Transcript
Dead Ladies Show Podcast Episode 41
Annette von Droste-Hülshoff

(Dead Ladies Show Music - 'Little Lily Swing' by Tri-Tachyon)

SUSAN STONE: Welcome to the Dead Ladies Show Podcast! I'm Susan Stone.

The Dead Ladies Show celebrates women both overlooked and iconic who achieved amazing things against the odds. And we do it through live history storytelling in Berlin and beyond. In this episode, we're really beyond, doing our first live show via Zoom. It's not quite the same as being on stage in a darkened bar or sold out theatre, but we did have a lovely virtual audience on hand for our collaboration with StAnza, the Scottish international poetry festival.

But before we get to that, I want to wish you, our lovely podcast audience a Happy Women's History Month, and welcome the new listeners joining us who may have heard about us from Stitcher, CeeCee, or Pamela Toler's blog History in the Margins, or StAnza. We're glad you're here! Of course, at the Dead Ladies Show, every month is Women's History Month.

Our show today comes simultaneously from Scotland and Germany, with Dead Ladies Show co-founders Katy, Florian, and myself dialing in from Berlin, our presenter Anneke Lubkowitz appearing from a very special location - the home of her Dead Lady, outside Münster, and our StAnza Host Annie Rutherford kicking things off from Edinburgh. Here's Annie:

ANNIE RUTHERFORD: Hello, and welcome. It is wonderful to have you all here for this special StAnza/Dead Ladies Show crossover event. For those of you who don't know me, I'm Annie Rutherford, I'm program coordinator at StAnza, Scotland's international poetry festival, and I am also a huge fan of the Dead Ladies Show, so I'm really excited about this event. This is actually a collaboration we had wondered about as a possibility more than a year ago, and we had no idea that by the idea 2021 came along, podcasting and international digital events would suddenly be very relevant — so in that way it's worked out quite well. The Dead Ladies Show is a Berlin-based events series, and also a podcast. They celebrate women who were fabulous when they were alive, from spies to pioneering activists to cookery show writers, to, today, poets. And one of the reasons we wanted to colaborate with them if youre a stanza regular you know we have a Past and Present section where contemporary speakers talk about their favorite past poets, and this felt like a really good tie-in. I'm going to keep this short and I'm going to hand it over to our hosts for the evening, Katy Derbyshire and Florian Duijsens.

FLORIAN DUIJSENS: Annie, thank you for inviting us.

KATY DERBYSHIRE: Thank you so much! Today we're going to be having Anneke Lubkowitz talking about a woman. Let me first tell you about her. She's a German book addict who studied in Edinburgh and Berlin, she works for our friends in

Münster, the Burg Hülshoff Center for Literature, she co-founded the literary magazine *Sachen Mit Wörtenr* and has published two different books already about contemporary nature writing and urban walking. She's currently kind of combining her passions, I think, and thinking about women writers and the outdoors. Welcome Anneke!

FLORIAN DUIJSENS: Anneke, to the untrained eye it might look like you have a Zoom background, but you have a real background.

ANNEKE LUBKOWITZ: Yes, it's a real virtual background! This is where I am. And thank you for the very nice introduction. This is actually at the Rüschhaus, where Annette von Droste zu Hülshoff, the woman I want to talk about today, lived. It's basically the same setting, the same furniture, and the same atmosphere, I hope at least, which she also experienced. So it's quite special for me to be here, and I hope you can also join me in enjoying this wonderful space.

FLORIAN DUIJSENS: I can see a lot of hypnotically green wallpaper that's really drawing me in. Yet it also has kind of a haunting…are there other alive people in the building, or mostly ghosts?

ANNEKE LUBKOWITZ: Mostly ghosts, yeah.

KATY DERBYSHIRE: We actually did a show there, and it was very cold, so I hope you have the heating on.

ANNEKE LUBKOWITZ: Yes, we prepared and started doing the heating a couple of days ago, so it's actually comfortable now.

KATY DERBYSHIRE: Good, glad to hear it. It looks gorgeous!

FLORIAN DUIJSENS: Then without any further ado, I think it's time for Anneke to tell us about Annette. Take it away!

