sound.

It is at this particular moment — one of concentrated, threatening group attention — that Cadet Krix appears for the first time

in the narrative. He at once interrupts and sharpens the group's listening: "Der kleine schlaue Krix horcht inzwischen an der Kammertür."<sup>18</sup> When the non-commissioned officer runs him away with a swat on the behind, "Krix springt zurück, katzenhaft, mit hinterlistig blitzdenden Augen."<sup>19</sup> But he is successful: "Er weiß schon genug" (W 438).<sup>20</sup> Krix alone discovers what is happening on the other side of the door, namely that the regiment doctor has arrived. The "Horchen" — or, as the English translation has it, "a need to keep listening" — that has descended on them finds its embodiment and active form in him. Krix then disappears from the narrative until the last few lines, at the same moment that Jerome is mentioned again. The latter "fühlt sich plötzlich am Arm gefaßt, so angesprungen." Krix hangs on him, and "[s]eine Augen glänzen und seine Zähne schimmern, als ob er beißen wollte."<sup>21</sup> Desire, violence, and knowledge, all closely associated with Krix, return in this passage, and are again intertwined with the status of Karl as a secret. "Ich hab ihn gesehen," flüstert er atemlos und preßt Jeromes Arm und ein Lachen ist innen in ihm und rüttelt ihn hin und her. Er kann kaum weiter: 'Ganz nackt ist er und eingefallen und ganz lang.'<sup>22</sup> He bites into Jerome's sleeve and laughs "spitz und kitzlich" (W 440).<sup>23</sup>

Krix's excitement derives at least partially from the fact that he possesses a secret and is able to disclose it to another person. Georg Simmel's 1907 essay on secrets offers a way of conceiving of that excitement. He claims that "[d]as Geheimnis gibt der Persönlichkeit eine Ausnahmestellung, es wirkt als ein sozial bestimmter Reiz."<sup>24</sup> Simmel cites as the source of this exceptional status and its consequent social appeal two related phenomena necessarily a part of any secret: first, the pronounced exclusion of outsiders and, second, a corresponding sense of ownership. (318). Krix, who, because of his small stature, probably occupies a relatively low position in the social hierarchy of the military academy, here feels himself privileged above the other cadets, for the possession of secret knowledge about Karl affords him a temporarily exceptional, higher status. Yet, according to Simmel, a secret also always entails an inherent tension which finds its release in the moment of revelation. One realizes and experiences the full significance of a secret only at the moment one divulges it (319). There is also a certain power in knowing that one can disclose a secret, that is "die Macht zu Schicksalswendungen und Überraschungen, zu Freuden und Zerstörungen" (320).<sup>25</sup> Besides the elevated social position that the possession of the secret of Karl's body affords Krix, it also allows him

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to inform, to surprise, and to inflict emotional pain: in short, to control the knowledge of that body.

Krix takes obvious physical pleasure in this exchange. He can barely utter the words due to an inner laughter that shakes his body. He whispers them breathlessly as his eyes gleam and teeth shimmer. Language is again highlighted here and underscores Krix' animal-like nature. Both passages in which Krix appears are dominated by the sounds "x," "tz," and "ch," which mimic those of a hissing cat (W 438, 440). His animalistic aspect underscores the erotic pleasure he derives from seeing the corpse and subsequently describing it to Jerome. Friedrich Loock, apparently the only scholar who has noted this passage's homoeroticism, posits the sadistic and homoerotic pleasure which Krix gains from his position. According to Loock, Krix' epistemological and voyeuristic pleasure draws from the control of the mysterious body that has proved too defiant and performed a feat that Krix and his fellow cadets dare not attempt for fear of punishment (122). While Loock's observation is apt, Krix performs an additional function along the familiar lines of deniable plausibility. While demonstrating the erotic pleasure of learning, possessing, and divulging a secret, this character simultaneously contains the deviant, dangerous possibilities associated with him. The narrator and reader participate in the pleasures he represents — and the homoeroticism that attends them — from the safe distance that this odd, animalistic character seems to demand.

