

Introduction

THE CRISIS OF MARCH 1801: EVIDENCE AND RECEPTION

Two extant letters furnish the evidence of the Kant crisis that has generated such varied responses in the literature on Kleist. This famous reading has been extolled as paradigmatic of an affective hermeneutics¹ and construed as the displacement of a frustrated homosexual desire.² Commentators less concerned with pathology have taken discovering the text that Kleist is paraphrasing as a challenge: Ernst Cassirer has argued for Fichte,³ Ludwig Muth for the *Critique of the Power of Judgment*,⁴ and Ulrich Gall for Reinhold's *Essay on a New Theory of the Human Faculty of Representation* (*Versuch einer neuen Theorie des menschlichen Vorstellungsvermögens*).⁵ But insofar as "the Kantian philosophy"⁶ to which Kleist attributes his misfortune in the one letter is supplanted in the other by "the more recent so-called Kantian philosophy,"⁷ the search for a text or even a concordant body of texts behind the crisis endeavors to settle a question left open by Kleist. To be sure, Kant himself could not be dubbed a so-called Kantian, and Cassirer and Gall accordingly have grounds for directing their search among Kant's apostates.

But given that the letters express despair over the attainment of knowledge, it cannot be ruled out that “so-called” does not qualify “Kantian” but rather the “philosophy” that, on Kleist’s reading, amounts to a misology. In the light of the reservations that hedge any answer to the question “What is this a reading of?” Emmanuel Terray has suggested that the crisis was less a simple reaction than a dramatic *mise-en-scène* marking the end of a long, complex evolution.⁸ A commentary might more fruitfully apply itself to the question that Kleist appears to have been asking himself: “What can this reading do?”

That an aspect of Kant’s philosophy receives in the crisis a reformulation as rigorous as it is violent is scarcely ever suggested in the secondary literature. True, Carol Jacobs is “tempted, rather, to call this confrontation Kant’s Kleist crisis,”⁹ yet it is a remark made only in passing. Tim Mehigan even denies that Kleist is offering anything apart from a straight paraphrase of Kant.¹⁰ Martha B. Helfer is neither blind nor unsympathetic to the departures in Kleist’s interpretation of Kant, but what she discerns as a literary critique of Kant’s transcendental project¹¹ is better understood as a radical reinvention and restitution of that project and its Enlightenment program, as will be argued in the course of this study. The task of reading Kleist out from under orthodox Kantianism, of thinking through an exegesis too often condemned or rehabilitated, as preparatory to developing a number of concepts by which the works of the two could be examined productively (and by which the notion of Kant’s influence would already imply a Kleistian Kant) remains to be done.

Of the two letters to which I refer, the one dated 22 March 1801 and addressed to Kleist’s betrothed, Wilhelmine von Zenge (the future wife of W. T. Krug, the successor to Kant’s chair in Königsberg and, like Kleist, a butt of Hegel’s contempt) and the other to Kleist’s half-sister, Ulrike, dated the following day, the earlier is the more expansive:

I recently became familiar with the more recent so-called Kantian philosophy, and I may impart one of its leading ideas to you without fear of its shattering you as deeply, as painfully as it has me. Then too, you are not versed enough in the whole matter to grasp the import completely. I shall therefore speak as clearly as possible.

If everyone saw the world through green glasses, they would be forced to judge that everything they saw was green, and could never be sure whether their eyes saw things as they really are, or did not add something of their own to what they saw. And so it is with our understanding. We cannot decide

whether that which we call truth truly is truth or whether it merely appears so to us. If the latter, then the truth that we acquire here is *not* truth after our death, and it is all a vain striving for a possession that may never follow us into the grave.

Ah, Wilhelmine, if the point of this thought does not strike you to your heart, do not smile at one who feels himself wounded by it to his most sacred inner being. My one, my highest goal has sunk from sight, and I have no other.

Since coming to the realization in my soul that truth is nowhere to be known here on earth, I have not touched another book. I have paced idly in my room, I have sat by the open window, I have run from the house, an inner unrest at last drove me to taverns and coffee houses, I have gone to plays and concerts for distraction, and, to find some relief, I have even committed a folly which I would rather you learned about from Carl; and still my one thought, which my soul, with this tumult all around it, kept belaboring with burning anxiety, was this: your *only*, your *highest* goal has sunk from sight.¹²

One might well believe that what Kleist takes away from the critical philosophy is not so much Kantian as Cartesian, namely, the skeptical hypothesis that we are being deluded by an evil demon, with no possibility of correction. In a move familiar to readers of Kleist's fiction, a proposition is here swept up by affects: the thought of the second paragraph quoted belongs at once to a physiology. With the image of the green glasses and the lament over the deceptiveness of the phenomenal world, the distinction between appearance (*Erscheinung*) and illusion (*Schein*), fundamental to the critical philosophy as its security against both dogmatism and skepticism, is elided. On its own, a failure to note this distinction is unremarkable: Kleist's text does not thereby distinguish itself from numerous early misreadings of Kant. Overlooking the rationale for Kant's theory of appearance, Kleist is thrown into despair. Kleist's question is not how a priori synthetic judgments are possible (the revolutionary inspiration given for the *Critique of Pure Reason*), but what a thing is in itself. With the traditional question of knowledge, he can no longer make any headway in the face of the Kantian philosophy, and he nonetheless does not take up the critical question in its place. Leaving himself with nothing, Kleist falls through the gap between two epistemic arrangements. If he escapes down a path of no return, the ostensible naïveté and conventionality of his interpretation of Kant should not be taken to imply that this path is a dead end. Kleist is an epistemic traditionalist, inasmuch as he pursues a knowledge of things in themselves; he eschews a knowledge of appearances *and yet* endorses Kant's definition of

things in themselves as unknowable. The old and the new definitions of truth enter into conflict, and the understanding is unable to decide between their claims: "We cannot decide whether that which we call truth truly is truth or whether it merely appears so to us." It would be supercilious to dismiss Kleist's reading of Kant on the *assumption* that what the thing in itself is for Kleist is self-evident.

