

Chapter One

Kleist's *Erzählungen* *The Crisis of Meaning*

THE DEATH OF TRUTH

In March 1801 Kleist narrates the story of the death of truth to Wilhelmine von Zenge, his fiancée. The story he tells is not an allegorical death-bed scene. “Truth” does not figure as one of the characters, and there are no last words—sanctioned by impending death—that can be bequeathed to the mourning witness. The scene is framed by the public space of a silent grave, and it is precisely this silence of the aftermath that Kleist attempts to articulate in his letter to Wilhelmine:

Wir können nicht entscheiden, ob das, was wir Wahrheit nennen, wahrhaft Wahrheit ist, oder ob es uns nur so scheint. Ist das letzte, so *ist* die Wahrheit, die wir hier sammeln, nach dem Tode nicht mehr—und alles Bestreben, ein Eigentum sich zu erwerben, das uns auch in das Grab folgt, ist vergeblich—

We cannot decide whether that which we call truth truly is truth or whether it only appears to be such. If the latter is the case, then the truth, which we gather here, *is* no longer after death—and all attempts to obtain a “property” that might follow us into the grave are futile.¹

Kleist is attempting to describe his realization that there is no longer one Truth but many “subjective” truths, and this shift from the singular to many truths contributes to marking the scene of death. The inability of truth to lay claim to universality implies the loss of its immortality. In other words, Kleist does not so much stage the passage of an individual truth from life to death than the encounter of Truth with its own *mortality*.²

This strange reversal is not limited to the burial itself. It extends to the frame that narrates the event. Initially, it seems that the scene of death can be

told only by the mourning bystander. Death “experienced,” after all, defies its own representation. Nonetheless, the safe, marginal position that Kleist as narrator assumes, begins to be contaminated by the logic of his own account:

Ich hatte schon als Knabe (mich dünkt am Rhein durch eine Schrift von Wieland) mir den Gedanken ausgeeignet, daß die Vervollkommnung der Zweck der Schöpfung wäre. Ich glaubte, daß wir einst nach dem Tode von der Stufe der Vervollkommnung, die wir auf diesem Sterne erreichten, auf einem anderen weiter fortschreiten würden, und daß wir den Schatz von Wahrheiten, den wir hier sammelten, auch dort einst brauchen könnten. (KB, 633)

As a young boy (I believe, on the Rhine, through a work by Wieland), I had already worked out the thought that perfection was the purpose of creation. I believed that some day after death, [starting] from the stage of perfection we had reached on this star, we would develop on another, and [I believed] that the treasure of truths that we collected here would one day be useful there.

By *narrating* the death of Truth, Kleist is drawn to the realization that he himself experiences a form of death. The contamination that leads to his own symbolic death in this passage can be perceived especially clearly in the interplay of “sammeln” (the accumulation of treasure) and “folgen” (the treasure’s continued company in the grave). As long as Kleist had believed that truths could be accumulated, this accumulation helped him to grasp death as a *stage* in a sequence. That sequence could be extended beyond the traditional definition of life to include life after death. In short, the accumulation of knowledge was to guarantee the coherence of a self; collected knowledge was to ensure the homogenous quality of the individual as s/he progressed through time, even past death.³

Losing his belief in the possible accumulation of an immortal knowledge not only endangers the future; it does not only suggest that Kleist’s own death will be truly final. The crisis widens to include even the possibility of a meaningful sequence: so that Kleist is alienated even from his past, once he can no longer believe in a continuous quest that could link his young self as “Knabe” with an older, progressing one. He witnesses the loss of a thread that guarantees both his growth and his coherence, and so finds himself banished to the isolation of the present.

What can be the response to such a crisis, especially when the act of writing, formerly calculated to lead to increased wealth of knowledge (Kleist uses the word *reich* [KB, 505]) as well as *Bildung*, is radically undermined, because even the possibility of progress is deflated? Kleist’s first response is paralysis. His will to read or to write is annihilated by nausea, and he equates his experience

of a present, isolated in time, with suicide ["eine Verirrung . . . die vielleicht unwiderruflich wäre" (KB, 635) ("an aberration . . . that might perhaps be irrevocable")]. This irreversible act could equally well signify a rupture with Wilhelmine as suicide.

