

Preface

In the usual interpretation of Kleist's reading of Kant, there is a contradiction that is either glibly explained away or not explained at all. Kleist, recognized as a proto-modern writer, nevertheless offers a pre-modern reading of Kant. Of course, this contradiction can be resolved by observing that the Kleist who was traumatized by his encounter with Kantian philosophy in March 1801 is not the Kleist who in the ensuing decade, until his suicide on the shore of the Wannsee, liberated literature from the imperative of edification and the settlement of ambiguities, from Christian and bourgeois interiority, and other so-called markers of literary pre-modernity. But this manner of resolving the contradiction is reactionary, because it makes of Kleist's Kant crisis a psychopathological no-man's-land between the dogmatic metaphysical conceptions of the eighteenth century and the experimentalism of modern art: it maintains the compartmentalization of the disciplines by preempting the question of their essence. In 1801, Kleist misread Kant, and out of disillusionment with his previous ideals of *Bildung*, he committed himself to literature. This makes for a very neat account, but what is thereby lost is any possibility of addressing the interrelations and continuities between the Enlightenment and modern literature. To reject this account is to take issue, not simply with an interpretation of an episode in Kleist's biography, but rather with the myth of the mutual exclusiveness of thought and art.

Even if it is just to assert that in Kleist's Kant crisis, as in an emblematic event, metaphysical dogmatism, philosophical modernity, and literary modernity go their separate ways, it is for that reason equally plausible to note in the crisis a convergence, a point of indifference and undecidability. This blind spot, owing to its structural importance in delimiting disciplines, cannot be left a blind spot. Kleist's reading of Kant is still and no longer dogmatic metaphysics, already and not yet literature. Philosophy and literature

do not form that spurious opposition within which the philosophy of Hegel's *Aesthetics* cannot but espy in the definiteness of "literature" its own power to define. As the moment when Kant's philosophical modernity, Kleist's literary modernity, and the dogmatic metaphysics of the preceding age declare their irreconcilability, and thus as a point when their irreconcilability was not taken to be self-evident, the crisis appears to pulsate with the active and counteractive forces shaping the modern before their ossification into organizational elements. Kleist's reading of Kant is contemporaneous with Schelling's philosophical privileging of art and the program advocated by the Jena romantics of a fusion of literature and philosophy. That Kleist, unlike Schlegel and Novalis, does not enunciate a philosophy of art and an art of philosophy is not grounds enough to uproot his interpretation of Kant from the problematic of romanticism and, by the criteria of an age with a more entrenched division of intellectual labor, to judge it a misreading. Kleist's Kant crisis is not merely a matter for his biographers and literary critics.

The evidence for the charge that Kleist misread Kant is, at first glance, indisputable. In his fixation on the thing in itself, Kleist seems not to notice that Kant has changed the rules of the game: the burden of the *Critique of Pure Reason* is an account of the transcendental structures of cognition, rather than a quest for things as they truly are. As far as epistemology is concerned, Kant's critical revolution was to formulate knowledge in terms of appearance and the universal conditions of appearance, instead of in terms of appearance and its particular essence. As science after science was infused with the Kantian spirit, the important linkages in a body of knowledge came to be seen to lie in a different direction. Linguistics, for example, arises by resigning the concern with the essence of a word to the "mysticism" of poets and focusing attention on the structural interrelations between words. Henceforth, to a large degree, a system stands or falls depending on whether its components fit together or not, on whether it "works": externality, wherever practicable, ceases to anchor the system. This receives political corroboration and provides epistemological corroboration of political changes. For its part, the immanence of modern civil society asserts its timeliness in opposition to the transcendence of sovereignty. The social contract that is made among free, equal individuals is the bond of society, according to Locke: the sovereign, continuing to exist in a state of nature, need be tolerated only so far, since as soon as the sovereign declares open war on society, the higher right to refashion the commonwealth can be invoked. On the basis of no more than a structural analogy between society and the new sciences, the imperi-

alist discourse of the West pronounced the indigenous political structures of its colonized peoples to be superannuated. With the disavowal of the exteriority of the sovereign—a disavowal that is more than rhetorical and less than consummate—there also comes a disavowal of the exteriority of foreign peoples: state-sanctioned regicide at home is the concomitant of European imperialism.