Kleist is not a dogmatic realist left shamefaced by Kantianism. The proof of this is Kleist's literary corpus. Between the necessity and universality of dogmatism and the necessity and universality of the critical philosophy there is a gap, and it is the contingencies and singularities of this gap that Kleist's literary works make their element. In his letter to Wilhelmine von Zenge, Kleist laments the uncertainty of our understanding of things as they *truly* are, that is, independently of the mediation of the apparatus of human cognition. This uncertainty, needless to say, is the destructive preliminary of the critical philosophy. What a thing really is, what it is in itself, is immaterial to the critical claims to necessity and universality. By means of the first *Critique's* doctrine of things in themselves, Kant plays on the inability of his predecessors to establish the a priori, since any concepts derived from things in themselves would be "merely empirical, not *a priori*."¹³ Necessity and universality rest with appearances and the mediation of sensibility, understanding, imagination, and Reason within the original synthetic unity of apperception. It follows that, for Kant, things in themselves are flightier than appearances. In Hegel's words, they lie "*behind* the *phenomena* like wild beasts lurking in the bushes of appearances."¹⁴ The critical philosophy, as it were, dethrones the Platonic Idea and transforms it into a brigand.

Of course, the allusion to Kleist's Michael Kohlhaas in the preceding sentence does not at all contribute to the argument in defense of the cogency of Kleist's interpretation of the thing in itself. What follows here is accordingly a reading of Kant that prepares the way for a number of claims relating to Kleist.

CROSSING THE LIMIT

The *Critique of Pure Reason* places the thing in itself under a theoretical ban. It is not above time and space in dignity but outside of them in unknowability. Its proscription is the inaugural act of the critical philosophy. It is relegated to the past *and nevertheless* assigned a structural role precisely as a

relic. Jaakko Hintikka has queried whether the thing in itself is anything more than a “façon de parler, an oblique illustration of the necessity of considering the objects of our knowledge qua objects of the operations which we use in gaining information of them.”¹⁵ This assessment is in line with Norman Kemp Smith’s claim that the thing in itself, ultimately senseless in the context of Kant’s phenomenalism, is a “pre-Critical or semi-Critical survival.”¹⁶ But Hintikka and Smith thereby make light of the explicit role that the thing in itself plays in demarcating the field of experience.

Kant calls the thing in itself a limit concept (*Grenzbegriff*).¹⁷ Sensibility, as the defining mark of finitude, must come up against a limit, and that limit is, for Kant, the thing in itself. Finitude stands in need of the unattainability of the thing in itself in order to preserve sensuous intuition’s traditional distinctness from the intellectual intuition of the infinite being that is God. The finite being, as it does not create things, knows them not as they are but as they are received through the sensibility. In his posthumously published *Lectures on the Philosophical Doctrine of Religion*, Kant writes: “God cognizes all things as they are *in themselves* immediately and *a priori* through an intuition of the understanding; for he is the being of all beings and every possibility has its ground in him.”¹⁸ God’s understanding is immediate; there is nothing that intrudes between it and the object as their mediation. The universal, which mediates between particular objects, has no place in the divine understanding. Human understanding, however, cannot dispense with the universal without simultaneously forgoing any claim to knowledge. In order to know anything at all, it must paradoxically turn its back on things as they are, or, more precisely and without any suggestion of paradox, it must renounce its always unfounded claim to immediate knowledge. The understanding mediates the sensibility, and the sensibility mediates the understanding, while the thing in itself is reserved for God. Kant’s God, like the God of Leibniz, manifests his omnipotence in the always absolute creativity that invests each thing with the immediacy of the singular. The lawfulness that human understanding discovers in the repetitions of phenomena cannot be ascribed to things in themselves without impugning God’s creativity. Nevertheless, the anarchy that empiricism discovers in human perceptions cannot, by means of an exposition of the irrelevance of universals to the divine understanding, be presented as a “fact” of the world of our experience without overlooking the composite and thus self-mediating nature of human cognition. God’s faculty of cognition is indivisible, because the passivity of sensibility is inappropriate to an absolutely necessary and

hence independent being. The concept of the thing in itself is Kant's security against a Promethean uprising of sensibility. It is not so much an unknowable thing as the concept of the unknowable. It is the limit that human knowledge requires in order to be itself (otherwise it would lose itself in indeterminacy), just as it is also that which our knowledge can never come up against, being humanly unknowable. As that which cannot be experienced, the thing in itself is the non-experience in relation to which experience acquires its distinctness and manageability as a field for the application of principles. It is the non-experience that informs every experience.

Such a proposition recalls the stalled dialectic of deconstruction, but more is involved in Kant's doctrine of the thing in itself as a limit concept than the constitutive contamination of opposites. What is at stake is Kant's privileging of the complete, the integral, and the bounded. Kant's modernity appears at times to be very Greek. The classical world's horror of the infinite, which flares up in a final exaggerated act of self-assertion in Origen's thesis of the finitude of God, has a legatee in Kant. Breaking with the Aristotelian and scholastic orthodoxy that defined the applicability of the method of a given science by its domain, Descartes initiates philosophical modernity through the unchecked "imperialism" of his mathematicism. The historical ambiguity of Kant's move—its classicism and modernity—is that he adheres to the infinite sway of mathematicism and nonetheless expounds it too as a domain. Transcendental philosophy arises with a thought of the limit, venturing its step beyond the empirical only into a domain whose completeness secures its amenability to law. In response to Hume's critique of the legitimacy of the *a priori*, Kant denies experience of things in themselves. Universality and necessity are not merely the constructions of habit imposed on the congeries of our perceptions, since whatever we perceive is always mediated in advance by the universality and necessity of our *a priori* intuitions of time and space. Kant repudiates the nominalist thesis that only particulars exist, because the irreducibly particular has no verifiable existence within the field of experience opened for us by our *a priori* intuitions of time and space: the spatiality and temporality of our perceptions already win the latter over for universality. The thing in itself, which is defined by its absolute independence of our means of perception, is the snark for which empiricism has been hunting in vain: it is the nonsensical particular that empiricism imagined it could discriminate from the universals of our cognitive apparatus. The thing in itself is unknowable. For Kant, its existence is its unknowability. Kant refutes nom-

inalism by means of his exposition of the universality and necessity of time and space in the “Transcendental Aesthetic,” but he nonetheless proceeds to reward nominalism for its very defeat. It is as though nominalism is granted a higher order of truth in Kant’s philosophy—the task of circumscribing the entire domain of knowledge—precisely because it is wrong. Notwithstanding its unintelligibility as an insoluble particular, Kant does not dispense with the concept of the thing in itself, but instead commissions its error to admonish thought to keep within bounds. Our knowledge is knowledge only so long as it is bound.