Still, there is a second alternative that he opposes to his brooding, to the stasis of pure reflection. In the same letter that dramatizes his crisis, Kleist asks Wilhelmine to allow him to travel, in order to replace the temporal deadlock with, at least, spatial displacement.

Ich müßte, wenn ich zu Hause bliebe, die Hände in den Schoß legen, und denken. So will ich lieber spazieren gehen, und denken. Die Bewegung auf der Reise wird mir zuträglicher sein, als dieses Brüten auf einem Flecke. Ist es eine Verirrung, so läßt sie sich vergüten, und schützt mich vor einer andern, die vielleicht unwiderruflich wäre. (KB, 635)

If I stayed at home, I would lay my hands in my lap and think. So, I prefer to go for a walk and to think. The movement on the trip will be more beneficial to me as opposed to brooding in one spot. If this is only an aberration, it can be redressed—and it protects me from another [error] that might be irrevocable.

With this temporary solution it might seem that Kleist overcomes his own death, that he simply replaces his temporal stasis with continuous movement through space. The spectre of death refuses to be banished, however, from his experience of traveling. The voyage he selects is an aimless wandering, and this choice seems to mirror his earlier realization that no meaning or coherence can be attributed to sequence. His initial disillusionment with progress is reaffirmed, in that his voyages remain ramblings, ungoverned by any organizing principle. More seriously: Kleist's travels seem to precipitate him into encounters with death, so that twice within a few months of his letter describing his disillusion with truth he is almost killed.

Although both events—the threat of being crushed by a wagon or drowning in a river—seem, on the surface, rather different experiences (KB, 666, 670), certain similarities are difficult to ignore. In the first experience Kleist finds himself being dragged at top speed ["spornstreichs"] through the town of Butzbach. Here the unbridled motion of the horses obliterates Kleist's will. What makes the experience especially upsetting, however, is the fact that the wild, directionless movement is brought about by a donkey's braying ["Eselsgeschrei"]. What appears to matter most, then, is not death but the arbitrary banality of the existence, not to mention the loss of control over the circumstances bringing it about.

The second brush with death occurs on the Rhine during a sudden storm that threatens to capsize Kleist, as he travels to Köln. Here, the concrete details of a watery death and of asphyxiation are swiftly glided over in Kleist's description; he quickly stresses that what matters is another kind of death—an abstract one:

Ein jeder klammerte sich alle anderen vergessend an einen Balken an, ich selbst *mich* zu halten—Ach, es ist nichts ekelhafter, als diese Furcht vor dem Tode . . . Wer es [das Leben] mit Sorgfalt liebt, moralisch tot ist er schon, denn seine höchste Lebenskraft, nämlich es opfern zu können, modert, indessen er es pflegt. Und doch, o wie unbegreiflich ist der Wille, der über uns waltet. (KB, 670)

Each one—forgetting everyone else—clung to a beam, even I to hold *myself*—Oh, there is nothing more nauseating than this fear of death. . . . Whoever loves it [life] with care, is already morally dead, since his highest life force, that is, to be able to sacrifice it, rots, while he nurtures it [life]. And yet, oh how incomprehensible is the will that reigns over us.

As in the Butzbach episode it is the loss of his will (and the contradiction in his desires) that mirror the movement without direction. Hence, by transfer, involuntary *motion* itself becomes the visible marker of death. Kleist's personal narratives gloss over the concrete details of a death in order to stress that *no* meaning can be imposed—even in retrospect—on the sequence of events. Most shocking to Kleist, when he seems to stand face to face with death, is that no voice replaces the absurd, unmotivated braying of the donkey. His dark, earthly life is an end unto itself; no invisible order governs it.

Und an einem Eselsgeschrei hing ein Menschenleben? Und wenn es nun in dieser Minute geschlossen wäre, *darum* also hätte ich gelebt? Das hätte der Himmel mit diesem dunkeln, rätselhaften, irdischen Leben gewollt, und weiter nichts—? (KB, 666)

And a human life would depend on a donkey's braying? And if it had come to a close in this minute, *that* is why I would have lived? That is what the heavens would have wanted with this dark, enigmatic, earthly life—and otherwise nothing?

