

MANAGING KANT CRISES

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Kleist's so-called "Kant Crisis" seems to be based on an imprecise interpretation of some of the philosopher's "Kritiken". This essay attempts to interpret this "crisis" rather as an expression of poetic reflection than of philosophical analysis. Under this condition, the "Kant Crisis" highlights Kleist's sensitivity for scepticism, which is also shared by English romantics, who do not directly refer to either Kant or Kleist.

Kleists sogenannte „Kant-Krise“ gründet scheinbar auf einer ungenauen Interpretation eines Teils der „Kritiken“ des Philosophen. Hier wird versucht, diese „Krise“ eher als Ausdruck literarischer Reflexion denn als philosophische Analyse zu interpretieren. Unter dieser Voraussetzung formuliert die „Kant-Krise“ Kleists Sensibilität für den Skeptizismus, die auch englische Romantiker teilen, obwohl sie sich weder auf Kant noch auf Kleist direkt beziehen.

1. *Conditioning the Unconditioned*

How does *Kritik* become *Krise*? How does one manufacture a crisis out of Kantian philosophy? Kleist criticism in German still frequently returns to Kleist's staging in letters of his alleged reading of Kant. Whether or not he read Kant in detail and with comprehension, the idea of being so disturbed by the philosopher was clearly very important to him. It became for him what one critic called a *Reflexionsmedium*.¹⁾ While this might appear an anxiety peculiar to Kleist, I argue here that it is useful to spread the pain: to see what happens to other writers contemporary with Kleist – how they look to us – when placed in the same

¹⁾ BERNHARD GREINER, *Eine Art Wahnsinn: Dichtung im Horizont Kants: Studien zu Goethe und Kleist*, Berlin 1994, p. 86: "Nach der immer noch zu wenig beachteten Arbeit von Ludwig Muth darf mit einiger Sicherheit angenommen werden, daß Kants *Kritik der Urteilskraft* die Ursache oder doch zumindest das Reflexionsmedium der Krise von 1801 war, in deren Folge bei Kleist das literarische Schaffen einsetzt." Greiner sees his own reading as contesting a critical tradition also fixated (*fixiert*) on Kleist's *Kant-Krise* but as binary dislocations between appearance and reality, rather than a teleological scepticism about the coherence of experience as a whole, a "progressive Spaltung" redeployed differently in different literary productions. He takes his bearings from publications by MAX KOMMERELL (1940), WALTER MÜLLER SEIDEL (1961), GERHARD NEUMANN (1986), and BETTINA SCHULTE (1988).

context. The question posed in this paper, then, is if Kleist's seemingly singular preoccupation with Kant is shared, not factually but in its traumatic character, by other writers of his period, writers who certainly did not become traumatised by reading Kant, but whose stance in relation to the literary possibilities they saw open to them can be better understood through the comparison with Kleist's worry. Carol Jacobs has even floated the idea of talking meaningfully about 'Kant's Kleist crisis', and this paper joins her in taking up post-Kantian ideas and hermeneutical claims that Kant was better understood by the Romantic literature that followed him than by himself. The concern to elucidate the meaning of Kant's philosophy simultaneously produced its own meaning.²⁾

Ludwig Muth pointed out that we are just as shocked when we read Kleist's famous Spring letters of 1801 to his fiancée Wilhelmine von Zenge and half-sister Ulrike as he apparently was by reading Kant. For what has this outburst of "Nihilism" to do with a philosophy which has proved fruitful in the history of ideas up to the present day and inspired Schiller and Goethe. Perhaps, Ernst Leopold Stahl had suggested, his knowledge of Kant was 'rudimentary'.³⁾ But Stahl respectfully cites Ernst Cassirer, who, almost thirty years before, had ventured the considered opinion that no one had experienced as deeply and profoundly the immediate vital power ('unmittelbare Lebensmacht') to which Kant's apparent abstractions gained access. Neither Goethe's serenity nor Schiller's restless study of Kant is Kleist's response. And, Cassirer points out, Fichte, inspired by Kant, posited an external world intelligible enough for the practicable fulfilment of our human moral vocation (a not-I reflecting the I so as to provide a symmetrical field of action for it), and this idealism must also somehow have been bypassed by Kleist.⁴⁾ To get round Fichte, Kleist's scepticism must have identified a damaging relativism not only in scientific truth but also in the Kantian idea of a self and the moral obligations determining it.⁵⁾

²⁾ CAROL JACOBS, *Uncontainable Romanticism: Shelley, Brontë, Kleist, Baltimore and London 1989*, p. 186. See also NORBERT ALTENHOFER, *Der erschütterte Sinn. Zu Kleists ›Erdbeben in Chili‹*, in: *Positionen der Literaturwissenschaft: Acht Modellanalysen am Beispiel von Kleists ›Das Erdbeben in Chili‹*, ed. by DAVID WELLBERY, Munich 1985, p. 53: "Der Text als Rätsel, das Leben als unverständliches Buch, die Auslegung als unendliche Aufgabe: In diesem Problemwußtsein treffen sich der Schriftsteller Kleist und der Hermeneut Schleiermacher [...] eine Hermeneutik, die in der Bemühung um den Sinn des Werkes zugleich ihren eigenen Sinn produziert."

³⁾ LUDWIG MUTH, *Kleist und Kant: Versuch einer neuen Interpretation*, *Kantstudien* 68, Köln 1954, p. 7. BERNHARD GREINER thinks Muth's work "zu wenig beachtet", cit. fn. 1, p. 186. See ERNST LEOPOLD STAHL, *Heinrich von Kleist's Dramas*, Oxford 1948, p. 7.

⁴⁾ ERNST CASSIRER, *Idee und Gestalt: Goethe, Schiller, Hölderlin, Kleist: Fünf Aufsätze*, Berlin 1921, pp. 163–171. And see especially p. 174 – "Um die Möglichkeit der menschlichen Freiheit zu retten, musste die Welt der Dinge in eine Welt der Bilder aufgelöst werden."

⁵⁾ See JAMES PHILIPS, *The Equivocation of Reason: Kleist reading Kant*, Stanford CA 2007, p. 13: "Contingency becomes the expression of the insubstantiality of the knower." The

Is Kleist simply mistaken about Kant's philosophy, or can Kant's philosophy be seen to undo itself under Kleist's scrutiny? One way the later might happen is as follows. Kant wanted aesthetic judgement to confirm the 'fit' which philosophy was obliged to assume to hold between the unconditioned and conditioned. The cooperation of those two realms, things as they are in themselves and as they appear to us, is clearly, from the point of view of Kantian philosophy, a benign affair. Confined to explaining the world as it must necessarily appear to us, philosophy has to assume without being able to prove that reality sustains appearance. Since appearances make sense, since our faculties, therefore, do work together successfully to produce them, we are necessarily obliged to think of what lies outside appearance as something consistent with the sense we make of its appearances to us.