Hegel’s critique turns, of course, on the spuriousness of the Kantian limit (*Grenze*). A limit is posited and at once transgressed, since it cannot be traced without brushing up against that which is excluded. On the one hand, Kant wants to pass off his discourse of the limit as bare description, and on the other hand, he does not restrict himself to answering the question *quid facti*, but goes beyond description to ask *quid juris* with respect to the limit. What is the nature of the discourse of the limit? Are Kant’s propositions concerning the limit of experience analytic or synthetic judgments? If analytic, what bearing can they have on the experience that they are to delimit? If synthetic, how can they adopt the independent position in relation to experience from which to impose a limit on experience? A Hegelian would here leap to Kant’s defense, pointing out that philosophical propositions cannot be made to conform to the Procrustean bed of the distinction between analytic and synthetic judgments. This rejoinder, however, does not disambiguate the Kantian notion of experience—quite the contrary, since its gist is the unsuitability of Kant’s terminology to the central problem of defining experience. The touchstone that experience provides for knowledge according to Kant is necessarily missing when it comes to a knowledge of experience and its limits.

Furthermore, the delimiting criterion of experience that sensuousness is to furnish in the critical philosophy is undermined by Kant’s expanded definition of sensibility to include space and time: for Kant, in the guise of temporality the sensuous—and experience with it—reaches into all synthetic applications of the law of contradiction. The temporal indices of an abstract thought retrieve it, in defiance of the empiricists, for experience by marking it with a sensuousness that belies its claim to empirical neutrality. With Kant, sensuousness itself achieves a power of abstraction. The universal is an abstraction not *from* sense but *of* sense. The a priori intuitions cannot be

considered empirically neutral; they are the very domain of experience, which, in the universality and necessity of time and space, is already abstract.

The non-experiential character of the thing in itself is not as straightforward as Kant sometimes makes out. That which is outside the sway of the categories of the understanding is, in its very recognizability as outside the sway of the categories, already categorized and recovered for the experience of conceptual thought. The limit that Kant traces around experience is, for the unlimited conceptualism of Hegel, an act of aggressive and indefensible modesty. In the first *Critique*, experience furnishes concepts with that which, in its independence, can corroborate them. But this assertion of independence does not square with Kant's point against Hume that experience can never be thought apart from concepts: "Without sensibility no object would be given to us, without understanding no object would be thought. Thoughts without content are empty, intuitions without concepts are blind."¹⁹ For Kant, experience is, as it were, always dissolving into thought, whereas, for Hegel, it has always already dissolved into thought. Hegel does not set a limit on thought; on the contrary, he makes thought the power of limitation itself. For Hegel, Kant's philosophy is not properly at home in the transcendental, inasmuch as it displays a passivity before limits that is alien to what Hegel considers the freedom of thought. Kant is unable to persevere in the audacity with which he broke with his predecessors' naïve conception of the relations between thought and the world. Thought ceases to be passive with respect to experience but invents a new passivity with respect to the limit.

What is Kant's inspiration for his understanding of the role of the limit? What does the introduction of a limit to experience bring about? Kant is clear: the terra firma of experience has to be demarcated from the surrounding fog banks of illusion. But the limit (*Grenze*) that is to render experience whole necessarily differs from the limit (*Schranke*) that maps out the domain proper to a particular science, since while geometry can be assured of the geometrical and its amenability to principles by means of its distinction from the positive content of the other sciences, that which is not experience, that which lies beyond the *Grenze*, only *is* at all inasmuch as it is experienced in some way. Paradoxically, on condition that it is transgressed, that non-experience is experienced and presents itself as that against which experience can be defined, the limit has a sense. The disciplinary role of the limit, from which Kant expects the restoration and proper foundation of metaphysics, is therefore compromised. Metaphysics, as the queen of all the sciences, is re-

duced to aping its subjects with their positively determinate domains for the sake of a comparable legitimacy.

Yet perhaps this *lèse-majesté* on Kant's part originates in his keeping his eye too closely, not so much on the model of the limit in the particular sciences, as on the model of political sovereignty. Is Kant's choice of the word *Grenze* for the limit of the entire body of knowledge (whereas he reserves the Latinate *Schranke* for the limits between one body of knowledge and another) swayed by an analogy? *Grenze* denotes "limit" in the sense of a territorial border and derives from the Slavic *granitsa*. The *Grenze* of a state that is not a nation-state need not be taken as the expression of the homogeneity of what it bounds. In this regard, *Grenze* and *Schranke* are not convertible. In the absence of the historical contingencies of territorial wars, colonization, and exile as determinants of the border, the arbitrariness of a sovereign decision announces itself in Kant's *Grenze*. Kant, who in Königsberg lived on the eastern border of the German-speaking world, more strictly, in the cosmopolitan enclave of East Prussia, maps the limits of human experience in order to safeguard it against anarchy. Human experience becomes a territory and the lawfulness of the sciences as a whole rests on the integrity of its borders. Does the doctrine of the *Grenze* therefore express Kant's hesitation before the freedom of the transcendental? In short, has an empirical model been smuggled into the transcendental? To what extent is the lawfulness of the sciences truly dependent on the integrality of human experience (for, to be sure, the *analogy* with the territorial groundedness of the laws of existing states does not amount to a philosophical rejoinder to Hume)? At the same time that he tears the thing in itself away from empiricism and declares it to be transcendent (unexperienceable), Kant betrays the transcendental (the necessary and universal conditions of experience) by submitting it to the empirical model of the jurisdiction of territorial states. The thing in itself seems intended to evoke the incomprehensible barbarian, the mute who lives beyond the *Grenze*. In the "Transcendental Doctrine of Method," Kant renounces the metaphysical ambition of a Tower of Babel, yet what he sets out to build in its place is not, as he says, a modest dwelling-house,²⁰ but rather the epistemological equivalent of the Great Wall of China.

The *Grenze*, however, exposes knowledge as much as it binds it. "What is knowledge?" Kant asks, and in order to avoid the answer of a reductive pragmatism, he defines it against the unknowable rather than by means and ends. The *Grenze* abducts the debate with Hume over the status of the *a priori*, because, from the outset, it brings knowledge face to face with that

which is inaccessible to the senses. Mishaps and deficiencies cease to orient the definition of knowledge. In its defining exposure to the unknowable, knowledge for Kant has no truck with the tests and procedures of that which Heidegger was later to denounce as technicism. Getting things done is not the *causa finalis* of knowledge.