The narratives of death in Kleist's letters reinforce the sense of a break between any sequence of events and any order of truth, for no sequence is genuinely coherent. Ironically, the voyage which was a flight from living death,

reminds him of his crisis; the motion produced through traveling itself becomes the signifier of death, of his obsession with it.

Clearly, then, the subject of death is central to Kleist's works, and indeed, this chapter will investigate the implications of both of Kleist's insights: his recognition that the subjectivity of "truth" implies all truths' mortality. For him, there can be no universals or absolutes. His second insight—the association of empty progression with an at least metaphoric experience of death—will be especially significant in his narratives "Die Heilige Cäcilie" and "Michael Kohlhaas," as well as in his drama, "Prinz Friedrich von Homburg." But before these insights can be pursued further, let us briefly consider an equally important corollary to Kleist's obsession with death, and that is, *how* death is to be represented through language at all.

NARRATIVE ENACTMENTS OF DEATH

What are the implications of a reversal, where the "detour" or "digression"—generally associated by Freud with the extension of life⁴—becomes so contaminated that it begins to represent the memory of death? Kleist's biography tells us only that the voyage begun in 1801 ends with a double and symbolic suicide: in 1803 he writes, "Der Himmel weiß . . . wie gern ich einen Blutstropfen aus meinem Herzen für jeden Buchstaben eines Briefes gäbe, der so anfangen könnte: mein Gedicht ist fertig" (KB, 735) ["Heaven knows how gladly I would give one drop of blood from my heart for each character of a letter that could begin in the following manner: my poem is finished"]. Within three weeks, however, Kleist burns most of his recently written manuscript (*Robert Guiskard*) and writes his half-sister, Ulrike, that he intends to throw himself into the infinite grave of Napoleon's army—and the sea. One can even cite Kleist's decision in 1811 to kill himself to show that the end of the voyage for him must be death.

Troubling as both the 1803 and the 1811 resolutions are, they do not explain what stands between the despair of the unproductive poet of 1803 and his *Michael Kohlhaas*, begun in 1804. Again, that unproductiveness seemed motivated less by the (perhaps only temporary) infertility of a poetic imagination than by a more far-reaching ideological dilemma. The crisis, which had even conjured up the writer's death symbolically through his act of narrating death, shakes the fundamental structure of literary language. Once Kleist has equated the flight *from* death (stasis and suicide) with the flight *towards* death, he has abandoned the self-evident metaphor of specularly as the trope governing the traditional laws of representation. The crisis of his faith in *Bildung* brings about an even more troubling suspension of the conventional laws keeping mimesis in play.

Within the context of a theory of representation, the equation of sequence with death contradicts the more usual mimetic relation based on the principle of *adequatio*.⁵ In his book *Mimesis*, for instance, Erich Auerbach emphasizes that a binary structure is necessary to any mimetic construct.⁶ “Representation” assumes an outside referent and a textual mirroring process, even if the rules governing this imitation resist codification. Even such “nonobjective” referents as consciousness still can be captured, mimetically, through the mediation of the random detail of everyday life.

Kleist’s decision to represent death through its conventional opposite—movement—necessarily invalidates the more familiar logic of mirroring. Still, his response is hardly an arbitrary one. A traditional and masterful theory of representation makes no provision for limit-experiences, such as death, that are excluded from the sphere of everyday life. What, after all, *could* represent death adequately?

In a more philosophical context—in his comparison of the philosophy of death as it is set out by Heidegger and by Sartre—Henri Birault expresses most clearly the incompatibility of death and representation.

L’idée de rencontrer la mort en chemin est une fleur de rhétorique, une image de style, car au moment où la rencontre s’effectue, il n’y a déjà plus qu’un seul personnage. Reprise par Sartre de l’argument antique: si je suis là, c’est que je ne suis pas mort; quand la mort me surprend, je suis mort: il n’y a donc plus personne pour être l’interlocuteur de cette rencontre.⁷

The idea of meeting death along the way is a rhetorical flourish, a stylistic image. For the moment the meeting takes place, there is no longer but one single character. Repetition of the antique argument by Sartre: if I am there, that’s because I’m not dead; when death surprises me, I am dead: there is thus no longer anybody who could be the interlocutor of this meeting.