In the third ›Kritik der Urteilskraft‹, are described the judgements letting us identify and experience this fortuitous collaboration, rather than just thinking it. Philosophy obliges us to assume it, but aesthetic and teleological judgements, working outside the logic of concepts, define experiences confirming the harmonious or purposive play of faculties necessary for concepts to have application. Kant is close to saying that in the case of aesthetic experience we can only enjoy this happy state of affairs if we know of its philosophical significance; and that way Hegel's aesthetics lie. For Hegel, once we have grasped art's peculiar philosophical significance we have no need of art itself: philosophy supersedes it. Kantian philosophy, having at first appeared to rely on aesthetic experience for its transcendental viability, can return upon itself and claim that aesthetic experience is only possible for philosophical reasons: because, as said, we are dialectically required to think that the unconditioned fits the conditioned. Leibniz had expressed the same thought in theological terms as a pre-established harmony ordained by God. But for Kant, Leibniz remained an idealist precisely because his omission to be dialectical as well as analytical meant he denied a materiality of things potentially (but impossibly) recalcitrant to our knowledge of them. He was so certain of his teleology, in other words, so sure it was backed by a theodicy, that he had no need of aesthetic pleasure as the confirmatory experience of a materiality which, although unconditioned, would always be cooperative.

Hegel argued that, after Kant, we can dispense with the details of aesthetic experience and need only salvage its philosophical significance. But Kant's idea

Fichte-crisis (consequent on Kleist's reaction to ›Die Bestimmung des Menschen‹) about which Philips and others are sceptical, is relevant insofar as it stresses the moral confusion typically accompanying Kleist's representations of epistemological uncertainty. HERBERT KRAFT in his ›Kleist, Leben und Werk‹, Münster 2007, refers only to a "Fichte-Krise", pp. 38–40.

of a *sensus communis* is there to tie the knot which binds aesthetics to philosophy forever. Our faculties share a teleology or common purpose which, if baffled, if not underwritten by philosophy, would not be enjoyed. But the *sensus communis* suggests a common culture much larger than the mutual knowledge of what is needed to underwrite Kant's philosophical enterprise. Yes, it is detected through the 'communicability' of pleasure ensuring the universal applicability necessary for a judgement to be a philosophically respectable judgement. But in the aesthetic case, this gives the lead to an autonomous vocabulary separate from and displacing philosophy: the words of the poet and of the critic who understands her and can extend her work. And once the poet is in control, then the direction pointed to is no longer Hegel but the Jena ironists and, ultimately, Kleist. All you need to be is generally persuasive: to find words, that is, that can become everyone else's.⁶⁾

Kant's explanation of the sublime further reinforces the dialectical assumption which keeps such poetic bids to displace philosophy in their place. Even if the normal teleology of the faculties is disturbed, and their collaboration disrupted, this 'contra-purposive' experience still only amounts to a re-shuffling of the cards in Kant's philosophical pack. The beautiful fit which we enjoy between sensibility, imagination and understanding is, painfully at first, replaced by another, sublime configuration which supervenes when the first configuration breaks down. Because aesthetics owes no absolute allegiance to concepts, it can fictionalise another harmony, thinkable but not available to human beings as a technique of knowledge. In this scenario, imagination uses reason as a schema for nature, conjuring the idea of an absolute, unmediated knowledge. The defeat of the empirical imagination to facilitate such transcendental cer-

⁶⁾ In section 22 of the third ›Kritik‹, Kant wonders if common sense is a constitutive or a regulative principle, and leaves the question unanswered. But if it is constitutive, then poetry has indeed taken the initiative, because common sense delivers an experience by definition free of conceptual jurisdiction. Were common sense regulative, it would enforce a Reason we cannot legitimately get on experiential terms with, according to the ›Critique of Pure Reason‹. IMMANUEL KANT, *Critique of Judgement: Including the First Introduction*, translated with an Introduction by WERNER S. PLUHAR, with a Foreword by MARY J. GREGOR, Indianapolis, Cambridge 1997, pp. 89f. (240f.). BERNHARD GREINER, *Eine Art Wahnsinn* (cit. fn. 1), argues that Kleist research has been fixated by the thought that Kleist constructs out of his reading of Kant irreconcilable, binary oppositions, and instead claims Kleist expresses a "progressive Spaltung": rather, as I am suggesting, one changing with its different expression throughout his literary work, and so dependent for its character on just that literary convincingness (p. 75). The binary Kleist interpretations departed from here would include MAX KOMMERELL, *Die Sprache und das Unaussprechliche*, in: M. K., *Geist und Buchstabe der Dichtung*, Frankfurt 1940; WALTER MÜLLER-SEIDEL, *Versehen und Erkennen. Eine Studie über Heinrich von Kleist*, Köln 1961; GERHARD NEUMANN, *Hexenküche und Abendmahl. Die Sprache von Liebe im Werk Heinrich von Kleists*, in: *Freiburger Universitätsblätter*, Heft 91, 1986; BETTINA SCHULTE, *Unmittelbarkeit und Vermittlung im Werk Heinrichs von Kleist*, Göttingen, Zürich 1988.

tainty, at first causes pain: the pain of our necessary failure to produce unmediated knowledge, knowledge delivered by a reason un-critiqued by the limitation of our epistemological powers. Enjoyment returns when the new harmony is aesthetically judged to be a thinkable faculty teleology. We would have to be superhuman to possess it, but in aesthetic imagining we can experience what it would be to have it. We feel exalted to think our apotheosis in this way, and so all is well once more.

Trouble arises when we abandon the idea that the unconditioned must always be approached teleologically, as if it deliberately fitted itself to the way our faculties of reason, understanding, imagination and sensibility combine to catch its appearances. Kant thinks anything else is impossible, ruled out of court. We have to think the unconditioned as if on purpose making possible the conditioned, otherwise we saw off the branch we are sitting on to fall into the abyss, or even ‘to fall upwards’, as Hölderlin thought in his fragment on ‘Reflexion’.⁷⁾ Then the poetic capture of our experience of elevation beyond our epistemological means would become abjection. Instead of the Kantian *sublime* or the exalted sense that we are more than the epistemological apparatus reflected back to us in knowledge, assuring us that we have something in us, a native freedom, matching and letting us withstand the indeterminacy of whatever lies beyond our scientific capabilities, we would feel a lack of gravity (*Schwerkraft*) and sobriety (*Nüchternheit*). Falling upwards would be a kind of reduction, a bankruptcy ensuing upon our expenditure of all our epistemological credit. The opposite, to fall downwards, would, thinks Hölderlin, impede the ‘elasticity’ of Spirit necessary to true inspiration (*Begeisterung*). Falling upwards releases us from gravity, but decentres us from the feeling that is just, warm, clear and powerful. In other words, we lose our defining human boundaries rather than finding them expanded. Transposing to a musical idiom, Hölderlin says we would lose the prevailing tonality which he thinks poetry realises, and which contrasts with the aspiration to know the whole which science aspires to but cannot achieve.⁸⁾ What, though, if we confronted this dysfunctional aesthetic experience head-on? It is not clear that Hölderlin, when positing our reflective condition of the momentarily incomplete, or endlessly approximate, or our typically eccentric path, does not himself do this.⁹⁾ The consequences of this would be to entertain the idea of an aesthetics of unpleasure.