ANNEKE LUBKOWITZ: Thank you so much again, and thank you Annie for the introduction and Susan as well. I'm very happy to be part of StAnza and part of the Dead Ladies Show, it's a great honor.

Before I start I want to thank Shane Anderson, Daniel Falb, Monika Rinck and Annie Rutherford for the their excellent translations of the poems from which I will quote in my presentation. So without them I wouldn't have been able to do the presentation.

The remarkable lady I wish to talk about was indeed a lady in the literal sense, including castles and everything. She was a born "Freifräulein" which is a German title of nobility which translates as far as I know, as baroness into English. Anna Elisabeth Franzisca Adolphina Wilhelmina Ludovica Freiin von Droste zu Hülshoff: more commonly known as Annette von Droste-Hülshoff. Or, as we used to say back in the 90s: The woman from the twenty Deutsche Mark banknote.

Her poem *The Boy in the Moor* is ranked higher than any Goethe poem in the list of the best-known German poetry – and yet she is relatively little known outside of Germany which I hope to change by my talk.

This portrait of the artist in her early twenties was done after a painting by Wilhelm Stiehl. Don't let yourself be fooled by the fancy hairstyle and the decorous collar. Her fearless, defiant look – or rather stare - gives her away – she was a tough cookie.

At the back of the banknote you see the obligatory writer's quill and a large beech tree. It references the work for which Annette von Droste is most famous today, her prose piece *Die Judenbuche*, *The Jew's Beech*, from 1842, a curious mix of murder mystery, horror story and realistic novella. It is about several murders in the forest of Westphalia and treats topics such as environmental destruction and anti-semitism in rural communities. Scholars have bitten their teeth out on this enigmatic text full of loose ends. One of the more problematic bits is that whereas it condemns the anti-semitism of its characters on one level, it cannot free itself entirely from the anti-semitic stereotypes of its time on another. As my talk will focus on Droste's poetry I only refer to the novella to show that when it came to trees and other elements of the natural world, Droste had quite a unique approach, which set her apart from her contemporaries and her Romantic predecessors. She had what I would call a taste for nature noir.

Perhaps not sinister, but a little haunted is how Droste's place of birth looks like – Burg Hülshoff, a moated castle in Westphalia, near the city of Münster. Here, little Annette was born in January 1797; she was two months early and not expected to live. She did, in the end, but she had to bear the consequences of the premature birth all her life. She was a weak, sickly child, and as an adult too she struggled with a sheer infinitude of illnesses, all documented, with a certain pride, in her letters: nervousness, abdominal pains, a weak lung, a weak heart, nausea, anxiety, panic attacks, periods of depression, headaches, weariness, catarrhs. Considering that she spent most of her life in drafty and damp castle chambers or on the road in uncomfortable coaches, it is clear that having a weak constitution was no fun. Often she complained on how her ill health kept her from writing, quite drastically saying she felt like an invalid pug.

She doesn't look like one, but you can see from this simile that she had a merciless kind of self-humor. Her worst problem, however, were her eyes. She was so short-sighted that she could only see what was right in front of her, everything else was blurry. In his biography of Droste, her close friend, the writer Levin Schücking, described the small woman as moving unladylike, with her neck thrust forward, closer to people than etiquette found adequate, with squinted eyes. But seeing little also made her care less about what those around her thought. She lived in her own world - with a mind of her own, too.

Droste wrote her first poem when she was seven – at least that's what she herself claims in a later poem. It was about a little cockerel which the speaker tries to make eat out of her hands. A little girl writes a poem about an attempt to tame a male bird: isn't that an interesting image for a woman who already early in her life

dreamed of succeeding in the world of men – not as a wife, mother or mistress, but as an intellectual? Who would baffle male critics long after her death? Poetry, back in Droste's time, was considered man's business. At least if it was to be taken serious. Women, especially noblewomen, were welcome to make poetic attempts, as long as they never ventured too far from a chosen set topics deemed adequate. They were expected to remain within the boundaries of a dilettantism that was pleasantly entertaining in family gatherings but certainly nothing to be presented in the public. Some of Droste's texts were written for such audiences. When she finally did publish her first poetry collection in 1838, aged 41, it was semi-anonymously and only 64 copies were sold. And yet, here she is, looking quite pleased with herself, in the year of her first book publication.

