Brothers or Others: Male Friendship in Eighteenth-Century Germany

MARTIN KAGEL
University of Georgia

Friendship – especially its male variant – was a concept of critical importance in eighteenth-century German culture. Closely connected to a new bourgeois social life centered around literary circles, the notion of friendship, defined in social practice, theoretical thought and literary representation, served to integrate personal, literary, and political tenets of the third estate. Beyond meeting the communicative and emotional needs of the Enlightenment individual, friendships among men were instrumental in creating networks of intellectuals, provided a model for social emancipation, and served as a blueprint for nationalist thinkers.

From the perspective of social history, the sudden prominence of the concept can be explained by pointing to the gradual erosion of social stratification throughout the eighteenth century. As bonds of profession, function, or status weakened, bonds which had traditionally defined the individual’s position in society, a new social heterogeneity evolved, in which personal relationships gained in importance and replaced institutional ones. Individual friendships and friendship circles allowed for new forms of interaction outside the already existing professional, political, and religious institutions, providing orientation in times of change and a realm of less restricted social and moral exploration.¹

Politically, male friendship circles anticipated a society of equals where members would be valued for who they were, not as representatives of rank or class. In many ways, the bourgeois notion of community was first realized in these groups, whose members established their own form of social interaction outside the existing power structures. In their emphasis on equality, these circles naturally challenged the privileged nobility’s claim to power.² Close friendships, ultimately defined by the willingness to sacrifice one’s life for the friend, also prefigured the bourgeois individual’s relationship to the emerging nation state, and hence played a crucial role in the cultural and political transition from the ancien régime to the modern German nation. «In der Freundschaft,» notes Wolfdietrich Rasch, «erlebte und erprobte der Einzelmensch innerste Hingabe, die Überwindung des Selbst im Aufgehen in einem höheren Ganzen, Treue, Verpflichtung und wahre Bindung und die Steigerung aller Kräfte in dieser Bindung.»³
From a personal perspective, friendships helped foster a sense of self-worth and uniqueness, and were the ideal medium for communicating the newly discovered spectrum of one’s own emotions. In a society stratified largely along homosocial lines, the intimacy of close friendships among members of the same sex was frequently considered superior to the formal heterosexual bond of marriage. Compared to the strictly regulated realm of heterosexual relations, homosocial attachments were seen more liberally and escaped the moral and social scrutiny common for the former, offering the freedom to express passion without sanction and to defy social norms. Unlike spouses locked into a conventional marriage, friends could, in other words, experience a theretofore uncharted depth of affection and pledge «to remain ‹faithful› forever, to be in ‹each other’s thoughts constantly,› to live together and even to die together.» Emotionally charged exchanges in letters in language later reserved for amorous heterosexual relationships are typical of both male and female friendships in eighteenth-century Germany and provide salient examples for the intensity of relationships that neither automatically included nor excluded an erotic attraction.

Not surprisingly, the extensive and sophisticated epistolary culture of the eighteenth century played a decisive role in the development and expression of friendships. Correspondence brought about friendships, was crucial in their maintenance, and allowed them to flourish. In Europe this was true above all in the loose conglomerate of states called the Holy Roman Empire of the German Nation with its hundreds of territories and lack of a single cultural or political center. Here, where friends were easily separated or lived apart from each other for long periods of time, the network of correspondence often substituted for actual fellowship. Letters were, however, not only a practical and necessary means of communication. Beyond permitting geographically separated friends to reveal their sentiments in writing, the epistolary culture facilitated the expression of intimate feelings that one did not dare to voice in face to face encounters. Therefore, letters were often the preferred and sometimes sole medium in which friendship could be performed in all its emotional intensity.

Friendships among the educated elite in Enlightenment Germany were not formed in a conceptual vacuum but were by and large initiated, maintained, and imagined according to the classical notion of the «Other Self» – codified in Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics* and Cicero’s *Offices*, and newly emphasized in one of Montaigne’s *essais*. Although references to the notion of the Other Self were not always explicit, it is clear from the way in which authors posed the question of friendship that the theoretical reflection on the inherent virtue and political expediency of friendship found in these classical texts represent-
ed a latent framework for their thinking and shaped the way in which German literati of the Enlightenment discussed and conceptualized friendship. To regard the friend as someone whose concern for one’s well-being equaled one’s own, to love the friend for his own sake, to consider friendship a completion of self, all of these attributes were standard fare in eighteenth-century German discourse on friendship. In addition, heroic friendship bonds from classical lore or literature, such as the friendship between Orestes and Pylades or Damon and Pythias often served as templates for their eighteenth-century counterparts. Their literary recurrence evidenced that, beyond the intimate personal relationship, friendship was conceived of as a codified form of interaction that regulated social and political relationships.8 In societal practice, it exemplified an ethic worthy of emulation.9

One striking feature of the sentimental culture of friendship around the middle of the century was the ritual element in amicable relationships. Clearly, the concept of friendship lent itself to ritual behavior and there is ample evidence thereof in eighteenth-century Germany.10 Part quotidian fashion, part philosophical expression, material and spiritual tokens of friendship abounded during the period. German landscape gardens often featured a veritable topography of friendship, with particular groves, memorial stones, small monuments or commemorative urns, and a variety of «temples.»11 In the house, inscribed porcelain cups and plates, distinctive jewelry, friendship altars and portraits of friends served as the concrete manifestations of a quasi-religious cult of friendship centered around memory and sacrifice.12

The ritualization of friendship permitted friends to transcend the mundane reality of the actual personal bond, adding a symbolical level to their interaction and infusing it with metaphysical meaning. The inherent reference to tradition in ritual practice moreover allowed eighteenth-century contemporaries to see an affinity between their relationships and those of classical precursors and to embed both in an imagined historical trajectory leading up to their own time. Since friendship rituals could strengthen both the symbolical and the concrete levels of amicable relationships, ritual practice allowed friends to reconcile ancient ideals with the demands of an emerging bourgeois society, linking traditional friendship bonds and decidedly modern causes.

Arguably the central figure within the sentimental culture of friendship in eighteenth-century Germany was Johann Wilhelm Ludvig Gleim. Born in 1719, Gleim had studied law and philosophy at the University of Halle during the late 1730s and served as secretary to Prince Wilhelm of Brandenburg-Schwedt and Leopold I., Prince of Anhalt-Dessau, before settling down for
good in the Northeastern town of Halberstadt in 1747. There, he was appointed secretary of the cathedral chapter, a position «enhanced in 1756 by an additional appointment as canon of Stift (endowment) Wahlbeck, allowing him to live his remaining years in complete financial security.»

