

# The deviance of respectability<sup>1</sup>

## Nineteenth-century transport from a woman's perspective

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Go to places where new objects, words and people move you, places which rejuvenate nerves, blood, life, and thoughts. We women are doubly in need of this. [Rahel Varnhagen, 1819]<sup>2</sup>

In general, only the more mature (male) adolescent undertakes journeys; those acquainted and well-educated with the knowledge of old and new classical texts, mathematics and trade, political science, history, statistics and geography, as well as several foreign languages. Journeys mark the transition from one's studies to practical life, a transition that leads one to a freer, more lively image of the world. [*German Brockhaus Encyclopaedia*, 1822]<sup>3</sup>

These two quotations illustrate clashing sentiments in the German-speaking world regarding travel in the early nineteenth century. The encyclopaedia entry suggests a world of public access – with the attendant limitations to acquiring knowledge according to class and gender. In other words, it is a document directed toward erudite bourgeois men regarding their sons and pupils. The letter, written by the philosophical letter writer Rahel Varnhagen (1771–1833) to her sister, reflects the ‘open intimacy’ of private correspondence, a world not without its own class and gender boundaries, but not necessarily meant for public exposure.<sup>4</sup>

The text under analysis in this article, Malwida von Meysenbug's (1816–1903) autobiographical railway travel story *A Journey to Ostend*, combines both public and private discourse. It was hand-copied and read aloud by Meysenbug's acquaintances at the first German women's college in Hamburg in 1850 and finally published for a larger audience fifty-five years later. My analysis begins with this emphasis on the contrast between public and private spheres in order to draw attention to the gendering of these spaces, or of space in general. The well established dichotomies of male–female, public–private, worldly–domestic, and mobility–immobility are challenged in Meysenbug's railway story. Because her text falls somewhere between the gendered spaces of public–private, it reflects the ambiguity of where she sees women ‘belonging’ in the new space of the railway. Nineteenth-century German masculinist culture dictated that women's sphere was that of the private, the domestic, the

immobile. Only in keeping submissively to their realm could women act respectably. But, for a variety of reasons, women sometimes left their sphere and travelled, often unaccompanied. Meysenbug's text is about the act of 'deviance' committed by women entering into the public realm and their attempt to maintain respectability within it. Her text is considered unique because it represents the only surviving travel text written by a nineteenth-century German woman which narrates specific episodes of train travel as well as reflections on travel and gender.<sup>5</sup> Its opening sentences echo my initial quotes in their immediate revelation of an overtly gendered perspective of travel:

I don't know if many of my sisters share my taste, but with regard to the present safety of travel, even for single women, there is a rare delight in this independence, for one has a sense of strong, compelling inner dignity. And no way of travelling increases this delight as much as the railway ...<sup>6</sup>

Like Rahel Varnhagen's message that *women are doubly in need of travel*, Meysenbug understands that for women travel is indeed a *rare delight*. Like the encyclopaedia entry, in which it is declared that one (young men) must travel in order to mark a *transition from one's studies to practical life*, Meysenbug suggests that travel also brings about a transition – in this case, however, a transition (in)to independence and inner dignity. The most typical reality for an upper middle-class German woman of the mid nineteenth century would have been the transition not from school to travel but from formal schooling, which ended at the age of fourteen, to a *practical* education (in the arts, social presentation and domesticity) in preparation for marriage.<sup>7</sup> Although both Meysenbug and Varnhagen promote the benefits of travel for women, their comments differ greatly from the explanation of travel in the male-oriented encyclopaedia entry, which defines travel as a means of gaining a freer, more lively *image of the world*. Men should travel to associate themselves better with the *outside world* and to find their place within it. Meanwhile, Meysenbug's travel pursues an *inner dignity* and Varnhagen's rejuvenates *nerves, blood, life, and thoughts*. These references to the body and the personal suggest that women should travel out into the world to ultimately attain a higher state of contentment *within themselves and within a realm familiar to them*.