If Krix exemplifies the eroticism of secret knowledge, Karl is the embodiment of the sexual secret. In a diary entry, Rilke refers to him as "de[r] blasse Mondsüchtige mit der flachen Brust" (*Tagebücher* 161).<sup>26</sup> Indeed, his surname has similar significations of morbidity and exhaustion: "Grube" can designate a (mining) pit, hole, cavity, or open grave. Karl is thereby characterized by death and degeneration. His anomalous and exaggerated athletic performance appears in this context as another sign of degeneration: in the final stages of physical decay, the body produces a final surge of energy before expiring. One might also read Karl's climb symbolically as one of the period's common causes of degeneration, namely masturbation. The phallic connotation of the pole is obvious, but its dim, semi-hidden location also points to the illicit, sexual nature of the act. So, too, do the discomfort Karl feels as the object of the cadets' collective gaze and the concern over his injured hands. Rilke's choice of the word "nackt" to describe the hook is similarly telling. While signifying "bare" in this instance, the word nevertheless retains the connotation of nudity and thereby connects this

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image to that of Karl's corpse at the end of the story, which, as we have seen, Krix also describes as "ganz nackt."

A key passage in "Die Turnstunde" has Karl looking for a second time at his hands, this time "ganz darüber gebückt wie einer, der bei wenig Licht einen Brief entziffern will" (W 436-37).<sup>27</sup> He is alienated from his body and sexuality — which are depicted as illegible and foreign — and he approaches them as one would something to be analyzed and understood. This enterprise is not free from difficulty or stigma, however. It is as if there were little light to undertake it, and when Jerome approaches, Karl "erschrickt" ("is startled") as if caught committing a proscribed act (W 437). This scene is emblematic of the status of homosexuality at the turn-of-the-century. Regarding same-sex desire, Sedgwick asserts that "there had in fact developed one particular sexuality that was distinctively constituted *as* secrecy: the perfect object for the by now insatiably exacerbated epistemological/sexual anxiety of the turn-of-the-century subject" (*Epistemology* 73). This epistemological terrain is typified, as Sedgwick points out, by the "imponderable and convulsive" relations of the open secret (*Epistemology* 80). The figure of Karl intently and anxiously attempting to decode his hands in a semi-secret dim corner illustrates both the contemporary conditions of homosexual (self-)knowledge and the limits of depicting homosexuality. It also parallels at once the difficulty and interpretive labor required of the reader confronted with this inscrutable text as well as the narrator's position and strategies.

In his essay on "Die Turnstunde," Dirk Dethlefsen addresses the issue of its narrator. He argues that the story presents neither a narrator nor a character with which readers might identify and thus frustrates attempts at orientation (249). Gérard Genette's narrative concepts help to specify the particular type of narration Dethlefsen describes. "Die Turnstunde" is an example of what Genette calls "simultaneous narrating" in the present tense. It appears to unfold along with the events it recounts and thus seems "like the height of objectivity, since the last trace of enunciating [...] now disappears in a total transparency of the narrative" (219). This apparent objectivity is also enhanced by a "heterodiegetic" narrator, one that is not a character in the story (248). Our narrator also features "external focalization" which designates a narrator who shares no knowledge of the characters' thoughts (189-90). At first glance this seems to describe the narrator exactly and accounts for Dethlefsen's claim that there is no tangible narrator. Despite the accuracy of Dethlefsen's observations, "Die Turnstunde" does nevertheless contain a narrative voice. However, it



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constantly attempts to cover any trace of its existence — with one important exception. The narrator accomplishes this partial and self-conscious erasure by limiting severely the attribution of intent. We know nothing of Karl's thoughts except the narrator's suppositions about them. The exception to, or perhaps ultimate evidence of, the narrator's "objectivity" takes the form of these speculations in the form of comparisons: the narrator often uses subjunctive verbs and comparative phrases such as "als ob" (as if) and "wie" (like or as) and the verb "scheinen" (to appear). Such a strictly limited narrator can only surmise what characters are thinking; and this scrupulous narrator never fails to mark assumptions as such. The characteristic move of "Die Turnstunde," that of deniable plausibility, here simultaneously marks the limits of the narrator's knowledge and oversteps those limits. Since the narrator's conjectures constitute the only information by means of which we have access to characters' inner states, they retain a narrative authority despite their being marked as dubious. These statements invite us to read them as authoritative at the same time as they withdraw from authority. The tension between this narrative lack (the narrator's inability to know characters' thoughts) and simultaneous excess (the assumptions about those thoughts that the narrator nonetheless provides) makes any univocal interpretation impossible and preempts the association of the narrator with the possibility sexually illicit subject matter.