Even if Birault’s and, by implication, Sartre’s reflections on death are anachronistic to Kleist’s texts, the argument remains pertinent. From an empirical point of view, death can only be mirrored mimetically as silence, as a blank or, simply, as undifferentiation. Who is speaking, after all, when loss of life is being recorded?

To return to literary discourse: the effect of an obsession with death upon a writer’s rhetoric will expose itself most obviously in scenes intent upon capturing the moment when life ends. Narrative descriptions of death do occur quite frequently in all of Kleist’s short prose, not least in “Die Heilige Cäcilie oder die Gewalt der Musik” [Saint Cecile, or the Power/Violence of Music], written in 1810. Already the subtitle hints at a self-reflection that could highlight a connection between the unlikely pair: art and death. “Die Heilige

Cäcilie" marks a good place to begin in order to interpret a Kleistian "poetics of death," since the entire story is devoted to describing, then interpreting the spiritual and, finally, physical death of its main protagonists.

Three significant deaths take place in the story. One—that of the unknown "Oheim" [the uncle]—constitutes the accidental, unelaborated circumstance, which motivates the narrative. (It is because of the resulting inheritance that the main protagonists, four brothers, meet in Aachen at the time of the Catholic festival celebrating Saint Cecilia.) Their own, apparently simultaneous deaths are also described rather sketchily by an anonymous narrator:

[...]die Söhne aber starben, im späten Alter, eines heitern und vergnügten Todes, nachdem sie noch einmal, ihrer Gewohnheit gemäß, das gloria in excelsis abgesungen hatten.⁸

[...]the sons died, however, a bright and cheerful death at a ripe old age, after they had once again, as was their wont, sung the gloria in excelsis right through.

Similar to the death of Truth staged in Kleist's 1801 letter and to the poet's own empirical brushes with death, the actual description of the four brothers' end seems to cede to its rhetorical function in the text. If the Oheim's death set the story in motion, the brothers' death acts as a closure to the legend, setting a term to the transformation created by the miraculous, albeit violent, power of music.

Still, the representation of death is not quite unproblematic in this story. The narrator's description of the four brothers' loss of life as "heiter" [bright] and "vergnügt" [cheerful] creates a paradox for defining death in the text. Earlier, the punishment inflicted upon the brothers for their intention to reduce the cathedral of St. Cecilia to dust transformed them into "petrified stone." Their actions became silent and phantomlike, and the repeated reference to their barren ["öde"], cloisterlike life implies that a metaphorical death sentence is being documented in the text. What, indeed, can be both more alienating and deathlike than a ghostly ["geisterartig"] existence?

Sie [die Vorsteher] setzten hinzu: "daß die Jünglinge, seit nun schon sechs Jahren, dies geisterartige Leben führten; daß sie wenig schliefen und wenig genössen; daß kein Laut über ihre Lippen käme." (C, 220)

[The abbots] added that the youths had been leading this ghostly life for six years already; that they slept and enjoyed [ate] little; that no sound passed their lips.

The end of the legend—through its compressed reference to the joyful demise of the four brothers—functions much like the silent voice of Kleist's

own near-death. Even though the brothers are liberated by death, their deathly existence has contributed rhetorically to the contamination of the two terms, *life* and *death*. In short: the ending does not shed light, retrospectively, on the sequence of the brothers' experiences. It simply adds one more enigma to the many questions that structure the entire narrative.