What does this mean? Earlier in the century, it may have more readily suggested a return from travel back into the physical realm of the domestic. But, at the time of Meysenbug's travel story, women's positions in both public and private realms were changing. The aristocracy was merging with the expanding moneyed bourgeois class, which was gaining economic and social influence. At the same time, industrialism continued to draw workers from agriculture to industry, country to city. Urban middle-class women began to seek work activities outside of the home, often in charity organisations that addressed the concerns of exploited female factory and cottage industry workers. Significantly, Meysenbug wrote her travel story in the midst of Germany's revolutionary upheaval and failure (between 1848 and 1850). Taking their cue from French models of revolt and reform, German democrats

fought for freedom of the press and release from censorship, and they attempted to establish a democratic republic out of a mass of principalities. The railway played a key role as a symbol of industrial, social and revolutionary change, transporting the revolution's enthusiasts on new rail lines to parliamentary sessions in Frankfurt and demonstrations in Karlsruhe.

Meysenbug's fascination with the railway can be understood as a larger metaphor for her dreams of revolutionary change. Her focus on women railway travellers suggests that women were an important component in making that change happen. Indeed, although without voting rights, many women supported the republic and sat in on the parliamentary proceedings in Frankfurt.<sup>8</sup> In her travel story, Meysenbug indicates that middle-class nineteenth-century German women should travel in order to become acquainted with change. They can then recreate an environment in the public, and therefore largely male, space of the train, in which they may feel *at home* again.

Meysenbug was fully committed to the democratic movement and devoted her life to the causes of social equality, educational reform and religious freedom. Born an aristocrat in Kassel, she rejected all that her family represented and eventually joined the oppositional German Catholic Free Congregation in Hamburg and studied at the teachers' college run by the pedagogue Karl Fröbel. Visiting Berlin, she was placed under arrest for her ties to democratic leaders. She narrowly escaped to London, where she lived for nine years. During this time she established herself as a translator and writer, and later, in Paris, forged friendships with Richard and Cosima Wagner and Friedrich Nietzsche, among other notable individuals.<sup>9</sup> She spent the last forty-one years of her life in Rome, never returning to Germany.

*A Journey to Ostend* is considered by some scholars to be her most revolutionary text.<sup>10</sup> She openly criticises not only existing German monarchies but also the leaders of the democratic movement itself for addressing strictly middle-class concerns. (When the parliament finally voted on its representatives, over 60 per cent had studied law and/or worked as civil servants, with no farmers or workers included.) Much of the liberatory tone she sets is echoed in comments concerning the 'democracy' of train travel which resemble early railway enthusiasts' utopian visions of 'one engine pulling all classes'.<sup>11</sup> But the individuals she encounters and highlights on her train trip are women who stand out because of their 'disorderly conduct'.<sup>12</sup>

Travelling within the 'ordered' male public space of the railway, Meysenbug's bourgeois women purposely choose to ride in lower-class carriages and create separate female spheres of support and friendship. This melding of the politics of class with the politics of gender makes it difficult to extrapolate one from the other. Because she did not openly participate in the women's movement or become a member of any of the official German women's organisations fighting for education and work rights, scholars have overlooked her writings for their feminist potential.<sup>13</sup> But her representation of women travellers crossed the boundary of stereotypical genteel 'ladylike' behaviour into the bolder action taken by the later feminist activists of the

1860s. Meysenbug's cast of characters can therefore be included among possible role models for the later German women's movement.

At the disappointment of the failed March revolution in 1848, Meysenbug felt the need to replenish body and soul, and so, after much pleading with her overprotective parents, she travelled to Ostend with two friends, Elizabeth Althaus and Anna Koppe, in 1849. Keeping a diary during her trip, she writes *A Journey to Ostend* upon her return in 1850, as we learn from the letters she wrote to her mother from Hamburg. The train trip in *A Journey to Ostend* comprises the first three chapters, roughly the first third of the book, and tells the stories of different women related in some way to the revolution.<sup>14</sup> In conflating the narratives of women's travel and the revolution's hopes of democratic freedom, Meysenbug makes the uniqueness of women's experience a central element in nineteenth-century German history.