Even if the suggestion of a consistency to a given historical constellation is open to dispute as a tic of modern historiography, its Kantian credentials are not open to dispute. What begins with Descartes and his modeling of a general method on the coherence of mathematics—the founding gesture of philosophical modernity—becomes entrenched with Kant by means of the greater flexibility of his philosophy in relation to the natural sciences. In one sense, Kant is the proper name of capitalism. He is the thinker who, in effect, if of course not explicitly, convinces the sciences that their legitimacy lies in maximizing their resemblance to the world coordinated by the mechanisms of exchange. The essence surrenders its role in determining the truth of an appearance to the universal conditions of appearance, just as the value of an object is determined not by the object as such but by the totality of values.

With his aspiration to know things in themselves, Kleist comes across as the lost sheep of modern epistemology. Failing to make the transition to modernity, he rushes after the essence as it retreats into philosophy's past. Yet to interpret Kleist's despair and eventual suicide as a cautionary tale, as a dramatization of the perils of an epistemological interregnum, is to trivialize both Kleist and Kant. Kleist's despair is not without a resonance in Kant, since even if he ushers in the age of the coherence theory of truth, Kant himself vacillates within the interregnum between conflicting understandings of truth. Kant consolidates modernity, but his thought is not reducible to coherence. Kleist's despair, which has been attributed to the pre-modern conceptions he brings to his reading of Kant, informs the modernity of the literary works whose contestation of the notions of totality and coherence can itself be said to be Kantian. Whatever would like to close in upon itself and state its own truth is to be broken open. Kant (i.e., the corpus and reception bound to his name) has more than the one project. The question of essence, which, on the one hand, lapses in the exposition of the subjective conditions of appearance and the corresponding consistency of all phenomena, on the other, itself assumes a critical function. The essence of a thing is the unassimilable x that totality must exclude in order to demarcate itself as totality and whose exclusion is simultaneously the disproof of totality.

Insofar as Kleist's reading of Kant fastens on the unassimilability of things in themselves, it can be argued that it is critical rather than obscurantist: it asks more of a body of knowledge than internal consistency. If immanence is the keyword of philosophical modernity, the contestation of immanence is seemingly the keyword of the literary modernity that comes into its strength in the nineteenth century. And given that, crudely speaking, philosophical modernity predates literary modernity by two centuries, "modernity" in its two uses here does not even have the same chronological extension. But this does not entail that the two regimes do not communicate. One program of philosophical modernity, namely, the critical labor of the Enlightenment, is discernible in Kleist's literary works. This should not be a surprising thesis. Kleist's works can be summarized as a declaration of the insolvency of the Enlightenment only on the basis of a thoroughly anodyne conception of the thought of the eighteenth century. The Age of Reason that comes to an end in the person of Kleist is simply the age in which the equivocal nature of Reason went untheorized. Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*, implicitly yet unmistakably, delineates incompatible significations of "Reason." The friction between Reason as the prudence of the self-sufficient bourgeois individual and Reason as the transcendental in its intractability to the old and new dogmas of Church and state (for example, Kant's objection in "The Paralogisms of Pure Reason" to the immortality of the soul is that the individual soul is not genuinely transcendental) is aggravated virtually to the point of hostility. It falls to Kleist to bring this hostility into the open. The promise of the Enlightenment, and for Kant the Enlightenment was a promise and not an actuality, not only still sounds in Kleist but also sounds with an intensity and purity wholly missing from the "rationalism" that has always known how to pass off its accommodation to political, social, and economic interests as the autonomous recognition of what is. Kleist continues the Enlightenment's struggle against dogmatism, taking it up against the dogmas that the Enlightenment harbored within itself. That which is pre-modern in Kleist's reading of Kant and belongs to dogmatic metaphysics is inseparable from his modernity and its critique of the dogmas by which the modern age succumbs to obscurantism.