Similarly, the third form of dying—Schwester Antonia's death, described in greater detail—far from marking the meaningful culmination of lived experiences, also contributes to the empty progression in the text, to the unsatisfied quest for truth. The abbess remarks:

Ja, Schwester Antonia würde ohnfehlbar selbst den Umstand, daß sie es nicht gewesen sei, die, auf so seltsame und befremdende Weise, auf dem Altan der Orgel erschien, bestätigt und bewahrheitet haben: wenn ihr gänzlich sinnberaubter Zustand erlaubt hätte, sie darum zu befragen, und die Kranke nicht noch am Abend desselben Tages, an dem Nervenfieber, an dem sie danieder lag, und welches früherhin gar nicht lebensgefährlich schien, verschieden wäre. (C, 227)

Yes, Sister Antonia would doubtless have confirmed and verified the circumstance that it was not she who had appeared on the organ balcony in such a strange and alienating manner, if her totally unconscious state had permitted her to be questioned and if the evening of that selfsame day, the sick woman had not succumbed to the nervous fever which she was suffering from and that had formerly not even appeared to be life-threatening.

The representation of Antonia's death is doubly metonymic. The word *verschneiden*, although traditionally associated with death, points euphemistically to the metaphor of separation and traveling (*Abschied*), rather than insisting on the silence and nothingness of the event. The voyage that is evoked by the effaced, literal meaning of the metaphor *verschneiden* (and by the logic of the euphemism) does not only reveal the deflection implicit to language. The slipping motion is pertinent to the narrative structure of "Die Heilige Cäcilie" as a whole.

First, the signifier denoting one character, "Antonia," itself reveals a certain instability. The nun is found in an unconscious ["sinnberaubt"] state, a condition that results possibly from the doubling of her identity. While the ill nun is being watched by one of her relatives, the congregation simultaneously perceives her slightly pale, taciturn double. This double's refusal to explain her own miraculous recovery and Antonia's immediate death (precipitated, it seems, by the phenomenon of being duplicated) constitutes—on the level of narrative structure—another example of metonymic sliding. The promise of a stable interpretation, of the theoretical capability to uncover the true meaning

of the occurrence, is split in two, leading to another quest. A new puzzle has been added to the initial, as yet unanswered, one. Antonia's death, far from acting as a locus of stable truth, only adds one more link to the chain of enigmas generated by the narrative.

The structure of this *Erzählung* bears the imprint of Kleist's crisis with the Bildungs model. It reinforces the impression that the existence of a sequence (and therefore of a continuous plot) cannot be equated with the unfolding of meaning. It is precisely the series of substitutions that contributes to the loss of meaning⁹ and that uncovers the impossibility, even the futility, of a causal explanation.

In "Die Heilige Cäcilie" the narrative perspective shifts six times, although these changes don't complement one another. They function as obscured points of view that only add *more* enigmas to the text. A rhetoric of "slippage" [*glissement*] governs the sequence of events with no one perspective adequately filling in the gaps opened up by other commentaries. The rhetoric of slippage organizes the text, reenacting the crisis, in which the production of stable meaning is undermined.

"Die Heilige Cäcilie" begins with a reference to the tale's historical context. We are in the era of a new, Lutheran order, which vows the destruction of the more traditional Catholic Church. The advocates of the Reformation, who begin as strong centers of intentionality, are the four principal characters. Although they are strangers to Aachen, the four brothers' destructive impulse [to pillage a nearby Church] acts as a magnet, attracting numerous young adherents to the new doctrine.

The centerpiece of the legend—the miraculous conversion of the four young men—destabilizes the introductory section. As soon as they hear an unidentified piece of religious music, all four suddenly abandon their plan and, from that day onwards until their death, lead a cloisterlike life. The mysteriously feminine power of music undermines the four men's force and intentionality, and, significantly, this transformation is represented as a moment of death:

Es regte sich, während der ganzen Darstellung, kein Odem in den Hallen und Bänken; besonders bei dem *salve regina* und noch mehr bei dem *gloria in excelsis*, war es, als ob die ganze Bevölkerung der Kirche tot sei. (C, 219)

During the entire representation, no breath stirred in the halls and pews; especially during the *salve regine* and even more during the *gloria in excelsis*, it seemed as if the entire population within the church was dead.