Young Droste had never been very interested in needlework and other activities considered suitable for a young lady. What she wanted was travel to Africa and Asia, talk politics and write poems. In her poem "Unruhe" ("Unrest"), probably written in 1816, she describes a powerful urge for freedom, a longing for the distant, a wonderful instance of female wanderlust, which does not fail to address the limits imposed on women's lives in that period. In the last stanza, she contrasts her longing for the distant with the narrow space of the domestic.

> They would have chained us to our own hearths!
> They call our longings madness or a dream.
> And yet the heart, this little clump of earth
> Would have for all creation enough room!

Even though her views would become more conservative in her later years, many texts from her teenage years and early twenties read proto-feminist. In her unpublished drama *Bertha*, she discussed the role of women in society from various perspectives. One of the heroines' antagonists argues that women who leave the place allotted to them and compete with men, for example by becoming professional writers, lose their femininity. It was common and powerful opinion in Droste's time, in spite of the fact that a number of women had succeeded or were succeeding in literary careers, such as Katharina Schücking, Sophie Mereau and Johanna and Adele Schopenhauer, some of whom were close friends of Droste's.

Droste had been an oddly inquisitive and stubborn child, soaking in Greek and Latin, as well as history, geography and natural history. To her death, she obtained a very un-feminine infatuation with fossils, rocks and minerals. These are some she collected, as on display here at the Rüschhaus

Her well-educated and matron-like mother also supported her, if a little reluctantly, with her wish to improve her poetry by making her acquainted with several local literary legends, such as Anton Matthias Sprickmann and Christoph Bernhard Schlüter. She also met the Grimm brothers, who were part of a circle of literati which included Drotes's uncles August und Werner von Haxthausen. They met at the Bökerhof in East Westphalia and were interested in collecting fairy tales and legends from the region. When young Droste was introduced to the circle at Bökendorf, the men were impressed but also repelled by her intelligence and self-confidence.

At the Bökerhof – which you can see here in a sketch drawn by Droste herself - Droste fell in love with the promising young poet Heinrich Straube, a commoner, and her aristocratic relatives were not amused. They had already observed her unseemly abandonment of female modesty with great skepticism and derided her poetic ambitions in every possible situation. Now, she had gone too far, risking the family's reputation. They were more than happy to get involved in an intrigue worthy of a Jane Austen novel which was to put to the test Droste's love for Straube. I recommend Karen Duve's well-researched novel *Fräulein Nette's kurzer Sommer* and Barbara Beuys' excellent biography at this point for one likely version of what happened in the summer of 1820. What is sure is that it was painfully unpleasant for Droste.

The lovers were separated and Droste was driven into a period of shame and depression. What followed from this personal tragedy, however, was an astonishing collection of poems on religious themes, which testifies to Droste's growth as a poet. Droste has often been portrayed as a devout Catholic and representative of a conservative Biedermeier culture – a term which in Germany evokes a lot of the associations the term Victorianism evokes in the English-speaking world. These poems, however, reveal a deep inner struggle, which stretches the thought system of Christianity in which it is played out to its very limits. Perhaps, the affair also simply marked the end of Droste's interest in men, as Angela Steidele has shown, Droste's poems often reveal a pronounced desire for women, and there are a several clues that Droste may have had love affairs with women.

After Hülshoff castle we come to a second important place for Droste, here it is, and here in the more likely weather of the Münsterland. A change of scenery also opened a new chapter in Droste's life. After her father's untimely death in 1826 she moved with her mother and sister to a remote manor house a few miles away – the Rüschhaus. As you can see, the wallpaper hasn't changed since then.

The avid collector of naturalia called the rooms she inhabited there the "snail shell" — *das Schneckenhaus* – it was a place of withdrawal, of inwardness, but also of encounters with the non-human. Removed from the social obligations at the castle, Droste could now dedicate a significant amount of time to her writing and her musical compositions and take long walks in the surrounding heath land.