Not only do these suppositions attempt to describe an ultimately unknowable (or simply proscribed) reality, they do so in a way opposed to and distinct from that of the military academy. Whereas the latter forcibly imposes a particular knowledge or behavior and allows no room for doubt, the former makes suggestions which are emphatically marked by doubt. Dethlefsen understands these features as Rilke's effort to break from narrative conventions, such as a confident narrator who directs and limits the reader's interest, and to shock the reader into a new, more intense type of attention (253-54). They are also the signs, according to Dethlefsen, of a fundamental inability to narrate experience, a theme explored in more depth in *Malte* (245). While this is certainly the case, Dethlefsen does not examine this narrative impasse in its relationship to the story's homoerotic elements. In our discussion of Rilke's writings on his boarding school experiences and of the studies about him, the arbitrarily shifting valences of homosexual definition produce an anxiety that manifests itself in deniable plausibility. This strategy allows for the withdrawal from a particular position should that position suddenly be foreclosed by the forever shifting definition of homosexuality.

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Anxieties about homosexuality which inform the narrative strategies in "Die Turnstunde" can also be found in Rilke's diaries and journals regarding his boarding school experiences. This story makes up part of what Rilke apparently intended to develop, perhaps along with the short story "Pierre Dumont," into a novel set in a military academy (Butler 18). Indeed, in the journal entry immediately preceding the first version of "Die Turnstunde" Rilke declares: "Seltsam, nachts wurde plötzlich der Militärroman so dringend, daß ich glaubte, ich würde, wenn nicht sofort, so doch wenigstens heute beginnen müssen, ihn zu schreiben."<sup>28</sup> A journal entry immediately following the story makes it clear that Rilke was planning an episode which depicted Karl's burial (T 169). Thus, while turning away from the project for the moment, he intended to continue the narrative. Unfortunately, this seems never to have occurred. Nevertheless, Rilke continued his engagement with "Die Turnstunde," and a revised version was first published in the 1 February 1902 edition of *Die Zukunft*, approximately three years after Rilke composed the first draft (W 862).

The question arises as to why Rilke felt compelled to begin writing his military novel and, only a few hours later, wrote that the same topic "tritt jetzt als gleichberechtigt mit zwei, drei anderen Stoffen auf und nicht einmal als inniges Bedürfnis, sondern als literarische Absicht" (T 161).<sup>29</sup> This is a moment in which an intense, personal matter is transformed into a literary work. The two exist in a tense relationship with each other, one threatening to overcome the other. This tension produced "Die Turnstunde," which Rilke later admired, so much so that he singled it out as the only short prose piece he would have liked to have included in the 1921 edition of his early works (W 862). Yet that same tension also prevented further work on his proposed military novel, with the possible exception of the prose fragment "Erinnerung" in 1914.

In his journal Rilke explains his difficulties with the theme of the military academy thus:

Auch erscheint mir der Stoff, je mehr ich mich an ihn verliere, immer noch unmöglich und grob; noch fühle ich nicht die Geschicklichkeit, diese Gesellschaft von Knaben in ihrer ganzen Roheit und Entartung, in dieser hoffnungslosen und traurigen Heiterkeit zu zeigen . . . diese ganze Masse beständig als solche wirken zu lassen, erscheint mir ebenso wichtig wie schwer. Denn der einzelne ist ja eben — auch der verdorbenste — Kind,

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was aber aus der Gemeinsamkeit dieser Kinder sich ergibt, — das wäre der herrschende Eindruck —, eine schreckliche Gesamtheit, die wie ein fürchterliches Wesen wirkt, welches bald diesen und bald jenen Arm verlangend ausstreckt (T 161).<sup>30</sup>

Scholars such as Loock have rightfully highlighted the fact that this passage indicates the importance Rilke placed on the project of depicting the harsh, totalitarian nature of the military academy (119-21). Additionally, as York-Gothart Mix argues, the passage illustrates the discrepancy Rilke felt between the subjective understanding of a personal experience and the depiction of that experience in literary form (62).