This also means that Kant's securing of a space for moral action is not an afterthought in his philosophy: the suspension of so-called instrumental rationality is central to the first *Critique* and the confrontation with empiricism. Ethics is grounded in metaphysics, or, more precisely, the universality and necessity of metaphysics are grounded in the freedom, that is, the suspension of the rationality of means and ends, indispensable to ethical action. The *Grenze* is not won for ethics to the detriment of the sciences, since the sciences can only come into their own as rigorous disciplines through the intervention of the *Grenze* and its rebuff to the pragmatism of instrumental rationality. Even if Kant is more explicit regarding the check that the *Grenze* offers to dogmatism, the confrontation with Hume's legacy informs this aspect of the critical philosophy as well. The *Grenze* does not place a ceiling on the progress of the sciences; rather, it marks out the territory in which progress is possible. This is the territory of the dialogue with the wonder of the Greeks, since the Kantian *Grenze* revives the possibility of an open encounter with the unknowable.

In his treatment of the question of the unknown common root of the Kantian faculties, Dieter Henrich makes a decision on the status of the unknowable that denies its constitutive role in the understanding of knowledge: "the unknown is for Kant not, as Heidegger would have it, that which presses in on us as something disquieting in the known, but something entirely closed to us, which can disquiet us only as long as we are not certain of its unknowability."²¹ Such resignation is possible provided one has another means of defining knowledge than against the unknowable. In that case, however, nothing fundamental is determined at the *Grenze*, a notion that then appears to be a fifth wheel in the apparatus of the *Critique of Pure Reason*.

Henrich leaves the unknown as a kind of trivial fact, where Kant's immediate successors were provoked into action by it. But to cross the *Grenze* is not to enrich knowledge, because to do so is to rob knowledge of the dialogue with the unknowable and thereby of its insusceptibility to the pragmatist reduction. Skepticism crosses the *Grenze* no less than dogmatism: the skeptic abandons the relation between knowledge and the unknowable by assigning knowledge to the unknowable. Hegel, who discerns in the critical

philosophy a transcendence of the *Grenze* in the very adoption of a standpoint from which the *Grenze* can first be demarcated, has little interest in the tension between knowledge and the unknowable. Hegel's Absolute Knowledge is the blind spot in his dialectics and the moment where his thought enters into uncanny and admittedly tortuous exchanges with positivism and instrumental rationality. The voluntaristic obscurantism of the positing of the *Grenze* (merely arbitrary from the perspective of Absolute Knowledge) and the ostensibly sterile verbalism of defining knowledge by its opposite—in other words, the philosophical insufficiencies of Kant's doctrine of the thing in itself—have to be weighed against the philosophical insupportableness of an understanding of knowledge structured by the myths of everyday pragmatism.

The objective of the *Critique of Pure Reason* is to show that Reason goes too far. Kant's work takes for itself the name of critique because it shows up this excess, not because it checks it. Reason calls for critique because it transcends what is experientially verifiable. The revelation of the critique is the meeting in Reason of the unknowable (the transcendent) and the knowable (experience). Reason goes too far, but it is Reason on both sides of the *Grenze*. Experience goes to the *Grenze* along with Reason, and what experience knows, it knows in the thick of unknowability. The rationality of experience is inseparable from this limit on knowability.

KLEIST'S NON-INTEGRAL EXPERIENCE

In seeming defiance of the Kantian ban on transgressions of the limit, Kleist continues to aspire to a knowledge of things in themselves. Yet in what sense should knowledge be understood here? The dialogue with the unknowable demands that the ban be both respected and defied. Unlike Hegel, Kleist does not simply ignore the *Grenze*. Kleist is unable to make out the unifying *Grenze* that is to reinvest experience with the epistemological legitimacy that knowledge of the world could claim under God in medieval theology. The Kleistian *Grenze* is constantly shifting; it does not testify to the birth of Man and the reconstruction of the sciences on the foundation of human finitude and the integrality of experience. Where epistemological modernity opposes finitude and immanence to the infinitude and transcendence of the God of scholasticism, the formula of Kleist's modernity is "finitude without immanence."

Certainly, Kleist is at odds with the modernity of coherence and immanence, but there is more than the one way to break with medieval thought. Modernity structures knowledge by means of coherence and immanence, dispensing as far as possible with the authorizing power of a transcendent Creator. This breach in the way knowledge is structured (the passage from an anchoring externality to the cohesiveness of interrelations) nonetheless points up the continuity in the conviction that knowledge is structured. In Kleist's version of modernity, the imperative of a structure to knowledge is contested.

This sometimes involves striking a very pre-modern note: contingencies, which coherence and the privileging of the systematic cannot tolerate, but which the correspondence theory of truth (with its ground in the externality of the transcendent Creator) is able to pick up, are given free rein. Kleist's work is the account of an exposure to contingencies. Although Kleist shares with the skeptic a despair over knowledge of the world, where the skeptic's despair attributes insubstantiality to the world, the despair of Kleist's characters attributes insubstantiality to the knower. These characters have no doubt whatsoever that the world is to be taken seriously. It is not a question of how to bridge the gap between the knower and the world. Here the skepticism concerns the problem of how the knower might resist the world. For without resistance, without some distance between the knower and the world, how are truth and error to be distinguished? Kleist dwells on the convertibility of truth and error. Again and again his characters are caught out in a misconstruction of events. Error, so long as it is containable, bears witness to the difference between the self and the world. Knowledge, which is what it is because it is distinguished from error, is not the erasure of this difference but the declaration of its manageability. Where error becomes uncontainable, the world ceases to be that of which true statements are made. It expands, becoming also that of which false statements are made. The world, for the Kleistian self, is unknowable, not through the skeptic's traditional lack of exposure to it, but rather through an excess of exposure: the Kleistian self misses the independent vantage point from which it can know the world as it is in distinction from the errors traceable to the self's endemic cognitive vices.

The non-integrality of the self translates into the non-integrality of the body of knowledge as a whole. Kleist's non-integral experience is not the non-integral experience in which, according to the correspondence theory

of truth, thought is open to the world. Scholasticism has no investment in the integrality of experience: relying on the goodwill of a transcendent Creator, thought can remain open to an independently existing world. For Kleist, contingency passes from being the expression of a world divinely created in independence of our thoughts and with which our thoughts, on the basis of a common external provenance, can enter into correspondence. Contingency becomes the expression of the insubstantiality of the knower.