Her famous poem "The Boy in the Moor" also published in the collection of 1844 describes the marshland surrounding the Rüschhaus in the uncanny hour before nightfall, in the vivid imagination of a child.

O how eerie to walk across the moor,
When it's teeming with peat fire smoke,
When the mists do veer like phantoms
And the tendrils tangle in the bush,
When underneath each step a spring wells up,
When from the crevice it hisses and sings,
O how eerie to walk across the moor
When the reeds are rustling in the haze!

As honorable women weren't supposed to wander about on their own, Droste often veiled the fact that she did so – by having male protagonists in her poems experience what she did – in this case the boy. The poem shows: Droste certainly is a true champion of the uncanny. She is so good at it because of all the sounds and visual details she registers.

Since I found out that they died in the same year, I've been wondering: would it be accurate to imagine Droste the way Emily Bronte is often portrayed in movies: a lonely woman walking across wild moorland, a dramatic grey sky above her, the dark dress flapping, her face thoughtful and moody? I guess it would be necessary to add a humorous note: the woman pauses, short-sightedly squints and in the next moment is on her knees, looking at a beetle through her magnifying glass, while thoughtlessly soaking her dress in mud. In one of her letters, Droste describes herself as crawling on all fours on the wayside, searching for fossils.

Especially in Germany, if we think of the outdoors we have in mind Casper David Friedrich's painting *Wanderer Above the Sea of Fog*, which was completed in 1818, when Droste was right at the beginning of her literary career. We think of lonely men in breathtakingly empty landscapes. We think of writers with first names likes William, Jean-Jacques, and Johann Wolfgang. But they weren't alone, there were women too, and they had different stories to tell. Droste was one of them. And she could look just as moody as Friedrich's wanderer – here's the proof.

In her satirical poem "Dichters Naturgefühl" (Poet's "Feeling for Nature") Droste caricatures a type of nature lover which the Scottish poet Kathleen Jamie recently called "The Lone Enraptured Male": a blond eighteen year-old with ivy in his hair, violets in his hand and emphatic lines on his lips, carrying his youth romantically into spring, without any deeper knowledge of the natural world around him. Oh yes, Droste had a sharp tongue and was not afraid to use it. In her nature poetry, Droste makes a clear cut with the Romantic tradition and its rhapsodizing forms of nature worship. Clear away the vague mists and look at the details of what really is in front of you, she seems to say to Caspar David Friedrich in this poem. Fun fact: the young man in the poem is really called Friedrich.

It may or may not have been due to her limited but highly specialized vision that Droste in her writing tended to focus on the small details. With scientific exactitude she describes the landscapes in which she lived and worked, often using the botanical names of plants and adding explanatory footnotes to her poems, which makes them appear oddly encyclopedic. In Droste's poems nature is never abstract or distant, but almost too close, something you can touch but that touches you back, something to become entangled in. In several poems she prominently describes *Wasserfäden*, "water threads", a colloquial term for a green algae variety of the botanical name Cladophora. They entwine and embrace the poem's speaker like a web, are compared to blood vessels. This image is very close to our modern understanding of the relation between humans and nature. 15 years before the publication of Charles Darwin's *The Origin of Species*, which would put an end to the idea of humankind as pride of creation, they suggest that humans are part of

nature, knots in a tightly woven fabric of interspecies relationships. You have here the modern idea of ecology in a nutshell.

Up until today, the people of Westphalia refer to Droste as “our” Annette. In reality, Droste travelled quite a lot, and spend much time writing letters to an impressive network of correspondents all over Europe. Far from spending her entire life in Westphalia, she had the happiest and most productive period of her life in the opposite corner of Germany, in Meersburg at Lake Constance, where she lived with her sister, her brother-in-law and her beloved literary friend Levin Schücking. She also wrote all her famous Westphalian poems, including “The Boy in the Moor” here, where she had a room, or rather a turret, of her own. It is here where she seems to have come closest to the freedom she had been yearning for all her life. Her poem “Am Turme” / “On the Tower” clearly references the turret in which she lived in her brother-in-laws castle – and where you can see her on the sketch by her sister Jenny:

> I’m stood on a balcony high up the tower,
> Surrounded by shrieking starlings,
> And like a mænad, letting the blast dishevel
> My streaming, untidy hair;
> O wild fellow, o dare-devil coxcomb,
> I’d like to enfold you with gusto,
> And, sinew to sinew, two steps from the edge
> Then wrestle in mortal combat!