Yet what Loock and Mix overlook is that the anxiety of this passage finds expression in sexualized images. Rilke fears losing himself to the material he is attempting to depict, which takes on a seductive, overwhelming, and destructive quality. He deems it “grob” and doubts his ability to render fully the “Roheit und Entartung” of this “Gesellschaft von Knaben.” This last phrase emphasizes the subjects’ youth but also the exclusive same-sex nature of the circumstances. He uses the term “verdorben” to describe the worst type of boarding school pupil. And finally, the “Masse” of boys takes the form of a “fürchterliches Wesen” which extends its arms in every direction, “verlangend.” This passage both demonstrates the anxiety caused by the forced homosocial community and the source of that anxiety in the constant possibility that it might be of a sexually deviant nature, or at least understood as such. The images also parallel the oppressive unity of the cadets’ voices in “Die Turnstunde” as they await news of Karl’s fate (W 438). Finally, the passage describes the tension between the urgency to depict the social constellation of the military academy and the trepidation Rilke felt in doing so. The two-part move of deniable plausibility that characterizes Rilke’s remarks about “Die Turnstunde” serves as one strategy for navigating the double bind that Sedgwick outlines. The literary theme of the boarding school proves too close for Rilke, both because of the similarity to his own experiences and the danger of being engulfed in the process of depicting it. In narrating the boarding school, one might unwittingly express what always runs the risk of being understood as homosexual thematics. Strategies of disavowal allow the space for both the expression of a homosocial milieu, with its ever-present homoerotic possibilities, and the containment of the latter.

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This anxiety — along with strategies of disavowal and oblique reference — expanded beyond Rilke's own understanding of "Die Turnstunde" to its reception as well. Two related controversies regarding his years at the military academy — the sincerity of Rilke's later depictions of his suffering there and the circumstances of his early release from the Mährisch-Weißkirchen academy — seem to have begun with Rilke's letter, dated 4 December 1894, to his then fiancée Valerie von David-Rhonfeld in which he told of his experiences at the military academy. Regarding his intention to leave the school, he described the latter period of his tenure as spent primarily in the infirmary, due more to grief than physical illness (*Sieb* 165). Rilke also shared the story of his friend Fried with whom he developed "eine auf gegenseitiger Übereinstimmung beruhende wahrhaft brüderliche Neigung" and "einen Bund — fürs Leben" which they sealed "mit Kuss und Handschlag."<sup>31</sup> Rilke mentioned the jealousy that accompanied their relationship and the tear-filled nights he spent waiting for Fried's return from a trip. Yet Fried later grew aloof. Rilke learned "dass Mitzöglinge unseren reinen Bund in den Schmutz gezogen und Fried überdies von höheren Orts Weisung erhalten hatte nicht so viel mit dem Narren zu verkehren" (*Sieb* 166).<sup>32</sup> David-Rhonfeld later transposed Rilke's account into three possible reasons for his release: "ein Gerücht sagte wegen 'Kränklichkeit,' das andere wegen 'Narretei' und das dritte bezichtigte ihn der Knabenliebe" (Hirschfeld 715).<sup>33</sup>

Taking up these themes, the controversy about Rilke's military school years has persistently continued. One can divide the two positions assumed by Rilke's biographers and literary scholars thus: those who doubt Rilke's suffering in the academy and those who dismiss what they understand as rumor and emphasize instead the sincerity of Rilke's remarks on his school years. Peter Demetz, who falls in the former camp, argues that Rilke's complaints about his suffering in the academy amount to subsequent exaggeration and self-stylization (36-37). Further, Demetz' argument sexualizes Rilke's relationship with his mother, Phia, and renders her as an overbearing, emasculating force and a possible cause of perversion (39). To this suspicious description Demetz adds that Rilke's fellow cadets asked for his dismissal from the academy (40-41). He also claims that Rilke admitted to David-Rhonfeld that he was expelled because of a "Sittlichkeitsaffäre" (41).<sup>34</sup> Demetz' statements seem calculated to cause speculation about Rilke's sexuality. In a related move, the Rilke biographer E. M. Butler's comments on the cult that developed around him also lend Rilke an effeminate and sentimental air, two attributes closely related with the gender-inversion

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model of male homosexuality (5). Butler's summary of Rilke's friendship with his fellow cadet Fried is telling; she terms it a "conventional" and "well-worn" "story" and writes that it "recalls public-school novels of the more lurid and distressing type" (17). Taken as a whole, these critical interpretations of Rilke and his boarding school years create the impression of a coddled artist with a tendency toward hypochondria and self-stylization who is too close to his mother and therefore ostracized from his classmates but nevertheless has a suspicious relationship with another boy (for which he is sent home shamefully).