Another pre-modern note is the unmistakably crude dogmatism in Kleist's despair that the conditions on which we acquire knowledge as living beings may prevent the transference of this knowledge beyond the grave. For such dogmatism, knowledge is the direct reception of things as they are. But what becomes of this immediacy after the Kant crisis? Kleist does not relinquish the dogmatism of the immediate. He has, however, been chastened by the Kantian critique and no longer takes it for granted. The thing in itself, as the immediate of dogmatism, has to be sought on the run before it is overtaken by the ordering, identifying, and coordinating procedures of Kant's epistemological apparatus. The pace and frenzy of Kleist's works are explicable in terms of the need to rescue the thing in itself from beneath the Kantian juggernaut, to snatch at it before its integration into the totality of human experience, to live the *Grenze* as the site of an encounter with the unknowability of things in themselves rather than as the point at which the sciences are permitted to turn in upon themselves.

For Kleist, the phenomenal realm as a whole is the site of this encounter. In this he remains faithful to the logic of Kant's argument, if not to the ostensible meaning of his terms. The *Grenze*, by playing a constitutive role in setting up the phenomenal realm, is ontologically essential and hence ubiquitous, rather than marginal: its marginality is its ubiquitousness. It is to Kant's credit, as Theodor Adorno suggests, that he acknowledges the *Grenze* and does not pass over the thing in itself in silence: "What survives in Kant, in the alleged mistake of his apologia for the thing-in-itself—the mistake which the logic of consistency from [Solomon] Maimon on could so triumphantly demonstrate—is the memory of the element which balks at that logic: the memory of nonidentity."²² Kant's "inconsistency" lies in the theorization of that which is purportedly outside theory. Far from representing a lapse, this "inconsistency" is the moment when Kant escapes the dilemma of thought's self-contradictory determination and rigidification as either active (in the absence of an outside) or passive (in the face of a world

on which it simply reflects). The pure activity of thought, which Kant's German idealist successors upheld against him, is not the assertion of the freedom of thought but its closure, since thought discovers its freedom in self-interrogation before the decision between determining itself as either active or passive. Kant retains a memory of the non-metaphysical that is necessarily incomprehensible within the metaphysics of purely active thought. The inexorability of Kant's drive to metaphysics and his unshakable commitment to the securing of the a priori is often censured, but this vehemence, which Kant shares with Plato, cannot be fully or fairly understood apart from the still vital confrontation with the non-metaphysical that is enacted in the *Critique*, as in the Socratic dialogues. In the *Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant both rejects and affirms the thing in itself. It is the non-necessary and non-universal that balks at the logic of consistency. It marks out the domain of this logic and likewise files a caveat against its claim to absolute hegemony. Hegel, who makes do without the analogy with the groundedness of the laws of a territorially bounded state, sees no need to recognize an outside where Adorno's non-identity could cling to existence. Skulking along the *Grenze*, Kleist is a denizen of the shadows of Kantianism, and in his intolerance of these shadows unilluminated by the light of metaphysics, Hegel is intolerant of Kleist.

Where Hegel is the thinker of absolute mediation, Kleist is the thinker of the immediate. His works flicker with haecceities, singularities, and contingencies. After the Kant crisis, the dogmatist's adherence to things in themselves persists, but what a thing is in itself has undergone a transformation: to know the thing in itself is not to know something in its immutability, in the non-sensuousness of that which can follow us beyond the grave, but rather to be exposed to the surprises of the non-identical, the resolutely phenomenal, the transitory, and the abnormal. In the adherence to things in themselves, there is thus a nominal continuity between the young Kleist's Platonism and the sensualism of Kleist the writer. How nominal the continuity is can be ascertained from the different relations to finitude. In his literary works, Kleist, as it were, takes up the Kantian affirmation of finitude, although as a stratagem with respect to Plato, Kleist's affirmation of finitude is the reverse of Kant's. Kant turns away from things in themselves and grounds the necessity and universality of knowledge in finitude. As Kant's uncanny double, Kleist turns away from the necessity and universality of what Kant calls knowledge and, unlike Plato, makes of finitude the

site of the encounter with things in themselves. For Kant, sensibility is invested with a dignity unimaginable in Platonism, but this affirmation of finitude in the epistemological task assigned the senses extends rather than vitiates the rule of metaphysics. Kant does not stand Plato on his head by affirming finitude, since he sees to it that the sensibility he affirms is already a priori. The stability of the Platonic Ideas survives in the stability of the Kantian a priori. All Kant's attention to the extraconceptual, to existence in distinction from essence, is subservient to his stated aim of shoring up the necessity and universality of synthetic a priori judgments. In its role as the authority of individual determinations, finitude (the Kantian *Grenze*) has simply taken the place of the infinite in Kant's early argument for the existence of God and in the scholasticism of a thinker such as Henry of Ghent. The God of medieval philosophy is the point of mediation of things in themselves and the ground of necessity and universality. Seemingly axiomatic for the critical philosophy is the godlessness, in this sense, of the world of things in themselves and the corresponding urgency of founding the a priori anew in finitude and its world of appearances. Kleist follows Kant in making finitude his home, but he follows Plato in his understanding of finitude: it is the arena of the chaos of the senses.

AN ART OF THINGS IN THEMSELVES

To read Kleist's literary works beside the *Critique of Pure Reason* is to be struck, inevitably, by discrepancies, reversals, and distortions. But the guiding question of the first *Critique* is not the only question that Kant poses. Kleist's fixation on the conceptually intractable admits a Kantian genealogy. In his treatment of free beauty in the third *Critique*, Kant's defense in the *Critique of Pure Reason* of the applicability of general concepts to individual intuitions is put aside. Kant is not insensitive to the singular; indeed, it can be said that romanticism owes its suspicion of the general concept to his "Analytic of the Beautiful." In our judgments of free beauty, the subsumption of the object under a general concept does not identify the object as beautiful, since beauty is not an isolable property that the beautiful object shares with other beautiful objects. For romanticism, since the beauty of the beautiful often seems to consist in the display of the limitations of conceptuality, it is the duty of art and not of metaphysics to save phenomena, that

is, to save them in the individuality by which they announce themselves as phenomena (and not general concepts).