Among his contemporaries, Gleim was renowned for his unusual devotion to his friends and his promotion of friendship as a cultural concept. Gleim’s unique dedication found its ultimate expression in his *Temple of Muses and Friendship*, established 1745 in one of the rooms of his residence. «Ich will in einem Kabinett meiner Freunde Bilder um mich her hängen,» he declared. «Sie sollen sehen, was ich mache und die Erinnerung ihrer Tugenden soll meine Lehrerin seyn.» By the end of his life, Gleim’s temple contained over 120 portraits of sympathetic minds as well as an especially designed chair which enabled the author to face the portraits when writing to his friends. Throughout his life, Gleim was an uncannily prolific correspondent. The surviving letters alone number approximately 10,000 to and from no less than 500 correspondents. At one point or another, Gleim appears to have been in written contact with almost every major literary figure of eighteenth-century Germany.

In literary history, Gleim is known for his mastery of anacreontic verse, a playful and flirtatious form of poetry modeled after a sixteenth-century collection of «60-odd short poems on love, wine and song» erroneously attributed to Anacreon of Teos (6th-century B.C.). Structured around a limited number of tropes, anacreontic poetry was often presented in idyllic settings and employed some form of role play, frequently in the guise of characters from Greek mythology. Gleim’s first collection of anacreontic poems, entitled *Versuch in Scherzhaften Liedern* (2 vols., 1744–45), was published to wide acclaim and subsequently copied numerous times. Similarly successful was an influential and widely distributed collection of patriotic poetry he wrote in support of Frederick the Great’s campaigns of the Seven Years’ War, the *Preußische Kriegslieder […] von einem Grenadier* (1758), in which the author also assumes a poetic identity, this time of a Prussian infantryman. In both his anacreontic and his patriotic poetry, role play is used to heighten the emotional intensity of the author’s writings and lend a sense of immediacy. Gleim’s *Kriegslieder* in the guise of the fictional infantryman invited the reader to imagine himself among the fighting, which, in turn, gave credibility to the patriotic sentiments he expressed.

In the year 1766, during a stay at the spa of Lauchstädt, Gleim met Johann Georg Jacobi. Jacobi, twenty years Gleim’s junior, was a professor of philosophy and rhetoric in Halle at the time and an intellectual with literary ambitions who had given up the study of theology for the sake of that of the arts.
The two immediately took to each other and out of the first encounter grew a friendship that culminated in Jacobi’s move to Halberstadt in 1769. Between their first meeting in Lauchstädt and Jacobi’s relocation, the friends extended their friendship through mutual visits and an extensive correspondence published in 1768. Theirs was an unusual epistolary collection, for the 75 letters exchanged between February 1767 and March 1768 consist not of the erudite discussion of literary, philosophical or political issues one might expect, but focus largely on the celebration of their mutual friendship. The affectionate tone of the letters and the lack of substantive content caused much irritation among contemporaries who criticized their repetitiveness when benevolent or openly ridiculed the authors when less forgiving. Goethe spoke of the “mutual nullity” of the authors’ self-congratulatory letters. Johann Gottfried Herder, though he acknowledged in an early letter to Gleim the correspondence’s “sweet enthusiasm of friendship,” thereafter considered the amorous language employed a token of inanity and labeled it “insipid nonsense.” Gleim’s former protégée Anna Louisa Karsch, alluding to the homophobic character of some of the unusually blunt criticism, remarked that the celebration of the authors’ friendship included “too many kisses to escape slander, suspicion and mockery.”

The “enchanted and rather enthusiastic language of friendship” of the correspondence, punctuated with highly emotional and somewhat suggestive passages, was doubtless radical even in the context of German Empfindsamkeit. “Ja mein liebster Freund,” writes Jacobi on August 24, 1767, “Freundschaft ist nicht weit von Liebe. Alles hab’ ich bey Ihrem Abschiede empfun- den, was ein Liebhaber empfinden kan, selbst die kleinen Umstände nicht ausgenommen, die für ihn so interessant sind.” Similar passion is expressed a good month later when Jacobi writes that his belief in the sacred nature of friendship has now been rewarded beyond expectation, and that “das liebenswürdigste Geschenk des schönsten Mädchens” would not be as endearing to him as his newfound friend’s letters. Gleim himself is equally enthusiastic, admonishing Jacobi if he does not write enough and exaltedly celebrating the arrival of his letters: “Aufgerissen wurde das Päkchen, und, o welch ein süßer Anblick! Eine Zeile von der Hand meines Jacobi, zehn Zeilen, zwanzig, dreißig, wer kan sie zählen? Gelesen, empfunden, gepriesen wurden sie; und dann geküsset, wie ein Liebhaber in der süßesten Entzückung seiner Liebe sein Mädchen küsset.”

One important aspect of the fervid language of the exchanges was its literary character. For as much as the amicable enthusiasm of the letters was aimed to initiate emotional responses, it was employed to generate aesthetic results. Jacobi, being the younger and less established of the two writers, was clearly...
on the receiving end in this regard, but both he and Gleim drew inspiration from the impassioned tone of the correspondence and used their friendship as a medium for their writing. Alternating frequently between verse and prose, the letters functioned like a poetic aphrodisiac, unlocking feelings previously undetected and motivating the poets to express them in writing. «Sonst, wenn ich dichten wollte, war die Natur todt um mich her,» observes Jacobi. «Ich empfand wenig, und wenn ich etwas empfand, so wagte ich nicht, davon zu singen. Jetzt, liebster Freund, jetzt, verdrengt eine Empfindung, ein Gedanke den andern. Kühn nehm ich mein Saitenspiel, ich sehe die Grazien, die mir lächeln, ich fühle die Gegenwart der Musen. Meinen Gleim nenn’ ich ihnen, und sie stimmen mir die Leyer.»27

Upon repeated reading of the letters, it becomes clear that friendship was largely performed in them, for it is exactly the repetition that contemporary reviewers found so tiresome that indicates that the authors’ spontaneity and indefatigable enthusiasm were actually the result of a conscious endeavor. More than a mere medium of communication, Gleim’s and Jacobi’s epistles were a vessel of exclusive knowledge, an understanding not located in the signified but in the amicable bond of the two writers. Thus, every letter was composed, sent off, received and read in ways commensurate with the author’s idealized notion of friendship, and, adding a symbolical dimension, with the heightened awareness of its significance for the friendship itself.28 «Was soll ich Ihnen sagen, liebster Freund?» Jacobi exclaims on September 17, 1767.