The opposing trend, exemplified in the studies by Hans-Christoph Kayser and Byong-Ock Kim, is to "recuperate" Rilke's image by shifting the focus toward the reality of his suffering and away from intimations of homosexuality. Kayser cites a long series of letters and prose works in which Rilke consistently depicts the horrors of school life (46-50). In open opposition to Demetz, Kayser concludes from this mass of evidence that the consistency and sheer number of Rilke's damning references to the military academy substantiate the fact that his time there was marked by real suffering (50). In another extensive study of Rilke's military academy experiences, Kim sharply criticizes Demetz' methods and conclusions. He accuses Demetz of careless research and contends that there was no scandal upon Rilke's departure and that, rather, Rilke was released early and not expelled (75-76). Kim argues that Demetz' rhetoric amounts to a thinly veiled accusation of dishonesty on Rilke's part (74). He concludes that his real aim is an attack on Rilke's character and that Demetz therefore loses all claim to scholarly objectivity (75-77). Kim then turns his attention to Valerie von David-Rhonfeld. According to Kim, she was simply embittered by the disappointment of her first love and therefore intent on degrading Rilke's reputation (77). The importance of Kim's criticism here lies less in the facts surrounding the end of Rilke's military education than it does in the tone of the criticism. It seems this is more than a simple correction of scholarly methods. Kim's criticisms may be true, but his fervor arises from the threat to Rilke's reputation. The anxiety that Kim seems to express has to do with the type of accusations being made: denials of intimations of "Knabenliebe" and a "Sittlichkeitsaffäre" here give rise to a disproportionate amount of passion.

The issue is not the truth of Rilke's adolescence, but how it is deployed. As we have seen, David-Rhonfeld, Demetz, and Butler attempt to demythologize Rilke. However, the terms they use to humanize Rilke's image reveal something akin to *schadenfreude* in "dragging him in the filth" of homosexual suspicion. Those who take

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issue with them see it as their task to defend Rilke's honor against outlandish accusations of aberrant sexuality (and the related images of the coddled, effeminate, self-styled, hypochondriac artist). Both sides display misogynist tendencies, especially Demetz in his discussion of Phia Rilke's unhealthy influence on her son and Kim in his criticism of David-Rhonfeld's memories of Rilke. Both sides take part in the anxiety of the constitutive uncertainty of homosexual definition.

It is on at least three levels, then, that the functions of policing and defining the boundary between sanctioned homosocial behavior and illicit sexuality occur: Rilke's school experiences and his anxieties about depicting them, the textual strategies of "Die Turnstunde," and the reception of the text and Rilke's image. The narrative itself thus takes part in a larger discourse regarding Rilke's sexuality. This set of discourses presents a range of textual responses to the anxiety attending the project of narrating the military boarding school, an epistemologically complex space given its self-contradictory and concurrent prescription of a homosocial "schreckliche Gesamtheit" and proscription of homosexuality. The deniable plausibility that Rilke creates in his journal entry regarding "Die Turnstunde" — the oscillation of his engagement with the topic of the boarding school — suggests the anxiety he experienced regarding this problematic, homosocial institution and its literary depiction. In the story, homosexual panic creates the necessity for and possibility of narrative innovation that turns on the limits of knowledge and the possibility of knowing or expressing too much, a possibility that the narrator in "Die Turnstunde" endeavors to control through disavowal. Ironically, he retains narrative authority precisely by drawing away from it. A certain narrative distance both allows for the depiction of the totalizing homosocial environment of the military academy and presents the limits of the project. Taken together, Rilke's letters, journals, and prose that touch on the military academy form a sparse and indirect, yet rich and compelling commentary on the relationship among homosociality, homoeroticism, and narrative. In fact, with careful attention, the narrator's assessment of Krix might tacitly apply just as well to the possibilities and limitations of the reader's knowledge: "Er weiß schon genug."