7) FRIEDRICH HÖLDERLIN, [REFLEXION], *Sämtliche Werke und Briefe*, ed. by GÜNTHER MIETH, Berlin 1995, pp. 378–390, p. 378: “Man kann auch in die Höhe *fallen*, so wie in die Tiefe.”

8) *Ibid.*, “[...] das augenblicklich Unvollständige zu ertragen.”

9) *Ibid.*, p. 379.

For Hölderlin and then Kleist, after Kant two prospects, both unsettling, had presented themselves. Kant's foreclosing on any sensible talk of things in themselves, makes phenomena self-sufficient. Transcendental logic describing them describes the only experience possible for us to have. This is Kant's analytic, dependent on a straightforwardly binary opposition between appearance and reality. Thinkers, especially those of a religious bent from Jacobi to Coleridge, saw in this an end to theology, unless theology settled for pantheism. Post-Kantian reliance on language, on the other hand, delegated to literature the authority to continue talking about the dimension beyond appearance. Kant's dialectic had required that we assume a congruence between the phenomenal and noumenal realms. But in ceding to literature the responsibility for describing our experience of this necessary harmony, he backed the wrong horse. The Romantic literature which ensued, celebrated for its fictional licence, its symbolic over-reaching, its open-endedness, the confusing mixture of its genres, tended to present experience in excess of this supposed harmony by refusing Kant's binary logic of appearance and reality. The exhilarations of being unconfined to a self which was supposed merely to rubber-stamp the coherence of its experience increased the sense of what might be pleasurable, over-riding Kant's assumptions. From the perversions of Sade's ›Justine‹ to the Shakespearean range of Goethe's ›Faust‹, writers quashed distinctions between pleasure and un-pleasure, seizing the literary opportunities to present an undifferentiated world beyond analytic and dialectical thought. Their art succeeded in soliciting our willing suspension of disbelief by creating literary works about whose experience we could critically communicate with each other. The critical community established a culture beyond the original purpose of Kant's common sense.

We then feel the unconditioned through the disharmony of our faculties, not through their falling out of one configuration to settle comfortably into the pattern of another new resolution, as if transposing from one key to another. Hegel thought that such an aesthetic sense of dysfunction is redeemed as tragedy. Tragedy pointed up a contradiction in Reason's form at a particular historical stage, one to be resolved by the next, higher stage. But his argument was based on a view of art as an experience replaceable by Reason, not one making of Reason a possible experience. But to press the objection to Hegel's overcoming of aesthetic experience by philosophy, we might argue that even our pleasure in harmony might be underwritten by a lie. The unconditioned might frighteningly exceed its strategic or historically relative accommodation of our conditioned view of it. This (Gnostic?) alternative is not only thinkable; it is one way in which the post-Kantian could revise Kantian aesthetics, repeating the Kantian in another tone; but not the ironic tone of the Jena ironists, profit-

ing from uncertainty to exhibit an infinite adequacy of expression.¹⁰) Rather, this is something more like the Kierkegaardian suspension of the teleological, or Hölderlin's upward fall. Kierkegaard, after all, was explicitly opposed to the sufficiency of aesthetic explanation, which he thought over-exploited by the post-Kantians. But if we include Kleist, then we can say that among the post-Kantians were some who were already, in practice if not by design, communicating the abyssal possibilities left open by Kant's third ›Kritik‹. Critics from Ludwig Muth to Bernhard Greiner have stressed that the aporias of the third not the first ›Kritik‹ are key to Kleist's art.¹¹)

Consequently, there are analogies useful for criticism in crises as apparently different as Wordsworth's confrontation with Godwin (›The Borderers‹), Coleridge's quarrel with Wordsworth, and Kleist's *Kant-Krise*. The unassimilable status of Kant's unconditioned ground of everything becomes what writing is about. Writing, as said, then takes the lead and even turns against the philosophy which had originally delegated to it the task of what it could not itself get on terms with. Romantics frequently write up as self-differing the disabled transcendental category which Kantian and post-Kantian speculation nevertheless cannot do without. Critics of Kleist have often pointed out that the famous passage in his letter to Wilhelmine von Zenge of 5th March 1801 where he describes his Kant crisis is far from a faithful rendering of Kant. Green spectacles, worn unknowingly, and undermining our knowledge of a world not entirely green, is no adequate critique of Kant's defence of epistemology in the ›Critique of Pure Reason‹. But the dramatization of uncertainty and scepticism in Kleist's literary work is a completely different matter. The experience of crisis described in Kleist's writings reflects upon its philosophical source and asks Kantian theory much more searching questions – penning, in effect, a phenomenology and its discontents – which *it*, philosophy, must become more sophisticated to be able to answer. This, arguably, is the *Sprachmagie* originally explicitly employed against Kant in the metacritiques of Herder and Hamann, and then later aggressively practised in post-Kantian art.

¹⁰) Carl Schmitt, famously, in ›Politische Romantik‹ (1919), had provided the locus classicus for attacks on Friedrich Schlegel, Adam Müller and others for an ironic unseriousness. Cassirer, though, points up the difference from Kleist, “der ihn im Innersten erschütterte” by something which “bedeutet für sie [Jena Romantics] nur die Gelegenheit, sich in freier Ironie über die Welt der Dinge und ihre angebliche Notwendigkeit zu erheben.” CASSIRER, *Idee* (cit. fn. 4), p. 181.

¹¹) See SØREN KIERKEGAARD, *The Concept of Irony*, with Continual Reference to Socrates, translated by HOWARD V. HONG and EDNA H. HONG, Princeton NJ 1989 and *Either/Or*, translated by DAVID F. SWENSON and LILLIAN MARVIN SWENSON, Princeton NJ 1971. BERNHARD GREINER, *Eine Art Wahnsinn* (cit. fn. 1), pp. 84–90, and passim.

2. *Beyond Dialectic*

Time is the form of inner sense for Kant, the form, that is “of the intuition of our self and inner state” (A33, B49). But as soon as Understanding grasps the object of inner sense, Schiller tells us in the first of his ›Aesthetic Letters‹, it destroys it.¹²⁾ According to Martin Hägglund, time is also the form of Derrida’s idea of *différance*.¹³⁾ Derrida, read with Hägglund’s emphasis, might provide a useful contrast to how the post-Kantians revised Kant and tried to solve the paradox of claiming familiarity with a subjectivity accessed through *apperception*, through *not* perceiving it. The project of Schiller’s ›Aesthetic Letters‹ is to salvage self-consciousness both from its cancellation by conceptual understanding and from the abstraction of the transcendental logic in which it is grounded. This intangible, after all, is also our self-acquaintance, the most familiar and continual of our apprehensions, isn’t it? We should have reams to say about it. The Kantian view (that since we cannot make the perceiving self the object of its own perceiving it is merely a logical requirement that experience be owned) does seem to beg the question of what self-consciousness is rather than provide an answer to it. However, time itself, the form in which we intuit ourselves, has traditionally seemed just as elusive, just as capable of its own deconstruction. Again, Augustine’s classic formulation (“What, therefore, is time? If nobody asks me, I know; if I want to explain it, I don’t”) describes the most common knowledge disappearing under philosophical examination.¹⁴⁾ I would like to compare the *Kant-Erlebnis* of post-Kantians who thought that, after Kant’s exposure of the way our lives are conditional upon something we cannot know, something radically absent from appearance, we lose our orientation altogether. Kleist’s short story, ›Der Findling‹, in which the unknown foundling boy is assumed to be assimilable to the foster family, and is not, and destroys it, could hardly be more pointed in its expression of this dilemma.