In his letters "On the Aesthetic Education of Man," Schiller, for instance, writes of the "philosopher": "In order to seize the fleeting appearance he must bind it in the fetters of rule, dissect its fair body into abstract notions, and preserve its living spirit in a sorry skeleton of words. Is it any wonder if natural feeling does not recognize itself in such a likeness, and if truth appears in the analyst's report as paradox?"²³ Consolidating Johann Georg Hamann's break with normative objective aesthetics in *Aesthetica in nuce*, the critical philosophy will have led to the curious result that art becomes the refuge of a dogmatist such as Kleist.²⁴ What a thing is in itself it is in its beauty, and it is aesthetic judgment rather than the general concept that is capable of addressing it. Aesthetic judgment is closer to truth, that is, to truth in the dogmatist's definition as adequation to things in themselves, because it concerns itself with the object in its singularity and not with its subsumability under a general concept. The truthfulness of art, its attractiveness for a post-Kantian dogmatist, is its intuitiveness, its immediate apprehension of phenomena by means of the senses. Kleist's art will be an art of intuitions. He will attempt to grasp the intuition on its own by outrunning the concept, for, as Kant writes, "the former relates immediately to the object and is single, the latter refers to it mediately by means of a feature which several things may have in common."²⁵ The Kantian marriage of intuition and concept was to be brief: Kleist sets intuition free at the same time that Hegel inaugurates the autonomy of the concept.

TRUTH AFTER THE THING IN ITSELF

This autonomy of the concept is at its most conspicuous in Hegel's redefinition of truth. The Hegelian concept's claim to truth is not dependent on anything outside of it. For Kleist truth is that which is *wholly* outside the concept. The correspondence theory of truth, which still maintains a fitful existence in Kant, is abandoned. If Kant represents a crisis in the history of the understanding of truth, it is because he problematizes the correspondence theory of truth without offering an alternative. Kant renders suspect the independence of the objects to which our concepts are to be adequate, according to the correspondence theory of truth: that which is truly inde-

pendent of our concepts, that which is untouched by the otherwise ubiquitous mediation of the faculty of understanding, namely, the thing in itself, likewise defies any correspondence with them.

In its secular form, the correspondence theory of truth has no way of explaining how thought and thing can simultaneously be independent and in relation to one another: the possibility of correspondence has to be taken as given. Even as he exposes the correspondence theory of truth to the charge of *petitio principii*, Kant himself invokes the presupposed extraconceptual character of existence in his refutation of the ontological argument for the existence of God from the concept of the supremely perfect being: a concept, even the concept of God, must have something outside of it if it is to be true.

The popular success of this section of the *Critique of Pure Reason* illustrates how little we appreciate the problems and solutions of medieval philosophy. Kant appeals to the correspondence theory of truth in a refutation of the ontological proof of the existence of God, when correspondence is intelligible solely in a universe where objects and concepts have a common external foundation, for instance, in the creative act of the divine being. What is consistent in Aquinas becomes inconsistent in Kant. Correspondence, as a theological doctrine, is not an option available to a thinking that claims to draw the sense of the world from human finitude.

Aquinas, who is the most lucid, that is, most lucidly mystical, thinker of the correspondence theory of truth, is correct—by the inspiration of his philosophy—in excluding the ontological argument from his proofs of the existence of God. If Aquinas does not raise objections to the correspondence theory of truth, it is because his thought is grounded in the conviction that object and concept can maintain their constitutional independence from one another and yet, in their common subordination to the Creator, admit the possibility of correspondence. The concept is distinct from existence, but it is not cut off from it. From a Thomist point of view, what is wrong with the ontological argument is that it blurs the distinction between concept and existence, even if it nevertheless reasserts the distinction in its pretensions to be more than a “miserable tautology”²⁶ (the argument, after all, wants to say that the object to which the concept, viz., the concept of the supremely perfect being, refers exists and not just that concepts have their own way of being, e.g., the being of thinkability). What is problematic, from a Thomist point of view, with Kant’s refutation is that the distinction

between concept and existence is absolutized. And having absolutized the distinction, Kant nevertheless resorts to the correspondence theory of truth in order to clinch his refutation.

THE EQUIVOCATION OF REASON

Without managing to extricate himself from the scholasticism of the correspondence theory of truth and appearing to skirt negative theology through his doctrine of the unknowability of things in themselves, Kant suspends judgment on the nature of truth. Elsewhere in the first *Critique*, Kant even appears to presage the equation of truth and consensus:

But truth depends upon agreement with the object, and in respect of it the judgments of each and every understanding must therefore be in agreement with each other (*consentientia uni tertio consentiunt inter se*). The touchstone whereby we decide whether our holding a thing to be true is conviction or mere persuasion is therefore external, namely, the possibility of communicating it and finding it to be valid for all human reason.²⁷

Kant's consensus here is immune to certain abuses (e.g., ideological manipulation) because it is Reason, and not the scarcely accountable totality of human beings, that is to acknowledge the agreement with the object. But who, in fact, and in what way, meets Kant's definition of rationality and is thus able to be a party to this consensus? How firmly does Kant's new touchstone for truth rest on the definition of Reason in the first *Critique*?

The universality that Kant ascribes to Reason, he ascribes to Reason in a specific sense. A clarification of this sense may serve to signal the Kantianism that comes to expression in Kleist's writings. In the letter to Wilhelmine, Reason goes undiscussed: it is the understanding and its interference that Kleist deplors. Why then mention Reason at all in relation to Kleist? Kleist's conspicuous sensualism is not the sense-certainty of mere sensualism. Inasmuch as perception in his writings is forever subject to dislocation, the senses acknowledge another power. Sense-certainty does not give way to the generalities of the understanding: that to which it gives way can be identified with one aspect of Kantian Reason. As a faculty, Reason is universal, yet its universality is the correlate of its transcendental character, and as such it is of little assistance in determining the truth or falsity of individual empirical judg-

ments. Kant installs Reason as an inalienable trait of humanity, although as a result he is unable to invest it with any discriminatory power over the contingent. This inalienable rationality, which is fundamental to the critical philosophy, rests on the transcendental ego's independence of experience.