Bold action is taken by a bourgeois woman travelling among the lower classes in the first chapter. The story is told by a train conductor sympathetic to the revolution. He serves as intermediary between the working-class passengers and the bourgeois woman, giving the woman who desires to be 'one with the people' a bit more credibility because of his class status. As a 'voice of the people' he sees merit in 'conducting' the woman's story to Meysenbug because it convinces him. The bourgeois woman tells him:

I travel third-class on principle, firstly because I feel better and more secure being closer to 'the people', those I want to belong to entirely, because my heart belongs to them, rather than in often very dubious proximity to people in the first class; but then it also angers me that the strict hierarchy of the old order has been transferred on to the democratic institution of the railway ... that here too the propertied classes have such enormous privilege and enjoy every luxury, while the poor and needy are deprived of such.<sup>15</sup>

Recall Meysenbug's suggestion that women travellers gain a sense of independence and *inner dignity* on the train. The bourgeois woman therefore experiences self-respect and *inner dignity* while transgressing social constraints of gender and class (namely that upper middle-class women should travel in the appropriately classed 'ladies' carriage). *Inner dignity* is gained through proving to herself that she can live with less: 'I know that the example of a single person is almost lost amidst the masses, but I could not forgive myself ... unless I proved to myself that I can give something up without complaint ...'.<sup>16</sup> This class transgression is both her revolutionary feat and her feminist deed, and she uses the new public space of the railway carriage to enact it. The railway is marked as a metaphor of democratic change and new social conduct for women. Because the railway is the emissary of change in the nineteenth century, its presence in the narrative also masks the excessive deviance on the part of the woman traveller. She is in an unaccustomed space, travelling unaccompanied, alone on the train. The new space of the train calls for new rules of conduct, and she defines that conduct for herself by travelling in the 'wrong' class.

At the same time, however, Meysenbug carefully couches this deviant act within the description of the woman as an otherwise socially ‘passing’ bourgeois female.<sup>17</sup> Descriptions of external matters of dress and demeanour balance the woman’s act and make her action redeemable according to social norms (outside of the train). This too serves her pursuit of *dignity*, as its definition suggests: ‘one’s appearance and demeanour according to social position’.<sup>18</sup> Throughout *A Journey to Ostend*, Meysenbug repeatedly refers to the *external* experience of dignity that pertains to one’s social position. Again, the train affords women an acceptable public forum in which to present their independent selves in a respectable manner. This allows women of the upper middle classes to demand the respect that their class position in society dictates. The woman’s act of sitting unchaperoned in the third class is deviant because her dress and demeanour reveal that she doesn’t belong there.<sup>19</sup> This is reinforced in the moment that she calls out to the conductor for protection in the midst of the overwhelming crowd. She thereby resituates herself within the familiar realm of a sheltered domesticity, becoming what could be referred to as the ‘angel in the traincar’:<sup>20</sup> ‘[The train conductor] looked into a youthful visage full of grace ...’ He cannot speak, bowing only ‘as if standing before something holy ...’ In the repositioning of familiar spheres of masculinity and femininity, Meysenbug reverts to a more socially ‘proper’ narrative of bourgeois gender norms.

The appropriate masking of the woman’s deviant act is in place and the reader is made aware of the special circumstances which allow her to speak openly. An interior familiar private sphere within the train has been established through the conductor’s protection of her in her corner of the third-class compartment. Only within this setting does the reader learn of her deviant outspokenness regarding the revolution. Yet a true angel should be seen and not heard.<sup>21</sup> Meysenbug makes up for the woman’s outspoken views on the revolution by presenting the conductor as falling into a state of dreamy romance each time he encounters the ‘March vision’ (*Märzerscheinung*),<sup>22</sup> forgetting his job and reality. This leaves her deviance in an even more ambiguous light, and thereby takes the punch out of her radical stance.