A present whose sense is dependent upon a future that is subject to the same uncertainties (itself future-dependent once present) has become disquietingly unpredictable. Rivers, the villain of Wordsworth’s tragedy ›The Borderers‹,

¹²⁾ “But it is precisely this technical form, whereby truth is made manifest to the intellect, which veils it again from our feeling. For alas! Intellect must first destroy the object of Inner Sense if it would make it its own.” (“Aber eben diese technische Form, welche die Wahrheit dem Verstande versichtbart, verbirgt sie wieder dem Gefühl; denn leider muss der Verstand das Objekt des innern Sinns erst zerstören, wenn er es sich zu eigen machen will.”) FRIEDRICH SCHILLER, *On the Aesthetic Education of Man in a Series of Letters*, translated by E. WILKINSON and L. A. WILLOUGHBY, bilingual edition, Oxford 1967, pp. 4f.

¹³⁾ MARTIN HÄGGLUND, *Radical Atheism: Derrida and the Time of Life*, Stanford, CA 2008, p. 16: “time is *différance*”, and see chapter one, “Autoimmunity of Time: Derrida and Kant”, pp. 13–50.

¹⁴⁾ AUGUSTINE, *Confessions*, Book 11, chapter 14.

is usually thought to be the vehicle of Wordsworth's critique of the ideas of William Godwin's ›An Enquiry Concerning Political Justice‹ of 1793. Rivers has an old man murdered by proxy in order to initiate another person, the murderer, into the unconditioned kind of experience Rivers has laid claim to. Wordsworth, initially enthusiastic, took from Godwin's treatise the idea that reason was the supreme organ of truth. Transcending local detail and circumstance, abstract reason, if followed meticulously, would necessarily lead to perfection. Wordsworth's later disillusion with this rational optimism and its remorseless utilitarianism, no doubt owing a lot to the subsequent Jacobin 'Terror' in France, grew from the neglect of human feeling in Godwin's argument, and the belief that truth referred in this way entirely to reason without any basis in affect would prove merciless. Truth, however, to be complete must be a notion with a place for sympathy and natural feeling. This, though, had been the conclusion that Godwin himself had reached, and his recent reading of David Hume is evident in the second edition of ›Political Justice‹ which appeared in 1795, two years later. Hume had thought that 'reason' without 'passion' could never be a motive for action. He also argued that our construction of the external world, our basic epistemology, was founded not on reason alone, but on the power of imagination to generate ideas of objectivity from reflections on the frequency and recurrence of impressions which in themselves had no necessary relation to each other. When Wordsworth expresses his full disillusionment in his drama ›The Borderers‹, however, his Humean critique of Godwin's rational contempt for conventional sentiment, and his subsequent tempering of it by concessions to natural feeling, are far from explaining the force of his poetry. It is better glossed in another context, one in which he was not learned but appears, I am suggesting, as a kind of historical default – the *Kant-Krise*. Kleist, as Cassirer suggests, is perhaps unique in that he arrives at a new theoretical insight into the world, in and through which he conceived the fundamental direction ('Grundrichtung') his art was to take. But much post-Kantian art is, if less explicitly, a capitalization on the opportunities for writing to be charged with the philosophical licence Kant's thought had been unable to police.¹⁵) In Wordsworth's drama, Godwinian reason's departure from feeling has become the idea that if we (impossibly for Kant) adhered to *pure* reason, we would become an entirely different kind of creature.

Kant believed that we could only think that new existence; and if we did so, we could only think of it as benign. Its transcendence of ordinary feeling does

¹⁵) CASSIRER, *Idee* (cit. fn. 4), p. 175. Cassirer, p. 179, also provides a description of what I am calling a historical default when he writes that "Der transzendente Idealismus bildet auch an diesem Punkte die Grenzscheide der Zeiten und die Grenzscheide der Geister."

not necessarily promise brutality. In fact the ›Critique of Judgement‹ ensures that Kant's superhuman being for whom the sublime is not contra-purposive (who can actually use Nature as a schema for Reason) is *only* allowed to find it beautiful instead. Beauty for Kant, we have seen, is the pleasure taken in a non-coercive contract between our faculties and nature. They were, it turns out, made for each other. That is the only alternative. So one can only break from Kantian orthodoxy by postulating a character actively antagonistic to such a settlement. Again, Kant would argue that, as a matter of logic, such a creature would simply be incapable of experience; and without experience, it would have nothing to be the subject of. But such a creature is the possibility Wordsworth imagines: someone who, stepping outside the jurisdiction of Kant's transcendental logic, completely disorients the rest of us. This idea, it seems to me, is not to be understood in relation to Godwin whom, as Stephen Gill says, Wordsworth is 'grossly simplifying', but to a different kind of economy of thought.¹⁶⁾

What, then, is at stake is a kind of 'greatness', not the evils of abstract reason. The new area of self-definition into which Rivers wanders is totally free of conceptual and ethical prescription and so is also totally arbitrary. It is sustained solely by its rhetoric. The 'purer element' in which he exists, 'Beyond the visible barriers of the world' exceeds the regulative influence on us of reason which Kant believes produces moral imperatives. The 'practical experiments' Rivers undertakes in this condition are not intentionally brutal, they are just a category mistake, an attempt to claim the authority to match a world beyond phenomena to the phenomenal world we experience. We therefore never get the 'purer element' intended, and can only see the actions of an 'unfeeling empiric'. It is like Penthesilea's love for Achilles, so extraordinary, "recht vom Herzen", that, quite out of her control, it produces dismemberment, as famously *Küsse* turn into *Bisse*, explicable to herself only as rhyme not as meaning, "Das reimt sich".¹⁷⁾ Here, indeed, the words take the lead. Rivers' murderous 'greatness' is more like that, rhymes with Penthesilea if you like, and is much less explicable as a chastisement of the rationalist ambitions of Godwin's philosophy. If we belong to a category of being we cannot make sense of, it may not be enough to manage this discovery by critiquing attempts to make sense of it. We need to go beyond Kant's dialectic; we need to be able to dispense with Kant's *de jure* assumption that what is outside our understanding does not invalidate our understanding, and insofar as it influences our behaviour is moral. For it may

¹⁶⁾ STEPHEN GILL, *William Wordsworth: A Life*, Oxford 1989, p. 114.