Tausend und tausend Danksagungen sind nicht genug für das, was ich empfinde! O lassen Sie mich weinend Sie umarmen: Diese Sprache der Liebe, der Erkenntlichkeit sagt mehr, als jede andere, und sie ist am wenigsten entheiligt. Nur diejenigen können Sie reden, die in das innerste Heiligthum der Freundschaft hineingegangen sind.29

One of the conditions for the depth of understanding alluded to by Jacobi was the absence of the friend, for the emotional intensity of the writing stood in direct correlation to the fact that actual fellowship was impossible at the time. The realization of friendship in physical distance or in retrospect – and therefore in writing – was not unique to Gleim and Jacobi. For them, however, absence fulfilled an indispensable literary function, for it was exclusively the memory of, and the longing for, the absent friend that gave grounds for introspection, served to intensify emotions, and initiated their articulation.30

For Gleim and Jacobi, friendship served almost exclusively as a medium of self-discovery. Similar to, though not identical with, the paradoxical claim once attributed to Aristotle that the true friend was always absent, the absence here is the absence of a self in need to be unearthed.31 The Other Self is,
in other words, conceived of as a form of identity: the friend is the absent I. «Den Nachmittag,» Jacobi writes, invoking both the ritual as well as the self-reflective character of their friendship,

ging ich auf meinen Berg, und stellte mich dahin, wo wir mit einander die schöne Gegend übersahen. Hier wiederholte ich alles, was Sie mir gesagt hatten. Recht lange stand ich da, und sah nach den Hügeln, die Lauchstädt verstecken. So viele schöne Augenblicke, für die ich Ihnen den zärtlichsten Danck sagte, wurden überdacht; unsere Scherze, unsere Gespräche, unsere Umarmungen — — o mein liebster, mein bester Freund, nie sind Sie stärker geliebt worden.»

Friendship is also a recurrent topic in the correspondence between Johann Wilhelm Ludwig Gleim and the Prussian officer and poet Ewald von Kleist, though their letters exhibit little of the amorous flirtation that could be seen in Gleim and Jacobi’s exchanges. A distinctly different concept of friendship evolves here and is expressed in Kleist’s literary works. The more serious tone of the letters may in part have been the result of Kleist’s personal disposition. The officer was known to suffer from bouts of depression and more than once expressed the wish to die on the battlefield. More importantly, however, friendship was placed in an altogether different context, one of military campaigns and nationalist ideology.

Gleim and Kleist first met in 1741 when the former served as quartermaster of a Potsdam regiment to which Kleist belonged. The Prussian officer, recovering from an injury suffered in a duel that temporarily prevented him from reading, had complained about boredom to Gleim who thereupon offered to entertain him with regular recitations from his poetry. Gleim’s literary consultations allegedly helped discover a life-threatening infection and are said to have inspired Kleist to pursue a literary career in addition to his military service. By 1750, following the publication of Der Frühling, a lengthy poem reflecting the subjective experience of nature, Kleist had become a well-known literary figure in German letters and continued to write until his untimely death in 1759. Both Gleim and Kleist participated in the siege of Prague in 1744 during the Second Silesian War, and while they remained in contact throughout times of peace, their friendship developed its greatest significance during the Seven Years’ War (1756–63), when Gleim wrote his Preußische Kriegslieder and Kleist served both as an officer in Frederick the Great’s Prussian army and as the main source for the poet-infantryman from Halberstadt who pretended to be amongst the fighting.

Kleist conceptualized friendship predominantly as self-sacrifice. In his letters to Gleim, he repeatedly expressed his desire to die before his friend, claiming Gleim’s life to be worth ten times his own. Self-sacrifice is also the gist
of Kleist’s poem «Die Freundschafft,» dedicated to his Halberstädter brother in arms. The poem depicts two shipwrecked friends, Leander and Selin, who, rather than struggling for individual survival, struggle to surpass each other in forfeiting their lives. While both are eventually saved, the poem unequivocally advocates self-sacrifice as the ultimate consummation of friendship.

«Die Freundschafft» features a triangular constellation, a recurring characteristic of Kleist’s writings on friendship where the tension between care and sacrifice of self can only be resolved through the addition of a third entity that allows the friends to transcend their mundane existence. In the poem, this entity is an unidentified higher power; in other writings it is the political state with whom the characters identify. In his dispatches from the theater of war, Kleist effectively connected amicable sentiment and military service, a link reflected in his patriotic poetry, such as his «Ode an die Preußische Armee,» in which he speaks of «Preußens Freunde,» referring to the military personnel of Prussia’s army rather than its political allies.

Friendship, patriotism, and self-sacrifice are also explicitly linked in Kleist’s narrative poem *Cißides und Paches*, published in 1759, the year of Kleist’s death in the battle of Kunersdorf. The poem depicts an episode from the Greek War, the siege of the Thessalian city of Lamia by an insurgent coalition force lead by the Athenian general Leosthenes. Historically, the siege of the years 323–322 B.C. is considered the principal confrontation of a war waged by the coalition to break with Macedonian hegemony in the wake of the death of Alexander the Great. Lamia, defended by the Macedonian general Antipater, was eventually liberated when reinforcements arrived in the Spring of 322. Forced to raise the siege, the coalition armies were defeated in the subsequent battle at Crannon and Macedonian rule reestablished, resulting not only in the defeat of Athens but ultimately leading to the demise of the classical Greek polis.