All her life, Annette von Droste remained torn between social expectations and the wish for self-fulfillment, between her aristocratic origin and her liberal ideas, the feeling of duty towards her family and her literary ambitions. She certainly wasn’t a revolutionary, she wasn’t a George Sand and neither took part in the revolutionary fights nor the campaigning for women’s right to vote. Most of her rebellious spirit seems to have gone into the confrontation of poetic conventions. Only in the last part of her life her works were slowly beginning to be recognized by her contemporaries. One of the reviewers of her second poetry collection patronizingly calls her: “a poetess of scarcest blessing who is authorized to wrestle with male poets for any prize”, whereas Friedrich Engels of all people had already compared her first poetry collection to the works of Percy Bysshe Shelley and Lord Byron. From the publisher’s advance for *The Jew’s Beech* she could even purchase a small house and vineyard at Lake Constance. Unfortunately, due to increasing health problems, she was never able to really enjoy the yields of her life’s work. She died in 1848, in the year of the spring revolutions in Germany. Her friends Levin Schücking and Elise Rüdiger took it over to write biographies and release convolutes of still unpublished texts to the public. Generations of scholars would unearth and decipher layer for layer of her notes and scripts, trying to make sense of this mystifying woman.

It turned out, Droste really had been born too early, only later generations would appreciate about her writing that quality which contemporaries criticized as obscure and unintelligible. Her fascination with ambivalence, insecurity and contradiction shows that Droste was not only a contemporary of John Keats, she also shared his

negative capability. Droste's gift, perhaps unsurprisingly for someone half-blind, was to see what other didn't. In her travel books on Westphalia, she describes the phenomenon of second sight. The *Vorkieker* – those who are bestowed with second sight, see funeral processions, armies and battles, events that will take place in the future, long after their death. In that sense, Droste too was a *Vorkieker*. In this daguerreotype she also looks grim enough to be one.

In literary history, Droste's work sits uncomfortably between Romanticism and Realism. There is a rapturous, dreamy side to her writing, a fascination with the supernatural and the freedoms of the imagination. There is also a mercilessly unveiled understanding of human nature and the shortcomings of society, a sober matter-of-factness that seems entirely at odds with the former characteristics. What makes her poetry so strong, however in my eyes, is exactly the conflict between these extremes, negotiated by humor and rigid self-reflection. Indeed, Droste's sense of self and view of the world, her inner struggles and her sense of displacement strike me again and again, the more I read of her, as surprisingly modern. Thank you very much.

KATY DERBYSHIRE: Anneke! I want to give you a big hug and just go to the bar and have a drink with you. That was marvelous, thank you so much! I think now is time for us to unmute and do a round of applause, am I right? I'm right!

(ZOOM AUDIENCE APPLAUDS)

SUSAN STONE: Anneke Lubkowitz on Annette von Droste-Hülshoff. We have images of Annette's delightful green room at Haus Rüschhaus where Anneke was speaking from, along with some slightly scary daguerrotypes of Annette and info on some of the images and books Anneke mentioned - that's all at our website - deadladiesshow.com/podcast and on our social channels @deadladiesshow

Heartfelt thanks to Annie and Eleanor at StAnza, Brigitte, Seif, and Jörg at the Center for Literature, and of course Anneke, and Katy, and Florian. And thanks to all of you for listening.

Here comes our theme tune…Little Lily Swing by Tri-Tachyon.

The Dead Ladies Show was founded by Florian Duijsens and Katy Derbyshire. The podcast is created, produced and edited by me, Susan Stone.

Let us know what you think of the show, and which Dead Ladies you think we should cover — by emailing info@deadladiesshow.com or just give us a shout on social media.

We'll be back next episode with our classic Dead Ladies Show format — the kind without a mute button — so stay tuned for more stories of great ladies.

See you then!

(Dead Ladies Show Music - ‘Little Lily Swing’ by Tri-Tachyon)

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