¹⁷⁾ HEINRICH VON KLEIST, *Werke und Briefe*, ed. by SIEGFRIED STRELLER in collaboration with PETER GOLDAMMER, WOLFGANG BARTHEL, ANITA GOLZ, and RUDOLPH LOCH, 4 vols., Berlin, Weimar 1978, Penthesilea Act 24, 3. 118.

de facto impose itself, and we can only imagine what may ensue – and write about it.

Investigating scepticism in ›The Claims of Reason‹, Stanley Cavell praises Wittgenstein for never underestimating “the power of the motive to reject the human: nothing could be more human.” This human inhuman sits outside the phenomena | noumena opposition, as it sits “outside language games”.¹⁸⁾ For in getting outside of ourselves, we simply re-enter ourselves by another door. Wordsworth and Kleist emphasize that we never really understood the extent to what we might be personally responsible for, of what we might be attributable to our agency. Correlatively, we never understand when we’ve made ourselves into something truly different from what we were before. Philosophy, or the attempt to know this fact, undoes itself in the process. This, arguably, is what post-Kantian philosophy understands, and why its insight has to be conveyed in discourses ostensibly other than philosophy, such as literature. But this literature is not a ‘literary absolute’ in the reassuring idiom of Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy, a servant of philosophy. It is more like Alain Badiou’s idea of the ‘inaesthetic’: an art whose literature (Mallarméan) can render the event with a facility that dissolves defining philosophical oppositions between individual and universal, empiricism and Platonic idealism. Its significance is to register the passage of ideals different from those which might be put to any philosophical use.¹⁹⁾

In his writings on post-Kantianism and Romanticism, Stanley Cavell often emphasizes the expression of a “craving for exemption from human nature”, the “breaking of attunement” the consequences of the irreducible scepticism he analyses at length in ›The Claims of Reason‹.²⁰⁾ But, as with Scepticism, what is at stake is another way of belonging to the world and to ourselves. This contrariness will always be at odds with knowledge and morality; yet, as an experience which will not be gainsaid, “the *denial* of the human is essential to what we think of *as* the human”.²¹⁾ To base everything on this might seem perverse. Kleist’s point (explicitly) and Wordsworth’s (by implication), I suggest, is that Kant makes possible this thought – by denying our knowledge of things in themselves and by, comparably, taking self-consciousness out of the realm of what we can know – and leaves us to cope with it, and to cope with it with-

¹⁸⁾ STANLEY CAVELL, *The Claims of Reason*, Oxford 1982, p. 207.

¹⁹⁾ PHILIPPE LACOUÉ-LABARTHE and JEAN-LUC NANCY, *The Literary Absolute*, translated by PHILIP BARNARD and CHERYL LESTER, New York 1988, and ALAIN BADIOU, *Handbook of Inaesthetics*, translated by ALBERTO TOSCANO, Stanford, CA 2005.

²⁰⁾ His main points are summarized in STANLEY CAVELL, *In Quest of the Ordinary: Texts of Recovery*, in: *Romanticism and Contemporary Criticism*, ed. by MORRIS EAVES and MICHAEL FISCHER, Ithaca, London 1986, pp. 183–241.

²¹⁾ CAVELL, *Quest* (cit. fn. 20), pp. 184f.

out resources. Since he has ruled out of court philosophically the experience of what this thought is about, he need not worry about its convincing literary expression. It cannot be an experience, this experience, he says in effect. Arguably, the starting point for much of philosophy after Kant up to Wittgenstein is concerned with what Kant's philosophy shows but cannot say.

Post-Kantianism explains Romantic writing's preoccupation with self-dramatizations which appear excessive. At first Rivers and Penthesilea may appear in line with the Kantian *sublime*. In fact they return us to a phenomenology which should be domestic but now is apprehended as foreign, our inhuman human – with the rider that the difference between the two is getting more and more difficult to maintain. This is different from the psychoanalytic difference between the Unconscious and the conscious mind, where the bringing to consciousness of the Unconscious is assumed to be a benign, remedial, humanising activity in which the Unconscious is civilised by the consciousness, rather like Kant's notion of a sublime replaced by higher beauty apprehended by a superhuman creature. The unconscious can only be constructed retrospectively, from a state of consciousness it does not threaten to replace with a new human character. Turning the sublime into the beautiful re-establishes our human character, albeit at what Schelling and Friedrich Schlegel would call a higher Power (*Potenz*). Wordsworth declares his endeavour to foster “the mind's *excursive* power [...] [to] build up the Being that we are”. If the new and benign authority he wants for the rhetoric of *The Excursion* is to be successfully achieved, though, then the threat of Rivers will have to be reduced to an episode of sublimity within a wider domestication of the inhuman human. Rivers' 'greatness' is to be outdone by the apotheoses of characters relentlessly related throughout Wordsworth's poem, the individual details of their stories increasingly not being subsumed under Wordsworth's general, philosophical-sounding categories, such as “the mighty stream of tendency” or “the procession of our fate, howe'er | Sad or disturbed”.²²⁾

3. *Staging the Crisis*

Rüdiger Görner's insistence on 'Grace' as a key category to understanding Kleist's dramatic worlds, means that Kleist's readers are asked to return to Kant's divide between appearance and reality.²³⁾ We should try to see violent and graceful exceptions to their harmonious interaction not as things we might decide

²²⁾ WILLIAM WORDSWORTH, *The Excursion* (1814), in: W. W., *The Poems*, Vol. 2, edited by JOHN O. HAYDEN, Harmondsworth 1977, Book 4. 1263f., Book 9. 87, Book 4. 12f.

²³⁾ RÜDIGER GÖRNER, *Gewalt und Grazie: Heinrich von Kleists Poetik der Gegensätzlichkeit*, Heidelberg 2011. See especially Part Two, ch. 6, pp. 129–143.

upon, the option Kant rules out. Rather we should consider them as visitations, which, in the case of grace, we can only hope for or put ourselves in the way of – like the music of his short story ›Die Heilige Cäcilie oder die Gewalt der Musik‹, which turns power into an access of something greater than it. Thus blessed, we may well indeed show this higher potential gracefully; but, in an unsettling dialectic, this superiority may then converge on a violence whose curse is equally entitled to supply our noumenal credentials. Achilles beware! Did Kleist mistake madness for genius, as Friedrich Schlegel suggested, or had he made them reciprocally undo each other?²⁴) And did, therefore, Kleist scandalously expose the aesthetic vocation as being to show it is the aesthetic's own incapacity adequately to mediate or sublimate the unconditioned realm it had laid bare? He could do this not by a sublime recuperation of this failure – for how can the sublime rescue the failing sublime? – but only through the staging of crisis.²⁵)