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## Notes

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- <sup>1</sup> The title is translated either as “The Gym Class” or “The Drill-Class.” German citations of the published 1902 version are taken from the third volume of Rilke’s *Werke* (hereafter cited as W). Occasional citations are from the original 1899 version contained in the fourth volume of Rilke’s *Sämtliche Werke* (hereafter cited as SW). English citations of this text are from Appelbaum’s translation. All other translations from German texts are my own.
- <sup>2</sup> “In the military school at Sankt Severin. Gymnasium” (85).
- <sup>3</sup> See especially Minder 77; Mix 63; and Ryan 71 for observations on this similarity.
- <sup>4</sup> See especially Demetz, Kayser, and Kim.
- <sup>5</sup> See especially Dethlefsen, Loock, Mix, and Ryan.
- <sup>6</sup> Cf. Downing, especially 178-79, on the disavowal of narrative authority as a strategy in German realism.
- <sup>7</sup> “with particular pleasure”; “he has never before been able to understand”; “involuntarily” (85); and “as if he had discovered a way out in the ceiling of the gym and were striving to reach it” (87).
- <sup>8</sup> “in a rather shady corner of the gym” (85) and “immeasurable” (87).
- <sup>9</sup> “high up below the ceiling he makes a gesture as if he wanted to shake them off; and since he obviously doesn’t succeed in this, he ties all those gazes to the bare iron hook up there” (87).
- <sup>10</sup> “he whizzes down the smooth pole so fast that everyone is still looking upward after he has been standing down below for some time” (87).
- <sup>11</sup> “at his burning palms with oddly dulled eyes” (87).
- <sup>12</sup> “in his usual, saliva-clogged voice” (87).
- <sup>13</sup> “he is looking straight into the gym, but as if he saw something indefinable, perhaps not in the gym, outdoors perhaps, right outside the windows, even though it’s dark and late on an autumn day” (89).
- <sup>14</sup> “Then, hasty questions: ‘What? What? Who? Gruber? Where?’ And more and more questions” (89).
- <sup>15</sup> “How does he look? What’s wrong with him? Has he come to yet?” (91).
- <sup>16</sup> “as if overlaid by a need to keep listening” (91).
- <sup>17</sup> “The boys’ voices are less confused and their humming has a more delicate sound, as if they were all constantly saying only: ‘Sss, sss, sss. . .’” (91).
- <sup>18</sup> “Sly little Krix, meanwhile, is eavesdropping at the door to the small room” (91).
- <sup>19</sup> “Krix jumps back like a cat, his eyes flashing with cunning” (91).
- <sup>20</sup> “He already knows enough” (91).
- <sup>21</sup> “suddenly feels someone grabbing his arm, as if leaping onto him”; and “[h]is eyes are shining and his teeth are glimmering as if he was about to take a bite” (93).
- <sup>22</sup> “‘I’ve seen him,’ he whispers breathlessly, squeezing Jerome’s arm, and there’s laughter inside him which shakes him back and forth. He can hardly continue: ‘He’s all naked and caved in and very long.’” (93).
- <sup>23</sup> “short, high” (93).
- <sup>24</sup> “a secret gives the personality an exceptional position, it functions as a socially determined appeal.” The last term, “Reiz,” has many possible translations, including “attraction,” “allure,” “charm,” “enchantment,” and “stimulus.”
- <sup>25</sup> “the power of twists of fate and surprises, of joy and ruin.”
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- 26 "the pale, moonstruck boy with the sunken chest." Subsequent references to Rilke's *Tagebücher aus der Frühzeit* will be cited as T.
- 27 "completely stooped over them like someone trying to decipher a letter in insufficient light" (87).
- 28 "Strange, last night the military novel suddenly became so urgent that I believed I would — if not right away — at least today have to begin to write it."
- 29 "now appears as being just as valid as two or three other themes and not even as a fervent desire, but rather as a literary objective."
- 30 "Also, the more I lose myself in this topic, the more it still appears to me impossible and crude; I do not yet feel the ability to show this society of boys in its full coarseness and degeneracy [. . .] to let this whole horde constantly come across as such appears just as important as it is difficult. Because each one is after all — even the most depraved — a child, but what results from the community of these children — this would be the prevailing impression — a terrible totality that appears like a dreadful creature which stretches out this and then the other arm longingly and insistently."
- 31 "a truly brotherly affection based on mutual accord"; "a bond — for life"; and "with a kiss and a handshake."
- 32 "that fellow pupils had dragged our pure bond in the filth and, moreover, Fried had received an order from higher up not to associate with the fool."
- 33 "one rumor said because of 'sickliness,' another because of 'foolery,' and the third accused him of pederasty."
- 34 "Scandal." This term strongly connotes a sexual scandal.

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