In another episode (the conductor is no longer narrator here, but Meysenbug herself) Meysenbug encounters a poor Polish emigrant woman seemingly out of place in a second-class carriage. This set-up reinforces the idea that a familiar private sphere based on appearances can be established out of a situation that may at first glance seem to deviate from the norm. The Polish woman boards the train with her small dog, and her crowding presence is unwelcome to Meysenbug’s travelling companions:

The elderly woman was dressed so poorly that a warm day in summer was necessary in order to not have the feeling that she needed to be protected from the cold. A big old travel bag, an umbrella and her dog appeared to be her only possessions.<sup>23</sup>

The dog, which the woman reassures the other passengers is well trained, is soon forgotten at the request of this ageing woman with the pale and worried face, *because she radiated an expression of calmness and good*. The inadequately dressed woman with her dog is out of place at first glance, yet on closer inspection she fits the model of faded bourgeois femininity:

her features and character gave the impression that she had been used to better; her youth had perhaps been full of happy trouble-free days, but now the sad traces of exile and the destiny of those banished were apparent in her age, in her fine, pale features, and in the painful smile of her mouth.<sup>24</sup>

This description is telling in light of Meysenbug's frequent references to qualities of goodness that one should automatically recognise as being 'respectable.' The image Meysenbug promotes of herself in this train story is almost synonymous with bourgeois notions of decency and honour. For example, Meysenbug feels outraged when the conductor in another episode overlooks the obvious 'honesty in her face' and reprimands her for overcrowding a first-class carriage.<sup>25</sup> She sees socialism as the answer to such 'bad' behaviour (as the conductor's): 'I would have come back to my socialist view and simply reasoned that relationships and education are what must make people better ...'<sup>26</sup> Just what these 'better' qualities of humankind are remain unclear, but they seem oddly to hint at the expected 'refined' behaviour of a bourgeois standard.

While the elderly Polish woman's actions on the train may not be particularly deviant, her fellow passengers soon learn of her participation in the revolutionary activities in Poland that reveal her movement away from submissiveness and domesticity.<sup>27</sup> As she travels to join her husband in Parisian exile the revolution has left the woman practically penniless, and this information gives her new female friends the opportunity to come to her aid by paying for the rest of her miscalculated fare and food supplies. The telling of the woman's story within Meysenbug's travel story serves several purposes. Meysenbug's middle-class readers learn that 'women just like us' can 'deviantly' fight for freedom but still maintain their respectability through the projection of proper bourgeois qualities such as *calmness and good* as opposed to material wealth. In creating a type of female solidarity through their acts of charity, Meysenbug and her companions gain the *inner dignity* referred to at the story's opening lines. They also create a new sphere of personal familiarity and sisterhood within the new public sphere of sometimes degrading travel experiences. And yet Meysenbug sees to it that no one is left without some sense of dignity. The Polish woman is not belittled by accepting their aid. 'Without hesitation, with the noble self-esteem of having got into financial difficulties through no fault of her own ... the dear woman took our offering ...'<sup>28</sup>

As a writer representing bourgeois women of the nineteenth century, Meysenbug's attempt to balance her characters between positions of respectability and deviance may, at first (or second) glance, appear to weigh

in a little too heavily on the side of the *status quo*. Meysenbug herself was deviant of the norm – an aristocratic daughter cultivated to marry, she broke free of gender, class and national codes, shunned her aristocratic background, and supported herself without marrying or having children. Living in exile, she survived as a writer and translator, a rare undertaking for a woman in the nineteenth century. But the gravitational pull of bourgeois respectability remained strong. In fact, being forced to renounce the comforts of home may have given the author an even stronger urge to recreate and situate herself and her characters within a sphere of recaptured bourgeois respectability.<sup>29</sup> As writers like Varnhagen and Meysenbug suggest, travel leads women to resituate themselves within new boundaries of the personal and socially appropriate. In *A Journey to Ostend* Meysenbug uses the new forum of the railway to symbolise the potential for women's changing role in society. Despite the 'unladylike' things they may do (travelling alone in the wrong-class carriage, participating in the scenes of revolutionary activity), Meysenbug writes them into a balance that would be acceptable to her middle-class audience with careful attention to behaviour that reflects the bourgeois norm. Yet, perhaps, like the failure of the 1848 revolution itself, the democratic hope signified by the railway gets bogged down in gender and class rules of propriety. Meysenbug makes it clear that for the railway to become a vehicle for the emancipation of women, it must be within the parameters of bourgeois respectability.