Alternatives to a binary explanation of uncertainty modelled on the appearance-reality distinction are the stuff of postmodern reading that we are all at home with now. Look at the story of the Marquise von O. She is saved from the threat of violation from persons unknown by a known quantity who turns out to have embodied the same threat. She didn't know what she knew. The saviour she knew was, unknown to her, her violator. Her swoon in which her rescuer's rape of her takes place is surely symptomatic for Kleist of a general condition. In the Kant-crisis, in other words, not to know what we don't know is also not to know what we know. To say that her body knew or remembered what her intellect could not is a ceding of authority comparable to saying that our language directs our thoughts rather than vice-versa. Her body is the material articulation of what has escaped her power to know. And we shall see later that Kleist implies this comparison himself.²⁶) You can never be sure of phenomenological significance if it is the appearance of something about which you haven't a clue. You might as well advertise in the local newspaper for enlightenment, as the Marquise does. The bind here is puzzling, thoroughgoing and immensely productive for poetics and literature. Scepticism, as Stanley Cavell made it his

²⁴) *Krisenjahre der Frühromantik: Briefe aus dem Schlegelkreis*, edited by JOSEF KÖRNER, 3 Vols., Brunn 1937, II, p. 239: "Er hat also nicht bloß in Werken sondern auch im Leben Tollheit für Genie genommen und beyde verwechselt ..."

²⁵) See Ricarda Schmidt's summary of how Kleist is exercised by the fact "dass aber von einem universalen hermeneutischen Verdacht gegenüber allen Formen des Erkennens keine Rede sein kann"; and this problematic "allgemeine Wahrheit" is therefore expressed through the contradictory interpretations of ›Penthesilea‹ in modernity and over time generally. RICARDA SCHMIDT, *Weiblicher Sadismus, Wutwelt des Liebes-Urwalds, Geschlechtskampf, absolutes Gefühl: die Penthesilea-Rezeption in der Moderne*, in: BERND FISCHER and TIM MEHIGAN (eds.), *Heinrich von Kleist and Modernity*, Rochester, NY 2011, pp. 162f.

²⁶) BIRGIT R. ERDLÉ, *Literarische Epistemologie der Zeit: Lektüren zu Kant, Kleist, Heine und Werfel*, Paderborn 2015, pp. 79–81.

theme to point out (in this case learned from Eve Kosowski Sedgwick's reading of Henry James's short story 'The Beast in the Jungle'), lets us into an essentially human activity or dilemma. Typically we are in thrall to something – let's call it a future – which we don't know anything about. In fact we are so ignorant, or scepticism once in play is so pervasive, that we honestly can't even know that we are so dependent.²⁷⁾

This doubling is typical of Kleist. A young man in prison in Santiago called Jeronimo initiates the catastrophe of his own suicide only to be pre-empted by the disaster of an earthquake. He finds himself in a place of greater safety, a prison, clinging to the pillar on which he had wanted to hang himself. Self-harm becomes salvation, apparently in direct reversal of the tale of the Marquise von O, whose rescue was her undoing. But then the story returns us to the original catastrophe of unhappy lovers, Jeronimo and Josephhe, condemned to death for adultery, which had been displaced by the now graceful-looking catastrophe of the earthquake. Muddle supervenes, and the pair saved by the earthquake are now murdered by those blaming them for the earthquake. So their salvation turns out to have been the cause of their death, analogously to the wrong visited on the Marquise after all. At the end, mere survival of catastrophe is the only happiness, without benefit of moral or any other kind of justification at all: "so war es ihm fast, als müßt er sich freuen."²⁸⁾ It just doesn't get any better, or worse. Once outside our normal parameters, anything can be explained by anything.

Cavell thinks that Wittgenstein solves the Kant-crisis. He shows that it makes no sense to postulate some reality with which our shared understanding or language is incommensurate but on which it is dependent. The so-called reality just drops out of philosophical consideration. But Cavell does appear to concede that we can *experience* thinking this way, false philosophically but recognizable existentially.²⁹⁾ By contrast, Hegel's contemporary solution to the Kant-crisis – by making the thing in itself the outward edge of phenomenology, a viewpoint from which the world may appear inverted but still the same – has no time for thinking the Kant-crisis as anything other than an experience which can be displaced by a higher state of understanding, the advance of reason beyond this contradiction to a more coherent stage of its progress.³⁰⁾

²⁷⁾ See STANLEY CAVELL, *Contesting Tears*, Chicago, London 1996, pp. 151–164.

²⁸⁾ HEINRICH VON KLEIST, *Werke und Briefe* (cit. fn. 17), 3, 174.

²⁹⁾ CAVELL, *In Quest of the Ordinary* (cit. fn. 20), p. 197: "The dissatisfaction with one's human powers of expression produces a sense that words, to reveal the world, must carry more deeply than our agreements or attunements in criteria will negotiate."

³⁰⁾ G. W. F. HEGEL, *Phänomenologie des Geistes*, A3, "Kraft und Verstand: Erscheinung und übersinnliche Welt", in: G. W. F. H., *Werke*, edited by EVA MOLDAUER and KARL MARKUS MICHEL, 20 vols., Frankfurt/M 1986, 3, pp. 107–137.

But for Kleist, the experience has its own validity outside the philosophical dilemma which may have triggered it, and the story it tells can be corrected by but never be effaced or rendered redundant by philosophy. Such writing's tolerance of contradiction sets an example of inclusiveness for a philosophy normally obliged to correct or rule out of court the conundrums which are the staple of Kleistian narrative. For Kleist, the experience related can remain unresolved, and, in fact, that may be its most salient characteristic. Again, as Werner Hamacher argues in his essay on Kleist's story, only literary resourcefulness can attempt meaningful expression of a Kantian philosophy in crisis.³¹⁾

In ›The Duel‹ (›Der Zweikampf‹), one of Kleist's most extreme examples, everyone is right and wrong at the same time. Count Jakob is right to think that he has slept with Lady Littegard who is equally right to think that he has not. She has, it turns out, been impersonated. Kleist seems to satirise Shakespeare's use of the bed-trick (recalling ›All's Well that Ends Well‹ more than ›Measure for Measure‹) rather than imitate it. Here it makes everything go badly not well. The uncanny charge to this story, though, is to suggest that we are not persons apart from our impersonations. How on earth can we get hold of this authentic personality other than through our aliases? We would be grasping, as Novalis said in his ›Fichte-Studien‹, at "a handful of darkness".³²⁾ The desire for authenticity, though, is ineliminable, and that intangible obscurity is often what Kleist's characters find themselves snatching at. This quest can be one for grace, or it can be murderous, as Penthesilea devours Achilles to find the truth she has fallen in love with.