In the poem, which reverses the roles of the antagonists somewhat, turning a war of aggression into one of defense, Cißides is the commanding officer of a few Macedonian troops left behind in a fortified castle near the city of Lamia. His friend Paches is second in rank. The two are charged with the task of defending the stronghold against an Athenian army many times the size of their own. It is clear from the outset that their charge is one impossible to carry out. Both will eventually succumb to the enemy’s supremacy in number and die in a heroic fight, though considerably depleting the enemy’s army in the process and forcing it to retreat. The poem ends with praise for the friends’ ultimate sacrifice in defense of their fatherland, introducing the idea of creating a friendship monument that would serve to memorialize their deeds. The passage is followed by an epilogue that links the historical events
depicted directly to Kleist’s own desire for heroic immolation in the Prussian campaign.40

Similar to Kleist’s story of shipwreck, Kleist’s novella in verse, Cißides und Paches, is centered around a time of crisis.41 The wartime setting serves to highlight the empowering nature of the protagonists’ amicable bond and its intimate connection to heroic death and deeply felt patriotism. For Kleist, friendship models the relationship to the fatherland, as it involves willingness to transcend the self and sacrifice for the other. The author’s conflation of the concepts of friendship and patriotism can be observed in a passage illustrating the friends’ courageous behavior in battle. Their furious fight is not only spurred by the realization that their heroism will leave a powerful legacy but also by their amicable sentiments. Tender feelings of friendship and heroic courage indistinguishably feed off each other and model a relationship that is at once personal and symbolical.

Begegneten
Sie sich, so sahen sie vergnügt sich an.
Schwieg gleich der Mund, so sprach ihr Auge viel,
Und sagt: Unsterblichkeit ist unser Theil! –
Doch auch die Freundschaft sah zum Blick heraus,
Und es blieb ungewiß, ob Heldenmuth
Die Freunde mehr beherrscht’, als Zärtlichkeit.
Sie drückten sich die Händ’, und eilten dann
Wohin sie Ehre trieb, und wo der Tod
In Feur und Stein, und Pfeilen sausete. –
Gleich unerschrocken blieb ihr kleines Heer.
Sah jemand seinen Freund getödtet: Floß,
Vom trüben Aug ihm eine Thränenfluth;
Doch schickt er Pfeil auf Pfeil dem Feinde zu.42

The inspired soldiers emulate their commanders’ example and fight and die for each other – as friends. It seems that only where friendship mediates the relationship between the individual and the fatherland is the sacrifice of life endowed with a transcendence that patriotic enthusiasm itself could not furnish. Formal equality and reciprocity in friendship also anticipate one of the main components of nationalist thinking in the late eighteenth century. From a nationalist perspective, the egalitarian community of friends provides the blueprint for the relationship between citizen and nation, an equidistant relationship for all members of the national community, past and present.43 Accordingly, in Kleist, the classical hero of antiquity no longer appears in singular greatness but in infinitely duplicable form: as a patriot. Likewise, «Unsterblichkeit» refers not merely to the remembrance of fallen soldiers by succeeding generations, but to the coexistence of the living and the dead
in absolute contemporaneity. Why, Thomas Abbt asks in his 1761 tract on death *pro patria*, are Germanic ancestors entitled to the respect of his contemporaries? «Die Ursache davon ist leicht anzugeben. Wir können fast keinen Schritt tun, wo nicht ein braver Mann liegen sollte, der für sein Vaterland gestorben ist.»

That no sacrifice is brought in vain is demonstrated in a second passage that depicts Paches finding an exhausted and despondent friend dying from dehydration. In a daring and utterly desperate act, Paches has Cißides drink the blood of fallen soldiers. The exceptional breach of the hero, which revives him and allows him to fight on, realizes in actuality and for everybody to see the bond of an otherwise merely imagined national community. It is a striking scene, both fascinating and repugnant in its transgression of moral and social limits. Clearly, this strange communion has a ritual dimension, for it is not just actual thirst that demands to be quenched. Rather, drinking the blood signals the union of the fallen and the living and thus the spiritual continuation of the soldiers’ battle. That Cißides himself will die shortly thereafter is but an afterthought in this regard, as his survival had never been the question.

A third passage, introduced to foreshadow the two protagonists’ deaths, aligns friendship with brotherhood. In this scene, set once more against the background of combat, Kleist portrays two courageously fighting brothers, one of whom, Zelon, suffers an essentially fatal injury when a large rock crushes his legs. He steadfastly fights through unbearable pain until his brother appears, and, pleading with him, asks his kin to mercy-kill him, announcing that his slow death is certain and that he cannot endure the pain much longer. Initially, the brother turns away, but he changes his mind when Zelon suggests that he may not die a hero.

Der Bruder kehrt
Zurück, umarmet den Verwundeten,
Auf dessen Lippen mit den seini gen
Er lang’ erstarret lag, indessen daß
Mit Schmerzen und mit Jammer Zelon rang.
Zuletzt setzt er den Bogen auf die Brust
Dem Flehenden, mit weggewandtem Blick.
Mitleidig fuhr der Pfeil ihm durch das Herz,
Und endigt’ ihm die Qvaal. Und jämmernd floh
Der edle Mörder, der freundschaftliche,
Zur Maur, um auch den Todt fürs Vaterland
Dem Bruder gleich zu sterben.

Chosen as the frontispiece for the original edition of *Cißides und Paches*, the image of the brother killing his kin is another example of excess and transgres-
sion in warfare. Yet, it is not just the exceptional state of battle that renders the murder admissible, but friendship itself. After all, Zelon addresses his brother as «treuester Freund,» suggesting a relation deepened by a shared regard for virtue and character. Friendship, it appears, is brotherhood’s most profound expression. Insofar as friendship concurrently models the relationship to the fatherland, Zelon’s request to be killed equals his brother’s patriotic self-immolation. In Kleist’s view, the murder is justified because it merely annihilates what has already been relinquished: the soldier’s life. The critical point here is that, overcome by pain, Zelon may come to regret his decision and hence deny himself the transcendent value of his death.49 This is where his brother steps in, and rather than question Zelon’s sacrifice, underscores its significance with his murder.