There is, however, a final twist to my argument, and this is where my feminist reading of *A Journey to Ostend* becomes most apparent. It may be worth while to reconsider the definition of transgression in the particular socio-historical context of this story, otherwise readers run the risk of thinking that such women are merely retreating and not revolutionary. The story is set in a time when an organised women's movement was still another twenty years away. For a woman to *decide for herself* what she needs and wants and to *implement her decision* alone are acts of deviance. A woman's action in seeking out a place of familiarity and comfort within tumultuous economic, political and social change can be called liberatory, or even deviant, especially when women then, as now, are expected to put the care of family and others first. Meysenbug's re-creation of a familiar 'respectable' private sphere for deviant women travellers is that which is most comforting to these women ultimately, and this search for 'selfish' comfort, this 'feminist-isation' of the male public space of the railway makes them indeed 'deviant'.

## Notes

- 1 R. E. Joeres refers specifically to the battle between respectability and deviance among women writers in her book *Respectability and Deviance: nineteenth-century women writers and the ambiguity of representation* (Chicago, 1998). The masculinist culture of the nineteenth century labelled any woman 'deviant' who did not behave with modesty, subservience and domesticity. Women writers, Joeres argues, fall into this category. I apply the use of the terms 'deviance' and 'respectability' not only to Meysenbug as writer but also to the female characters she develops, specifically because, like the author, the characters struggle within these boundaries of behaviour and fall ultimately in the realm of ambiguity.

- I justify my use of the terms for both author and character in the knowledge that the autobiographical nature of this travel text blurs the boundaries between author and character.
- 2 All translations are my own, unless otherwise stated. Quoted by E. Frederiksen, 'Der Blick in die Ferne' ('A view into the distance'), *Schreibende Frauen vom Mittelalter bis zur Gegenwart* (Stuttgart, 1986), p. 104.
  - 3 Quoted in *ibid.*, p. 105.
  - 4 At the beginning Rahel Levin Varnhagen wanted to remain anonymous, but she eventually decided, with her husband, that her 'honest letters' should be shared with 'like-minded readers'. More on this in G. Brinker-Gabler, *Deutsche Literatur von Frauen, 19. und 20. Jahrhundert* (Munich, 1988), pp. 13–26.
  - 5 W. Wülfing, 'On travel literature by women in the nineteenth century', *German Women in the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries* (Bloomington IN, 1986), pp. 291–303.
  - 6 Translation from *ibid.*, p. 291.
  - 7 I refer to upper middle-class women in order to situate Meysenbug: born an aristocrat, her lifelong pursuit of democracy led her away from the luxuries and financial comfort of nobility. Throughout her life she supported herself through various types of work, but her class background still brought education and connections which she might not have had otherwise. In all other instances I shall refer to the middle class as 'bourgeois/bourgeoisie' in order to address the general pull toward this middle-class group's cultural norms by all classes.
  - 8 Historians are still debating the actual cause of the revolution's failure. For one, the democrats who gathered to create a constitution had first to invent parliamentary procedure, which did not exist. Chaos ensued. Among the many other reasons given for their failure are the monumental scope of the cause (bringing together thirty-nine smaller states as well as the German and Bohemian territories of the Hapsburg Empire), the nationalist fervour which flavoured their discussions, and the relative lack of support (and the parliamentarians' actual distrust) of 'the people'. The general public at the time are described as too upright, too well behaved, too subservient. See D. Dowe, H. G. Haupt and D. Lange-wiesche, *Europa 1848. Revolution und Reform* (Bonn, 1998), and 'Es lebe die Republik', *Der Spiegel* 7/9 (February 1998), pp. 44–59.
  - 9 Among the multitude of articles and letters that she produced is her almost 1,000 page autobiography, *Memoiren einer Idealistin* (Berlin, 1905), shortened and translated into English as *Rebel in Bombazine*, ed. M. Adams, trans. E. von Meysenbug-Lyons (New York, 1936).
  - 10 H. Teuchert refers to her as such in a summary of the story in the German *Malwida von Meysenbug Jahrbuch* (Kassel, 1998), p. 31.
  - 11 Like the Saint Simonian Constantine Peucker quoted in W. Schivelbusch's seminal study of the railway journey, *Geschichte der Eisenbahnreise. Zur Industrialisierung von Raum und Zeit im 19. Jahrhundert* (1977, Frankfurt, 1995), p. 36. Unfortunately the democratic dreams of railroad travel were dashed almost immediately. With the introduction of passenger cars in the 1840s class divisions were also introduced.
  - 12 C. Smith-Rosenberg, *Disorderly Conduct: visions of gender in Victorian America* (New York and Oxford, 1985), describes a variety of gendered behavioral traits that might constitute deviance from nineteenth-century male bourgeois standards of 'normalcy'. Among them are a female world of love and intimacy 'in which hostility and criticism of other women were discouraged, and thus a milieu in which women could develop a sense of inner security and self-esteem' (p. 64) was created. While Meysenbug's characters do not build 'intimate' relations to the extent that Smith-Rosenberg describes, their carving out of a female sphere of support and security (especially in different class carriages) within the new male public sphere of railway travel constitutes a 'disordering' of this (male) social structure. While her analysis refers to Jacksonian and Victorian America, many of the characteristics she discusses reflect general sexual behaviour (such as homosexuality and the New Woman) found equally in Europe.
  - 13 I define feminism in the broad terms of any deed or action that promotes the equality and liberation of women.
  - 14 The rest of the narrative is concerned with people, places and events experienced in Belgium. One of the events relates to another railway adventure in Belgium which I am unable to explore here but do investigate in my dissertation.
  - 15 *Eine Reise nach Ostende*, pp. 21–2.
  - 16 *Ibid.*, p. 21.
  - 17 This term is taken from the discourse of race and sexuality, 'passing' as white or as hetero-

