

Vault and Wall: Notes on an End of Ethical Exemplarity in Hume and Kleist

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In the tradition of rhetoric, exemplarity (and therefore the logic of imitation) lies at the foundation of ethics as well as of stylistics. The eighteenth century sees the beginning of the end of this close relationship between example and ethics with the idea of a natural virtue. As Hume's *Enquiry* suggests, natural virtues are spontaneous and exclude the logic of imitation, while the system of justice has no regard for the individual case. The relationship between the two is expressed in two images: vault and wall. Natural sympathies are a "direct tendency or instinct": they move us to act in a manner that comes before reflection and hence precedes the logic of the example. An act of natural virtue may demand our attention but its value does not depend on the generality of its possible or actual imitation, nor on its consequences. The dimension of the singular act as a singular act is a new phenomenon. By contrast, "justice" and "fidelity" rely not on the individual act but rather on a system, which is in turn blind to the individual case. Between the images of vault and wall, between singularity and system, exemplarity disappears. Subsequently, wall and vault become a central constellation in Kleist's work, in particular in his novella *The Earthquake in Chile*.