Similar to Gleim and Jacobi, Kleist, in his poetry and his letters, conceives of the Other Self as essentially alike. Yet, it is not the «absent I» that is invoked here, but the «transcendent self.» Linking friendship and fraternity the author submits that both the meaning and the transcendent power of the death for the fatherland spring from the sacrificial selflessness that is the mark of true friendship. «But it is true to say of the man of good character that he performs many actions for the sake of his friends and his country, and if necessary even dies for them,» Aristotle observes in his Nicomachean Ethics, already recognizing the intrinsic link between the attachment to the friend and the abstract political body of the state.50 Clearly, the conception of friendship put forth by Kleist was not novel, as brotherhood had long functioned as the governing paradigm of male friendship. Adopting it for modern patriotic purposes, however, proved significant nonetheless – and problematic, since in Kleist’s amalgamation of friendship and patriotism, friendship was easily instrumentalized for a nationalist agenda.51 While the sacrifice of life acquired a deeper, symbolic meaning where patriotism was grounded in friendship, this meaning was derivative, not genuine to the actual relationship of subject and state. Furthermore, in order to fuse together affection for the friend and the fatherland, the author relied largely on the ritual dimension of friendship, the source of its symbolic meaning. As such, the call for patriotic sacrifice laid claim to a transformative power that could hardly be matched by reality, especially in campaigns fought for reasons of political hegemony, such as Prussia’s in the Seven Years’ War. In Kleist’s poetic vision, the imagined community that is the nation may have been realized already in the fraternity of soldiers; viewed against the background of the Seven Years’ War, however, the soldiers’ patriotism carried with it the ambivalence of a sacrifice whose lasting value existed in ideology only.52

Both eighteenth-century cultural manifestations of friendship discussed above, the «absent I» and the «transcendent self,» were embedded in a meta-
physical framework that, while allowing for the generation of symbolic meaning, restricted the malleability of the concept in regard to a functional political notion that was emancipatory in nature. Of course, at the time, both the discovery and the transcendence of the self were politically progressive practices, insofar as they were connected to the rise of the third estate and the bourgeois revolution. Yet, in a larger historical context the emphasis on identity inevitably constrained the notion of friendship in a way that turned initial progress into repression over time. Gleim, Jacobi, and Kleist can conceive of friendship only as a relation that presupposes sameness and not as a medium through which to negotiate difference and alterity. Borrowing a figure of thought from Walter Benjamin, one could say that it was the foundation of friendship in ritual that prevented its emancipatory adaptation. Only where friendship was realized as a social medium based on political rather than ritual relations could it function not just as a singular ideal but as secular collective practice modeling a modern social ethics.

Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, Germany’s preeminent Enlightenment playwright, was a friend of both Johann Wilhelm Ludwig Gleim and Ewald von Kleist. Yet, of the three, he was certainly the one most skeptical of the patriotic enthusiasm that spread throughout and beyond Berlin at the beginning of the Seven Years’ War. To be sure, Lessing was not immune to its draw. After all, he served as an editor of Gleim’s Preußische Kriegslieder, to which he contributed a foreword, and he also arranged for the printing of Kleist’s Cißides und Paches. Moreover, he had a rather favorable view of the military as an institution, having served voluntarily for nearly five years as the secretary to the Prussian General Bogislaw Friedrich von Tauentzien, whom he first came to know through Kleist in Leipzig. Lessing himself, however, never fully gave in to the lure of amplifying the impact of his literary production by linking it to Prussia’s military success. The only “patriotic” play he wrote, Philotas (1759), questions heroic self-sacrifice and depicts it as self-serving. Minna von Barnhelm (1767), set at the end of the Seven Years War, places military honor in a social and political context and characterizes it as obsolete and impractical. In his correspondence with Gleim during the year 1758, a time when Lessing resided in Leipzig and often met with Kleist, he mentions Kleist’s progress on his “heroic poem” Cißides und Paches, but displays no particular enthusiasm for the work. Similarly, Lessing’s equivocal commentary on the poem in his 40th Literaturbrief focuses on its aesthetics rather than its content. While Lessing certainly admired Kleist and greatly valued him as a friend, he was equally suspicious of his unbridled patriotism. «Wild sadness,» seized him upon the news of Kleist’s death at Kunersdorf, a sadness mixed
with frustration and anger about his friend’s unreflected patriotic fervor and his deeply contradictory personality.\textsuperscript{57}

The correspondence between Gleim and Lessing during the late 1750s is different in tone and substance from the letters Gleim exchanged with Johann Georg Jacobi or Ewald von Kleist. While they address each other as «dearest friend» or «dearest Lessing» respectively and assure one another periodically of their mutual friendship, their letters are largely characterized by mutual respect and admiration for the friend’s literary achievements. This is particularly noticeable with Gleim, who clearly recognizes Lessing’s brilliance. Thus, the letters revolve around common projects, the evaluation of each other’s work, and the occasional discussion of the whereabouts of their mutual friend Kleist. All in all, the reader gains the impression that Kleist mediated their friendship both in person and symbolically, as was the case already in the opening of the first letter Lessing addressed to Gleim:

Lieber Herr Gleim! Es hat sich noch nie schicken wollen, daß ich mir das Vergnügen machen können, an Sie zu schreiben; und da es jetzt geschehen soll, wollte ich mir wohl eine bessere Veranlassung dazu wünschen. Ich schreibe dieses in dem Zimmer Ihres Freundes, des Herrn Major von Kleist, und vor seinem Bette. Er liegt bereits den achten Tag an einem Catharral-Fieber krank. Ihre Besorgniß aber, unnöthiger Weise, nicht zu vergrößern, setze ich sogleich hinzu, daß er wieder außer Gefahr ist.\textsuperscript{58}

Gleim and Lessing corresponded with increasing frequency throughout the period in which the infantryman from Halberstadt concocted his Prussian war songs. Lessing was initially quite supportive of the project. He appreciated the unpretentious simplicity of Gleim’s language and clearly enjoyed the literary stabs at Prussia’s enemies. However, when the playfulness disappeared and the poems became ever more aggressive, Lessing took issue with Gleim: «Zeigen Sie aber dem Grenadier diesen meinen Brief nicht,» he writes in December 1758, «denn ich fange wirklich an mich vor ihm zu fürchten. Es scheint, er läßt sich zu leicht in Harnisch jagen.»\textsuperscript{59} Gleim, of course, took offense, and in the ensuing exchange of letters Lessing not only showed himself to be conciliatory but, in a significant move, dissociates the notions of \textit{amicitia} and \textit{amor patriae}:

Ich habe überhaupt von der Liebe des Vaterlandes (es thut mir leid, daß ich Ihnen vielleicht meine Schande gestehen muß) keinen Begriff, und sie scheint mir aufs höchste eine heroische Schwachheit, die ich recht gern entbehre. – Doch lassen Sie mich davon nichts weiter schreiben. Ich rühme mich, daß ich von der Freundschaft desto höhere Begriffe habe, und daß noch tausend solche kleine Uneinigkeiten meine Liebe und Hochachtung gegen meinen lieben Gleim und wackern Grenadier nicht im geringsten nachtheilig seyn können.\textsuperscript{60}
Friendship is an important concept in much of Lessing’s work. In an early one-act play entitled *Damon, oder Die wahre Freundschaft* (1747), which Lessing wrote as an eighteen-year old, it is in fact the central subject matter. Critical of a naive, idealized view of friendship, Lessing here places two friends in competition with each other, for Damon and Leander both desire to marry a young, rich widow. Unlike Kleist, however, Lessing does not employ the triangular constellation to evoke the transcendence of the individual. Rather, Lessing parallels homosocial and heterosexual relationships to allow for the displacement of the friends’ affection for each other. An example of what Réné Girard has termed «triangular desire,» the rivalry of the friends is clearly imitative as their desire, rather than being directed at the object, the widow, is directed at the person desiring the object, the friend. Mixed into this constellation is the imagery of commerce and exploration. Both Damon and Leander have invested all of their assets into two ships currently at sea and bound to return with riches from East India. The play initially suggests that the friends’ success in winning over the widow – who claims to love both in equal measure – rests on the fortune of their colonial enterprise. Hence, the development of the action leads to betrayal of the friendship by Leander who is trying to gain the upper hand after Damon’s ship has sunk. Yet in a final twist, the widow decides to marry the more virtuous Damon whom she considers the more «fortunate» of the two. In the course of all this, actions and words on stage show Damon and Leander’s friendship to be superficial and insubstantial. Throughout the play, Leander sees his friend merely as an expedient extension of himself providing hollow praise and worshiping an ideal of friendship that could never be reconciled with reality. Only at the end, following the discovery of his betrayal and Damon’s forgiveness, is he beginning to grasp the true meaning of friendship: the nonutilitarian love of the other for his own sake. Incidentally, this result is less pleasing for the widow, as Damon and Leander’s reconciliation asserts the ultimate superiority of male friendship over heterosexual love relationships and points to her mediating role in the contest:

Damon: Nun, gestehen Sie mir wenigstens, lieber Leander, daß es etwas schwerer sei, die Pflichten der Freundschaft auszuüben, als von ihr entzücket zu reden.
Leander: Ja, Damon, ich habe die Freundschaft oft genennet, aber sie heute erst von Ihnen kennen lernen.

Lessing returns to his criticism of misconceived notions of friendship two years later in *Die Juden* (1749), a play advocating an enlightened and emancipatory view of ethnic and religious difference. Here, an unnamed traveler
saves a nobleman from two robbers disguised to appear to the prejudiced eye as Jews. The grateful nobleman invites the stranger into his house where soon thereafter the real thieves are discovered: two Christian servants of the baron. In a further development, the altruistic traveler reveals himself to be Jewish, thereby demonstrating that prejudices against either religious group say little about the individuals belonging to them – the moral lesson propounded by the playwright.

While the humanitarian plot of this one-act is somewhat in want of suspense, one finds considerable drama on the conceptual level, where friendship plays a pivotal role. Initially, the traveler is uncomfortable with the baron’s gratitude and lectures his servant Christoph about the value of charity, after the latter suggests taking further advantage of the nobleman’s hospitality. According to the traveler, charity loses its value when one conceives of it as a *quid pro quo*. «Das Vergnügen, einem Unbekannten ohne Absicht beigestanden zu haben,» the traveler states, «ist schon vor sich so groß!»65 When, shortly thereafter, the baron appears on the scene, the traveler’s unselfish behavior is linked to the notion of friendship. Right away, the baron expresses his strong desire to become friends with his savior, indicating that throughout his life he has had many acquaintances but no true friend. The traveler responds with a gesture of humility, stating that the mere desire for his friendship merits it to be granted, and the following exchange ensues:

Der Baron: Oh, mein Herr, die Freundschaft eines Wohltäters --
Der Reisende: Erlauben Sie, -- ist keine Freundschaft. Wenn Sie mich unter dieser falschen Gestalt betrachten, so kann ich Ihr Freund nicht sein. Gesetzt einen Augenblick, ich wäre Ihr Wohltäter: würde ich nicht zu befürchten haben, daß Ihre Freundschaft nichts, als eine wirksame Dankbarkeit wäre?
Der Baron: Sollte sich beides nicht verbinden lassen?
Der Reisende: Sehr schwer! Diese hält ein edles Gemüt für seine Pflicht; jene erfordert lauter willkürliche Bewegungen der Seele.
Der Baron: Aber wie sollte ich -- Ihr allzu zärtlicher Geschmack macht mich ganz verwirrt. --

Clearly, Lessing places friendship not in the sphere of intimacy but in a social and ethical realm, in which it conforms to specific norms and expectations. Reminiscent of the highest form of friendship in Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics*, Cicero’s claim that friendship in its «finest and most natural guise» is friendship «desirable for its own sake,» and Montaigne’s statement that in friendship «there are no dealings or business except with itself,» it has to
be provided without purpose or personal gain in mind. As a basic expression of kindness toward others, uncoupled from the utilitarian expectation of direct return, it is given indiscriminately and independently of what it may yield. Therefore, the Christian nobleman, even though de facto not the Jewish traveler’s friend, was treated and cared for as if he were his friend. Friendship preceded the encounter and shaped the interaction and it is in this sense that one could consider friendship in Lessing the form through which humanity expresses itself.

Incidentally, the principle acceptance of difference advocated in *Die Juden* was also realized in Lessing’s public friendship with Moses Mendelssohn. Friendships between Christians and Jews were by no means a given in eighteenth-century Germany, as «the edicts of the 18th century were still documents of segregation,» regulating «all aspects of Jewish life under Christian government» and discouraging «any form of Christian-Jewish dialogue.» A friendship between a Christian and a Jew therefore had to be established deliberately, since there could be no presumption of common ground in terms of provenance, social status, or cultural perspective, and certainly no supposition of equality. Jews were outsiders in German society, «merely tolerated, not considered equals.» Friendship with a Jew, notes Vera Forester in her biography of the two friends, was not considered socially acceptable. «Umso genüßlicher propagierte Lessing eine solche Verbindung. Als Demonstration für die Überwindung von Vorurteil und Völkerhaß, als lebendiges Beispiel für Toleranz.» Lessing, it is clear, does not propose to seek commonality in spite of difference – on the basis of an equal claim to humanity – but rather opts to consider alterity as that which both friends have in common.