God's judgement in allowing the Count to defeat the champion of the slandering Lady Littegard is right because he lets the Count win; but God then rightly lets her elected champion, her *chosen* impersonation, the Chamberlain Friedrich, win too. The Count perishes from the long drawn out effects of a superficial wound and her champion, Friedrich, adjudged the loser because he had apparently suffered mortal wounds, recovers, and so ultimately wins the duel he had lost – last man standing. This ambiguous rectitude is possible because Count Jakob is actually being punished for another crime, for having murdered his brother. God's will is the stand-in for the reality about which we supposedly know things but whose circumscription of our knowledge and the

³¹⁾ WERNER HAMACHER, Das Beben der Darstellung, in: Positionen der Literaturwissenschaft: Acht Modellanalysen am Beispiel von Kleists ›Das Erdbeben in Chili‹, ed. by DAVID WELLBERY, Munich 1985, pp. 149–173. And in: Kleists Kritik der Urteilskraft: Zum Erhabenen in ›Das Erdbeben in Chili‹, in: Heinrich Kleist und die Aufklärung, ed. by TIM MEHIGAN, Rochester, NY 2000, pp. 46–57. DAVID ROBERTS elaborates on Hamacher, interpreting Kleist's ›Das Erdbeben in Chili‹ "als eine narrative *Kritik der Urteilskraft*".

³²⁾ Novalis Schriften: die Werke Friedrich von Hardenbergs, ed. by PAUL KLUCKHOHN and RICHARD SAMUEL, 3 vols., Stuttgart 1968, 2. 106 (Fichte-Studien).

evidence we adduce to justify it renders that knowledge arbitrary. The presiding Emperor does not see the way duel leads to dual, *Zweikampf* to *Zweideutigkeit*, and is about to have the slanderous couple executed before all is revealed. We are left feeling that if our knowledge is knowledge of what remains unknowable then we are always ignorant. All is finally explained, yes, but on the way there the best image of our attempts to know things looks like the reading of Jakob's unsigned confessional note! We can know things only "if it is God's will", as the emperor concludes.³³⁾

›Der Zerbrochene Krug‹ (›The Broken Jug‹) sees the comic rather than tragic possibilities here, caught in Frau Marthe's riposte to the Assessor Walter when he confidently claims that "he can know | All that we need to know to make a judgement." She replies: "How much you need to know to make a judgement | I do not know and will not seek to know | But what I know's this: to bring an action | I must be allowed to *tell* you what about."³⁴⁾ The story told is everything, and how persuasively you can tell it. Knowledge is closer to arbitration than reportage, and arbitration is inescapably close to the arbitrary just as in German, *Willkürlich*, or 'arbitrary' seems unavoidably close to the opposite of random, or the assertion of will. We are back to the idea of reality as an unsigned note, what Eve calls Heaven's "wunderbare Fügung" ("strange determining/coincidence"?).³⁵⁾

In ›Das Bettelweib von Locarno‹, the lack of signature is even more apparent. No one has signed off in a recognizable way for what we cannot know our knowledge to represent. The loss of causal explanation does not exactly produce antinomianism in its place, but a self-confessedly mysterious writing is the best simulacrum for the unattributable story it describes. The story is of a wrong done to an old beggar-woman who is evicted from the place in which she has kindly been allowed to rest. The returning master of the house orders her to move and after retiring she expires. Subsequently she haunts the room, the sounds of her agonised efforts to move and final disintegration clearly heard by all. But, crucially, no one seems to recognize the haunting as by her. We the readers do, the characters do not. They don't know the title of the story in which they are appearing! It is as if once the door on the supernatural has been opened, the logic of reflection by which natural experience, pace Kant, reflects back to us our sense of the subject capable of having that experience, is disabled.

³³⁾ HEINRICH VON KLEIST, *Werke und Briefe* (cit. fn. 17), 3. 288.

³⁴⁾ I am using David Constantine's translation in HEINRICH VON KLEIST, *Selected Writings*, Indianapolis 2004, Scene 7, pp. 26f. Cf. *Werke und Briefe* (cit. fn. 17), I. 262. "Wieviel ihr brauchen möget, hier zu richten, | Das weiß ich nicht, und untersuch es nicht; | Das aber weiß ich, daß ich, um zu klagen, | Muß vor euch sagen dürfen, über was."

³⁵⁾ CONSTANTINE, *Kleist* (cit. fn. 34): Scene 8, p. 42; KLEIST, *Werke und Briefe* (cit. fn. 17), I. 280.

Outside these constitutive boundaries, we lose all specifics and particulars. The terror is never explicitly defined or named, and what appears to result from it – total conflagration of the castle – is appropriately no more explicable. Reality is once more the unsigned note, purposive but without a purpose, inscrutable. The supernatural in this story does not reflect back to us a freedom from natural determination mirroring our own freedom, for that freedom would ground our moral responsibility while here it is precisely the man's abdication of moral responsibility – the unkindness done to the beggar-woman – which has opened up the metaphysical void. No reasons or causes apply; everything is contingent.

Kant's philosophy reworks Leibnizian optimism, eschewing Leibniz's optimistic believe in a pre-established harmony guaranteeing the coherence of our knowledge, but recasting that harmony as a procedural necessity for us to have any experience at all. Tim Mehigan's studies of Kleist and Kant are helpful here.³⁶⁾ Mehigan basically argues that the *Kant-Krise* reacts to a residual Leibnizian optimism in Kant. Subsequently, though, Kleist writes as a modern, alert to the enigmatic openness of life abandoning a notion of "language as *adaequatio* for something more in line with systems theory (Luhmann)".³⁷⁾ The power of speech, rhetoric, and linguistic effect generally is a component of many of Kleist's plots, and also justified in his early essay ›Über die allmähliche Verfertigung der Gedanken beim Reden‹, which refuses a separation of thought and speech.³⁸⁾ Mehigan sketches a post-Kantian Kleist, one making an absolute of communication, so not a straightforward sceptic but someone who appreciates that if language produces only language, then changes in its currently integrated genres are bound to appear potentially catastrophic. Mehigan, drawing on recent Kleist criticism, argues that this comes from the phenomenology of language-led thought: when our language inspires us and then thinks for us, the experience feels like being ruled by 'chance and subjectivity', by the random association of ideas, while in fact it is the grammar of reality, 'a systematic operation', the force of historical change which is at work. Kleist's chosen example of Mirabeau's epochal remarks at the *Assemblée Nationale* to the Marquis de Dreux-Brézé, grand master of ceremonies, suggests, that Mirabeau's words fetch their sense out of an as yet unrealised future.³⁹⁾ This is Kleist's linguistic solution to the inaccessibility of the thing-in-itself: a self-sufficiency of language whose impersonality grants us an articulate perspective on what we cannot say. It is also his solution to the unpredictability of politics in a revolutionary age. Such showing, though, has the potential to confound

³⁶⁾ TIM MEHIGAN, *Heinrich von Kleist: Writing after Kant*, Rochester, NY 2011.

³⁷⁾ See *ibid.*, p. 170.

³⁸⁾ KLEIST, *Werke und Briefe* (cit. fn. 17), 3. 453–459.