As Maurice Merleau-Ponty remarks, the critical philosophy takes it for granted that individuals fundamentally agree in the transcendental ego:

Starting from the spectacle of the world, which is that of a nature open to a plurality of thinking subjects, it looks for the conditions which make possible this unique world presented to a number of empirical selves, and finds it in a transcendental ego in which they participate without dividing it up, because it is not a Being, but a Unity or a Value. This is why the problem of the knowledge of other people is never posed in Kantian philosophy: the transcendental ego which it discusses is just as much other people's as mine, analysis is from the start located outside me, and has nothing to do but to determine the general conditions which make possible a world for an ego—myself or others equally—and so it never comes up against the question: *Who is thinking?*²⁸

It is correct to say that the Kantian philosophy never comes up against the question “Who is thinking?” inasmuch as it does not furnish a concrete answer. To be fair to Kant, he does raise this question, but for him it is rhetorical, as it were: the interrogative pronoun is itself his answer, since the agent of thought is the anonymous “Who” of the transcendental ego. The transcendental ego is more anonymous than any object, but this impersonality does not at all denote the reification of the transcendental ego, its status as a “What.” The essence of humanity, the difference by which humanity is distinguished as a “Who” from the realm of what is, lies in thought's power to outreach the positive. The anonymity of the transcendental ego is not something that we have in common. This is because it is not a property designating the essential homogeneity of human beings. It is not the reassuring constant among individuals, but the empty space of abstraction in which properties and their individuation first become intelligible. We are all rational beings, in the sense that Reason is the true subject, substance, and foundation. Reason's claim to universality derives from its abstractness and not from being a common predicate. To be sure, a common predicate or general concept is abstract, but its abstractness falls short of the abstractness of Reason and the transcendental ego. A predicate determines a being, while Reason is that whereby human beings step back from their determinacy. As rational

beings, we are not candidates for a census, because it is only in our divergence from the abstractness of Reason that we become numerable. As rational beings, but as rational beings alone, we are one.

Ethical action, which involves an acknowledgement of the other person's irreducibility to the phenomenal realm, does not therefore presuppose a "generous" suspension of disbelief on the part of the agent. The evidence of a transcendental self within the agent is the evidence of a transcendental self within the other, since the transcendental self, by definition universal and necessary, cannot be privatized. When, in the previous quotation from the *Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant speaks of a touchstone in the possibility of communication and universal assent, he is not recommending that we undertake surveys of the entire population: Reason is in itself already communicated, already all human Reason. Furthermore, Reason cannot be converted into the determinate object that, raised above the vicissitudes of individual perception, is to be the common ground of our judgments.

In more than one respect, Reason is transcendental: in medieval philosophy, a "transcendental" is higher than a genus, because it is not simply that which entities have in common. We cannot deviate from Kantian Reason, since it encompasses identity *and* difference, truth *and* error by virtue of their bare thinkability. The dignity of Reason does not provide a basis on which a judgment in relation to a given object might be pronounced either true or false. To misjudge an appearance is not to flout Reason, since the departure from the given carried out by an error of judgment is only possible within the empirically infinite domain demarcated by the Ideas of Reason. That we are all rational beings (creatures of Reason) does not imply that we judge a particular phenomenon in the same way. Reason, whose fantastic (*schwärmerisch*) yet inborn transgression of the limits of experience and the verification provided by correspondence necessitates the first *Critique*, is nevertheless called upon to put an end to the perplexities of defining truth.

This is as misconceived as the attempts in 1789 to draw up a constitution for a state to be governed by Reason. Insofar as Reason is hypostasized, the above passage on truth from the *Critique of Pure Reason* and the French Revolution both attest to the escalating tensions in the practical program of the Enlightenment (out of adherence to the logical definition of "Reason," Friedrich Heinrich Jacobi, for instance, disputed the French National Assembly's claim that its constitution articulated in its content the formal power of Reason). In making his appeal to Reason in the crisis of the understanding of truth, Kant appears to adopt the conventional usage that

conflates Reason and common sense: Reason (*Vernunft*) is said in many ways in the critical philosophy that are scarcely ever compatible. The community of rational beings ends up as disputable a touchstone as the secular survival of correspondence.

Of course, Kant does not press the consensus theory of truth. It is no more than a stopgap in his exposition. Kant plays the various understandings of truth off against one another. Notwithstanding the systematic interrelations in his thought, Kant is not an advocate of the coherence theory of truth. Truth remains an open wound in his philosophy. Even Hegel, who sutures together the components of the Kantian antinomies by means of their very contradiction, leaves this particular wound open. Hegel admits the coherence theory of truth no more than Kant. His dictum that the True is the Whole has nothing whatsoever to do with the stabilization of a judgment through its situation in the totality of a paradigm or *Weltanschauung*: the Hegelian Whole does not close in upon itself, does not draw a limit (*Grenze*) around itself whereby it would be rendered determinate and manageable. Truth, for Hegel, is famously a bacchanal in its lack of restraint.

AN ART AND POLITICS OF ERROR

For Kleist, on the other hand, truth seems reserved for a diaspora. Frequently, his work suggests a series of measures against the possibility of consensus. Consensus, as the understanding of truth that secularization invents for itself, and by which it does not so much break with medieval philosophy as substitute the realities of political and social coercion for the mysticism at the foundation of the correspondence theory of truth, founders on his adherence to things in themselves. Kleist's dogmatism survives the Kant crisis and becomes a response to the coming dogmatisms of public opinion, ideology, common sense, and ideal speech situations. Testifying to the transformation of contingent truth in modernity into a demonic force, Kleist turns his back on the communicable truth of appearances (*Erscheinung*) to make a pact with the genius of error (*Schein*) in the thing in itself. Where once the truths of events and individual cases signaled the integrity and independence of the human mind and the world and their correlation under the auspices of the transcendent Creator, early modernity with its attempts to reconstruct the world as a set of necessary truths finds itself diffident in the face of the continued presence of contingent truth. Kleist shares this

diffidence and confronts his characters with the intractability of the world by means of a series of errors in interpretation. The world's goodwill toward the human mind can no longer be assumed on the basis of a common origin. For the pragmatist, truth need be no more than a provisional solution permitting us to make a further step in our activities. Error, for Kleist, marks the empty place of truth, and he clings to this emptiness rather than turn to the Church or technicism.