In her speech on the occasion of being awarded the Lessing Prize of the city of Hamburg, Hannah Arendt pointed to this particular feature of Lessing’s work where friendship referred not to fraternity but to a form of interaction that presupposes alterity. Whereas in other conceptualizations the sameness of friends meant imagining the other as essentially identical, in Lessing’s thinking the common denominator lay in the world that is shared. According to Arendt, this «world» is never a given but comes into being as a matter of dialogue. «Für die Griechen,» writes Arendt, aber lag das eigentliche Wesen der Freundschaft im Gespräch, und sie waren der Meinung, daß das dauernde Miteinander-Sprechen erst die Bürger zu einer Polis vereinigte. Im Gespräch manifestiert sich die politische Bedeutung der Freundschaft und der ihr eigenständlichen Menschlichkeit, weil dies Gespräch (im Unterschied zu den Gesprächen der Intimität, in welchen individuelle Seelen über sich selbst sprechen), [...] der gemeinsamen Welt gilt, die in einem ganz präzisen Sinne unmenschlich bleibt, wenn sie nicht dauernd von Menschen besprochen wird.
Reading Lessing through Arendt, one realizes how radical the playwright’s stance actually was, as difference and dialogue have become constitutive elements of his notion of friendship. Shaping any social interaction in the form of a preceding as if, amicable discourse mediated difference on the basis of mutual regard. «Und wenn ich Sie versichere, daß Hochachtung bey mir Freundschaft ist,» Lessing writes to Gleim in 1770, «so kann der meinigen Niemand gewisser seyn, als Sie.»

This notion of friendship is articulated most emphatically in Lessing’s Nathan der Weise, for Arendt «das klassische Schauspiel der Freundschaft.»

Here, in the course of a discussion of religious tolerance between the Christian Templar and his Jewish counterpart, Nathan, realizing their affinity in attitude and thought, exclaims: «Ha! Ihr wißt nicht, wie viel fester/Ich nun mich an Euch drängen werde. – Kommt,/Wir müssen, müssen Freunde sein!» A few lines later, the Templar echoes the Jewish merchant’s words: «Nathan, ja;/Wir müssen, müssen Freunde werden.» The friendship they forge is neither one of love nor of fraternity nor is it a ritual bond – though it may still result from spontaneous inclination. Their handshake on stage simply demonstrates that religious difference does not equal enmity. On the contrary, it produces friendship.

It is this operative practice of philia as compared to the ritual reenactment of an abstract ideal that renders Lessing’s concept of friendship political. The author renounces friendship’s ritual dimension based on his scepticism toward what Arendt termed the enthusiastic excess of brotherhood. Instead, his notion of friendship opened up a realm of encounter. Peter Fenves has observed that Lessing’s turn against fraternity could be seen as a process of rationalization: «To this warmth [of brotherhood, M.K.] – and all the movements it generates – Lessing says ‘no.’ And this renunciation […] makes his call for friendship, unlike many of his contemporary’s apparently similar appeals, sharply critical: it does not exalt and cannot therefore belittle; rather, it separates out and distinguishes.»

The playwright’s critical appropriation of the concept enables him to overcome its ritual aspects and to arrive at a functional political notion of friendship, emancipatory both in its egalitarian idea of humanity and its embrace of alterity. Lessing, says Arendt, «wollte vieler Menschen Freund, aber keines Menschen Bruder sein.»

«There is no democracy without respect for irreducible singularity or alterity, but there is no democracy without the ‘community of friends’ […], without the calculation of majorities, without identifiable, stabilizable, representable subjects, all equal,» Jacques Derrida in his Politics of Friendship restates the aporia that crosses through eighteenth-century conceptualizations of friend-
ship: «These two laws are irreducible one to the other. Tragically irreconcilable and forever wounding. The wound itself opens with the necessity of having to count one’s friends, to count the others, in the economy of one’s own, there where every other is altogether other.» 80 Clearly, neither Gleim, nor Kleist, nor Lessing is able to reconcile the contradiction between the friend as brother and the friend as other, which remains a disquieting force in each of their respective conceptualizations of friendship.

As greater awareness of the fundamental contradictions between the notion and practice of friendship developed in the late eighteenth century, an increasing unease began to articulate itself as to the emphatic claims that were made with regard to the absolute virtue of friendship. This unease was often expressed in criticism that focused on the relationship between friendship and trust.81 Any absolute notion of friendship, such as the ones discussed above by Gleim and Kleist, will radically exclude even the hint of betrayal. The challenge posed by the historicity of friendship, its relative merit, by ambiguity, by the conflicting demands of total loyalty and admonition is neither met nor addressed by these authors.

As of the 1770s, however, writers such as Jakob Michael Reinhold Lenz begin to consider the notion of the Other Self merely a necessary illusion, created to permit friendship, now a relationship that bears the distinct possibility of turning into deadly hatred.82 Immanuel Kant who in his lecture on the subject contemptuously called friendship «das Steckenpferd aller dichterischen Moralisten,» had a similarly disillusioning assessment when it came to trust in amicable relationships. «Gegen den Freund,» Kant pronounces toward the end of his lecture, «hat man sich so aufzuführen, daß es uns nicht schadet, wenn er unser Feind wäre.»83 It is statements such as these that indicate the crisis in the conceptualization of friendship in the latter half of the eighteenth century, a crisis that will eventually lead to the decline of its significance as a concept and a practice.

Lessing’s functional and politically astute conception of friendship that constructs it as discursive exchange, presupposes difference, and places the notion in opposition to personal or political forms of identification, is less concerned with the problem of betrayal, as for him the political practice of friendship does not categorically exclude mistrust or enmity. Yet it also represents a first step toward the relative devaluation of friendship, as the emancipation from ritual involves gain and loss. Historically, the criticism of friendship’s absolute value resulted in the dissociation of its attributes and qualities into military comradeship on the one hand and heterosexual love relationships on the other. In the wake of economic, cultural, and political changes in the early nineteenth century, friendship as an emphatic cultural discourse
gradually disappeared. With this in mind, it is certainly no vain attempt to recover, revive, and reconfigure the notion of friendship for contemporary political and social discourse, as Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault, Tzvetan Todorov and others have proposed. In light of the historical precedent, the question is merely, how?