- sexual. See S. Stanford Friedman, 'Beyond white and other: relationality and narratives of race in feminist discourse', *Signs* 21, 1 (1995), pp. 1–49.
- 18 *American Heritage Dictionary* (Boston MA, 1976), p. 396, and the Grimms' *Deutsches Wörterbuch* (1854), p. 2062.
- 19 Indeed, it could be argued that a woman sitting almost anywhere unaccompanied at this period in time might be considered deviant. My point is that this woman chooses purposely to sit in an enclosed compartment from which she cannot readily escape and in which she knows her class and gender will stand out, specifically when there is a 'ladies only' compartment in which she could easily have chosen to ride.
- 20 The 'angel in the railway carriage' plays off of the well known concept of the 'angel in the house' that Virginia Woolf speaks of in her essay 'Professions for women'. It refers to the silent, obedient and diligent bourgeois wife whose work in the home should remain invisible to the husband. Here there is clearly no husband, but most bourgeois men would expect women of the same class to behave in a similar way in public, being seen (as submissive, obedient), not heard. *The Death of the Moth and other Essays* (New York, 1942).
- 21 This reference is obviously directed to children, with whom middle-class women of the nineteenth century were often compared both philosophically and judicially by intellectuals such as Rousseau and Schiller.
- 22 The 'March vision' or 'March appearance' here has to do with the fact that she appears to him as a 'vision' (of beauty?) for the first time in March 1848, the time the democratic uprising is taking place.
- 23 Meysenbug, *Eine Reise nach Ostende*, p. 36.
- 24 *Ibid.*, p. 36.
- 25 *Ibid.*, p. 67.
- 26 *Ibid.*
- 27 Joeres defines deviance to be where 'domesticity, submissiveness and modesty get ignored'.
- 28 Meysenbug, *Eine Reise nach Ostende*, p. 43.
- 29 The concern for socially acceptable appearances was a matter of life and death for bourgeois women in an age when wives and daughters were routinely incarcerated in insane asylums for any behaviour considered 'deviant', such as reading, writing, hysteria, lesbianism, depression, baby blues, etc. While exiled in England, Meysenbug herself helped rescue a friend from being unjustly imprisoned by her husband; see her autobiography, *Memoiren einer Idealistin* II. On the issues of writing and madness see S. M. Gilbert and S. Gubar's *The Madwoman in the Attic: the woman writer and the nineteenth-century literary imagination* (New Haven CT and London, 1979). In the German-speaking realm see S. Duda and L. Pusch, *Wahnsinnsfrauen* (two volumes, Frankfurt, 1992, 1996).

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