In his letter to Wilhelmine, Kleist writes: "We can never be certain that what we call truth is really truth." The proposition is not cast in the first person singular. Maintaining the universal voice of the critical philosophy, Kleist does not retreat to the privacy of sensations in the face of his reading of Kant. Kleist's first person plural is the openness of Reason, of the transcendental. It is unable to extract empirical certainty from itself and ground the lawfulness of a science or a state. The universality of the first person plural does not convert into the universality of objectivity. Kleist's "We" is more akin to the outlaws who congregate and scatter around his Michael Kohlhaas.

For Kleist, illusion is yet to be satisfactorily contained. Descartes, for his part, denies in the *Meditations* that error is other than privative.²⁹ Involved in such a denial is the conviction that our understanding of truth rests on deeper foundations. Kleist aspires to the truth that is the knowledge of things in themselves, when the contingency, lawlessness, and unrepeatability of things in themselves arouse the suspicion that here we are dealing with an illusion. It could be said that Kleist accordingly misses the entire point of the critical philosophy. The tactical nature of the thing in itself, which Kant preserves as a trophy of his victory over both empiricism and dogmatism (in their adherence to things in themselves rather than appearances, empiricism and dogmatism are alike unusable as foundations for the sciences), is overlooked. But Kleist is consequently also blind to the illegitimate conflation of Reason and common sense. Reason cannot become the new mainstay of the conventional understanding of truth because, in its inherent preoccupation with things in themselves, it concerns itself with that which can never be the stable object of consensus.

Having admitted the thing in itself and thereby avoided the reduction of thought to a tautology, Kant nonetheless grows anxious and avails himself of a sleight of hand. He introduces common sense in the disguise of Reason to distract attention from the gulf between the transcendental form and em-

pirical content of thought into which everyday judgment threatens to disappear. Although Kant does not dwell on the difficulties that the critical philosophy throws up for everyday judgment, the placidity and complaisance of phenomena, let alone of things in themselves, are not assured. The thing in itself, as that which for Kant is given, is anything but the given that can be taken for granted and whose comprehension amounts to a birthright. It is the given that is as much a fiction as a fact. Reason is a literary faculty: the truths of things in themselves, since they are corroborated neither by consensus nor the adequation between the concept and the object, fall to what is known as fiction.

If Kleist's turn to literature after the Kant crisis has much more to do with his early dogmatic conception of knowledge than is generally believed, literature itself, not as an ineffectual ornament of the workaday but as a means of addressing things as they are, must likewise be seen to be consanguineous with Kantian Reason. The thing in itself is not at all the exuviae that philosophy casts off in becoming transcendental: it is the emblem of transcendental philosophy's difference from common sense. The Kleist of the literary works, no less than the Kleist of the letter to Wilhelmine, elides the distinction between illusion and appearance in the name of a truth that does not pretend to define itself over against error, but that carries error within itself as its open-ended complication. In Kleist's work, the transcendental ego starts talking in tongues. Nothing of the transcendental apparatus that Kant erects in response to Hume needs be scrapped in an interpretation of Kleist, but its claim to apologetic effectiveness as a response to the psychedelia of Hume's skepticism, which G. E. Schulze, Maimon, and others had all but immediately disputed, is harder to uphold. Contingency is not submitted to the rules of good sense, because in the blank space between the singular and the pure abstraction of the transcendental, the empirical general concept is unable to take root. Kleist's extremism—the antipathy for reservations, concessions, and qualifications that denotes his Kantianism—issues from the universalism of Reason and bears down, not on the singular and the contingent, which it much rather first gives their scope and legitimates *as singular and contingent*, but on the generalities of common sense.

Kleist revels in the proliferation of irreconcilable perspectives, and on the rare occasions when anything like consensus could be said to reign (such as among the survivors of the earthquake in Santiago), it is as brief as it is ultimately calamitous. But Kleist is not a relativist: his work amounts to a love

song, albeit anguished, to contingent truth.³⁰ Kleist's characters seek out the truth because it is the truth, regardless of whether or not it destroys them (in a letter to his sister from November 1800, Kleist denies that any considerations of utility inform his search for truth). In the plays and tales, perspectives proliferate because each in turn shatters on the externality of truth, on the shimmering fragments of a world held together by neither the transcendent Creator nor the coherence of a system of knowledge. Relativism, which disavows this externality, is the bastard brother of the coherence theory of truth in philosophical modernity, resembling the latter in taking coherence as its principle (everything is relative to the subject).

Kleistian Reason maintains itself in the explosion of the given by which Reason first announced itself as a historical and political force, where Kantian Reason at times speaks with the voice of mere common sense, and Hegelian Reason discovers itself actualized in the Prussian state (notwithstanding all his protestations of the freedom of thought, Hegel ultimately shackles thought once more to the given, not just analogously, but literally, to the *Grenzen* of Prussia). Everything in Kleist is played out on the raw tips of nerves. His sensualism, his purported anti-intellectualism, answers to a faculty of Reason prized loose from common sense and its measure. Kleist is faithful to the moment in Kant when the transcendental has opened up as an abyss and Reason has not yet been debased, out of fear of the measurelessness of this abyss, by its appointment to the position of touchstone.

What defines Kleist's Kantianism arguably becomes apparent once Kant's conventional examples, which unduly restrict the scope and disguise the radicalism of his principles, are set aside. In the Preface to the first edition of the *Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant lists his motives for dispensing with examples in that work. One of these motives is that these "aids to clearness, though they may be of assistance in regard to details, often interfere with our grasp of the whole."³¹ In his critical reflections on the use of examples, as the definitive empirical moment in a philosophical exposition, Kant himself is at his wariest regarding the dangers of equivocation and conflation. It is therefore here that, from Kantian motives, Reason should be unseamed from prudence and common sense. Kleist's Penthesilea can take her place in a Kantian ethics no longer identifiable with the renunciatory practice of its illustrations, and the stumbling humanity of "On the Puppet Theater" can be seen to participate already in the incommensurability of the sublime without recourse to the overwhelming spectacle of mountain passes or

storms. And that Kleist himself was inclined to ignore examples is an inference from his letter to Wilhelmine. Examples have no role in a knowledge of things in themselves, since what a thing is in itself it is in that by which it cannot be subsumed under a general concept and thereby rendered an example. If the aspiration to a knowledge of things in themselves is to be sustained, it is by a refusal to think in the general, to act in conformity with a code, or to limit the transport of the sublime to a preordained set of examples: three hints toward a Kleistian doubling of Kant's *Critiques*.