³⁹⁾ MEHIGAN, *Kleist* (cit. fn. 36), pp. 178f.; KLEIST, *Werke und Briefe* (cit. fn. 17), 3. 454–456.

basic assumptions of what is coherent – such as the idea that we always say what we mean, what we intend, what we purpose.⁴⁰) For Lukács, the problem in reading Kleist was to reconcile his ‘superb literary concretization’ of apparent decadence with his Junkerism. The *Kant-Krise* showed the reactionary Prussian unable to countenance the progressive core of Kantian *Kritik*. However, Mirabeau’s example appeals to Kleist, argues Andreas Gailus, because it shows “the historical eventfulness of his own speech”.⁴¹) Although it is as the creator of poetic speech, as Lukács concedes, that Kleist is to be taken most seriously, Lukács criticizes ›Penthesilea‹ for its avoidance of social mediation in its presentation of passion. (Penthesilea’s Amazons are symptomatically ‘exotic’, standing apart from the realistic drive Lukács values.) But in reducing it to the expression of “the self-contained and solitary soul of Kleist”, Lukács inadvertently also describes the confusion of the Kantian self, undone by *Kant’s* preservation of a realist dimension to his philosophy through the unknowable thing-in-itself.⁴²) Kleist’s representation of historical agency follows from this, rather than being out of line with it.

4. English Comparisons

Let me finish with one of the most spectacular disagreements amongst the English Romantic poets, the one between Coleridge and Wordsworth over the latter’s ›Ode: Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood‹. There are many personal reasons for the friction, but Coleridge’s objections find their main expression in a book, ›Biographia Literaria‹, written to settle a methodological quarrel, a poetological difference over the philosophical nature of poetry. In the context of my essay here, though, we might say that their dispute can also outline the features of what I have been calling the Kant crisis. Wordsworth is closer to Kleist, and Coleridge is troubled by Wordsworth’s Kleistian openness to the losses incurred to present experience as a result of preserving an unconditioned source of our aboriginal humanity –

⁴⁰) ANDREAS GAILUS, *Passions of the Sign: Revolution and Language in Kant, Goethe and Kleist*, Baltimore 2006, p. 148. Relevant for me is that Andreas Gailus can read Kleist’s Mirabeau anecdote as the collapse of performativity into grammarology, via, once more, the constitutive (Derridaean this time) power of language. Cf. *ibid.*, p. 14: “Kleist’s anecdote lays open a constitutive feature of language. Every sign incorporates in its structure the energetic cycles of its own production. Every sign is performative with respect both to its past and to its future; it is the residue of its own performative history.”

⁴¹) *Ibid.*, p. 14.

⁴²) GEORG LUKÁCS, *German Realists in the Nineteenth Century*, translated by JEREMY GAINES and PAUL KEAST, with an Introduction by RODNEY LIVINGSTONE, Cambridge, Mass. 1993, pp. 18–20, 32, *passim*.

Not in entire forgetfulness,
 And not in utter nakedness,
 But trailing clouds of glory do we come
 From God who is our home [...] ⁴³⁾

Wordsworth can only describe our variable sense of this extra-phenomenal lineage. This unknowable immortality is intimated in a vocabulary of retrospect, diminishment and loss. Making what use of Plato's myth he can "as a poet", ⁴⁴⁾ Wordsworth figures our immortality as something antenatal rather than post mortem; something, therefore, whose *fading* grandeur, as we grow older, is best testimony to its *original* grandeur. The child, the character closest to that primordial state can remember, as in Plato's anamnesis, but not systematically. His philosophical understanding of what he was is perceptual, grasped in the way the brightness of nature is pristine because it is "apparelled in celestial light", in reflected 'glory' that now has passed away. The child's experience of nature is irradiated by his antenatal experience, which projects on to nature a "vision splendid". He seems momentarily to corroborate Coleridge's view of nature in his reply to the Ode, 'Dejection: An Ode', "Ours is her wedding garment, ours her shroud". This is our "second nature", as James Chandler put it, the cultural creativity as natural to us as biological growth. ⁴⁵⁾ In fact without culture, where would we be? Back in an impossibly unmediated, graceless sensibility, the stuff of Penthesilea. Wordsworth does not go that far, or sound Penthesilea's potential violence, but he does raise "his song of thanks" to culture as a mourning for an aboriginal state, not an elegy for the infantile existence which is closest to it but

those obstinate questionings
 Of sense and outward things,
 Fallings from us, vanishings;
 Blank misgivings of a Creature
 Moving about in worlds not realized,
 High instincts, before which our mortal Nature
 Did tremble like a guilty Thing surprised [...] ⁴⁶⁾

Altogether this is a scene of loss as much as promise, of depletion as much as Coleridge's source of celebration, benediction and all the positives of religious institutional life. For in Wordsworth's poem, like the ghost of Hamlet's father, we tremble on the edge of a supernatural vocation, or Purgatorial chastening as if in Penthesilea's gaze after she has devoured her lover.

⁴³⁾ WORDSWORTH, *The Poems* (cit. fn. 22), I. 525.

⁴⁴⁾ *Ibid.*, I. 179.

⁴⁵⁾ JAMES CHANDLER, *Wordsworth's Second Nature: A Study of the Poetry and Politics*, Chicago 1984.

⁴⁶⁾ WORDSWORTH, *The Poems* (cit. fn. 22), I. 528.

And this is the point at which Coleridge fundamentally objects. He resents the polarity of an inauthentic life and an unspecific, unconditioned vocation. Wordsworth certainly reaches a compromise, one in which “primal sympathy” is reconstituted in a nature still founded on mourning, on grief for the loss it stands for.

To me the meanest flower that blows can give
Thoughts that do often lie too deep for tears.⁴⁷⁾

But these intimations of immortality which nature gives us appear even *beyond* emotional response. Coleridge, on the other hand, is Christian, or uses a Christian theological framework for philosophy as does the Schelling of the ›Freiheitsschrift‹. Poetic speculation of the Ode’s kind is excessive. It advances, hubristically, beyond being a secondary repetition of God’s original act of creation. It bids to undo our God-given dispensation to evoke an immediate intimacy, one necessarily beyond our mortal lot, before rather than after it, but equally ‘outside language games’ for Coleridge. It undoes what it works with and produces a kind of chaos rather than what it should – the necessary proof of God’s harmony with our purposes, his identity or Incarnation in our fate, or a Christianizing of Kant’s transcendental dialectic.

For Coleridge, when Wordsworth’s language is about what it cannot know it becomes nonsensical rather than founding a new *sensus communis*, which for him would be religious. Hence Wordsworth’s strange commendation of a six-year old child as “best philosopher [...] Mighty Prophet! Seer blest!”⁴⁸⁾ If philosophers become children, literally not parabolically, anything, it seems to Coleridge, the ‘meanest’ thing, can stand for the numinous; we confront a democracy of poetic subject-matter indistinguishable from the arbitrariness of the world to which Kleist’s characters submit. Coleridge usually called this scenario pantheistic, and the *Pantheismusstreit*, starting with Lessing and Mendelssohn, has perhaps been allowed to overshadow the closer *Kant-Krise* surely more pressing for someone who had described in such detail his conversion to Kantianism from Empiricism, and who, like any post-Kantian, was then condemned to spend the rest of his life managing the consequences!

⁴⁷⁾ Ibid., The Poems (cit. fn. 22), I. 529.

⁴⁸⁾ Ibid., I. 527.