Notes


3 Rasch, Freundschaftskult und Freundschafsdichtung 106.

4 The emancipatory aspect of friendship applied to both women and men, in spite of the fact that male friendships were often based on the explicit or implicit subjugation of women or female sexuality. Cf. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire (New York: Columbia UP, 1985) 50–51.


7 For a broader discussion of the classical notion of friendship see David Konstan, Friendship in the Classical World (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge UP, 1997). Moreover skeptical as to the influence of classical authors on 18th-century German literati is Meyer-Krentler, Der Bürger als Freund 22.

8 Cf. Tenbruck, «Freundschaft» 448f.


12 A number of examples can be found in Ute Pott, ed., Das Jahrhundert der Freundschaft: Johann Wilhelm Ludwig Gleims Leben und seine Zeitgenossen (Göttingen: Wallstein, 2004).


14 Cited in Wilhelm Kö rte, Johann Wilhelm Ludwig Gleims Leben (Halberstadt: Bureau für Literatur und Kunst, 1811) 162.

15 Ibid., 71. Lee mentions 400 different recipients but the current manuscript holdings at the Gleimhaus list about 500. See also Heinrich Mohr, «Freundschaftliche Briefe – Li-


16 Briefe der Herren Gleim und Jacobi (Berlin: n.p., 1768). A second volume with additional letters by Jacobi and poetry from both authors was published the same year: Briefe von Herrn Johann Georg Jacobi (Berlin: n.p., 1768). The two also collaborated on [Johann Wilhelm Ludwig] Gleim and [Johann Georg] Jacobi Die beste Welt (Halberstadt: Johann Heinrich Groß, 1772).

17 For selected reviews see Körte, Johann Wilhelm Ludwig Gleims Leben 506ff.


20 Cited in Körte, Johann Wilhelm Ludwig Gleim’s Leben 157f. Beat Hanselmann counted 13,242 kisses, cited in Dieter Martin, «Der Freundschaftskuß im 18. Jahrhundert,» Rituale der Freundschaft, ed. Klaus Manger and Ute Pott (Heidelberg: Winter, 2006) 51. Though significant, homophobia should not be considered the exclusive or even predominant motivation for the criticism levied against a publication that was rather unimpressive from a literary point of view. While it is not always easy to separate the two, it seems important to maintain this distinction.

21 Ibid. 43.

22 Ibid. 32.

23 Ibid. 45.


25 Briefe der Herren Gleim und Jacobi 12.

26 Ibid. 43.

27 Ibid. 12.

28 A radical constellation of this kind can be found in Friedrich Gottlieb Klopstock’s ode «An Ebert» (1749), in which the author fancies the death of his friends, a thought that is unbearable, yet also the trigger for writing the poem. Friedrich Gottlieb Klopstock, Ausgewählte Werke, ed. Karl August Schleiden, vol. 1 (Munich and Vienna: Hanser, 1981) 27–29.

29 Cf. Montaigne, «Of Friendship,» Other Selves: Philosophers on Friendship, ed. Michael Pakaluk (Indianapolis and Cambridge: Hackett, 1991) 194. «This precept […] is healthy in the practice of ordinary and customary friendships, in regard to which we must use the remark that Aristotle often repeated: «Oh my friends, there is no friend.»»
32 Briefe der Herren Gleim und Jacobi 13.
34 Kleist’s status can be gauged by comments Friedrich Schiller made about his Frühling in «Über naive und sentimentalische Dichtung,» where Kleist serves as an example of the latter: «Was er fliehet, ist in ihm, was er suchet, ist ewig außer ihm; nie kann er den üblen Einfluß seines Jahrhunderts verwinden.» Cf. Friedrich Schiller, Sämtliche Werke, ed. Gerhard Fricke and Herbert G. Göpfert, vol. 5 (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft 1993) 734.
35 Körte, Johann Wilhelm Ludwig Gleims Leben 77ff.
38 Kleist, Sämtliche Werke 94.
41 Here the death of Alexander the Great, resulting in a temporary power vacuum due to the uncertainty of succession. Cf. Schmitt, Der Lamische Krieg 50. In Kleist’s poem the crisis in leadership – the loss of the father figure – is also psychological. The metaphors the author employs reveal a mind painfully torn between the draw of an all-out destructive masculinity and the fear of self-dissolution, very similar to what Klaus Theweleit discussed in regard to phantasies of members of the free corps between the two world wars; see Klaus Theweleit, Männerphantasien, vol. 1 (Rowohlt: Reinbek b. Hamburg, 1980). Kleist also consistently combines homoemotional with homoerotic imagery to underscore virility and justify self-sacrifice on behalf of the fatherland.
42 Kleist, Sämtliche Werke 146.
47 This is also true in a literary sense, for it refers to a passage from the Nibelungenlied. See Gottfried Fittbogen, «Gleims und Kleists poetischer Blutdurst. Ein Beitrag zur Geschichte papierner Motive,» Germanisch-Romanische Monatsschrift 10 (1922): 113ff. For the passage itself cf. Das Nibelungenlied (Stuttgart: Reclam, 1997) 2113–17.
48 Kleist, Sämtliche Werke 144.


Examples of failed attempts to convert military equality into political equality in Karl Schwarze, *Der Siebenjährige Krieg in der zeitgenössischen deutschen Literatur* (Berlin: Juncker und Dünhaupt, 1936) 88.


Ibid. 3.

Ibid. 67.

Ibid. 77.

For a more extensive discussion of this model cf. Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Between Men*, 21.


In Aristotelian terms he has now achieved the highest level of friendship; cf. Aristotle, *The Nicomachean Ethics* 263.


Ibid. 543.


Ibid.


Arendt, *Von der Menschlichkeit in finsteren Zeiten* 41.

Ibid. 43.

G.E. Lessings Briefwechsel mit Friedrich Wilhelm Gleim 162.
Arendt, *Von der Menschlichkeit in finsteren Zeiten* 45.


Arendt, *Von der Menschlichkeit in finsteren Zeiten* 29.


Arendt, *Von der Menschlichkeit in finsteren Zeiten* 53.