Music has the power to kill metaphorically, either by petrifying or by possessing the listener. The possession, moreover, is expressed through a complete

inversion of character. The four sons abandon their life-affirming nature in order to practice self-abnegation, and the culmination of this experience of being possessed (this death to the self) finds its expression in the four brothers being forced to repeat the melody of the mass at regular intervals. From the mouths of the four brothers the repetition of the melody—which had engulfed their identity—threatens to spill onto the external world; windows, supporting foundations of their building, even the “firmament” are shaken by their song. This moment is especially disturbing, since such a threat can blend the original destructive urge of the brothers and the violence of the music. It is hardly a coincidence that the word *Gewalt* (in the title) means both power and violence.

If loss of self is signified *through* Art (the singing) and also presented as a consequence of the music, how can the narrative explain the transformation? It is the four characters' mother who, by searching for her sons and their cure, structures the subsequent paragraphs. Her quest to discover the meaning of this transformation becomes the organizing principle of the text. Each of her four encounters—the unmediated presence of her insane sons; the discussion with Veit Gotthelf; the visit to the scene of her sons' spiritual death; and the final dialogue with the Abbess—repeats the quest for meaning, and reasserts the impossibility of such a reconstruction. Each explanation qualifies the preceding one, so that the event itself remains an absent center.

The displacement from scene to scene repeats the crisis of meaning. Both Gotthelf's and the Abbess's explanations begin under the sign of “Unbegreiflichkeit” [incomprehensibility]. The episode, they insist, eludes both the literal grasp and conceptualization (“der Begriff”). Gotthelf Veit begins by asserting the event's resistance to interpretation, only to end with the evocation of the insane asylum. His description focuses on the physicality of the rooms and walls of the asylum, so that the conjuring up of the physical building almost seems meant to deflect his anxiety. The brothers' repeated scenes of madness are contained, rhetorically at least, by the reference to the institution. The appeal to madness (and this is echoed by the narrator) supposedly is able to attribute an “inner” coherence to the affair (“innerer Zusammenhang der Sache,” C, 224).¹⁰

The signifier “madness” only displaces the crisis of meaning, however. It represents primarily the desire for a solution, for boundaries, instead of endless sliding, and it does not provide a lucid interpretation of the enigma. An alternative to the diagnosis of madness is the appeal to a divine (Catholic) truth, which could replace the opaque label of insanity. During her dialogue with the four brothers' mother, the Abbess explains:

Welcher Mittel er [Gott] sich dabei bedient, kann Euch, die Ihr eine Protestantin seid, gleichgültig sein: Ihr würdet auch das, was ich Euch darüber sagen könnte, schwerlich begreifen. Denn vernehmt, daß schlechterdings niemand weiß, wer eigentlich das Werk . . . da die

Bilderstürmerei über uns hereinbrechen sollte, ruhig auf dem Sitz der Orgel dirigiert habe. (C, 227)

Which methods [God] used, may remain indifferent to you, who are a Protestant. You would hardly understand what I could tell you about that. For hear that absolutely nobody knows who actually directed the work while sitting calmly on the organ bench . . . while the destruction [iconoclasm] was supposed to descend upon us.

A purely human account of a miracle, the Abbess asserts, can only lead to a conclusion of undecidability. Such an interpretation must submit to the limitations of Protestant subjectivity and, consequently, to the dead-end of "Unbegreiflichkeit" [incomprehensibility]. But through the appeal to divine grace, a logic based on "Mittel" (or pure human mediation) makes way for the miraculous figure of a saint's reincarnation. This stabilizing interpretation of the miracle is even supported by the Authority of the papal letter, where the spiritual force of Saint Cecilia is cited as the source of the miracle, which had saved the church. Most significantly, this image of resurrection can then be read as the key to solving all the enigmas in the narrative. The double existence of Antonia, the impact of the performance both on the performers and the audience, the immediate transformation of the brothers—all these elements become metaphors of a religious force and of God's purpose.

It is seductive to identify the Abbess's words as the story's stable center of meaning. Her account can obliterate the impression of an uncontrolled text, and this impression is especially strong in a work that seems to shift aimlessly by substituting one inadequate set of explanations for another. And yet, one must remember that the narrative appeal to different (subjective) opinions repeats iconically the enigmatic transformation of the brothers. So, the return to Catholic authority does not really manage to halt the endless slipping of the quest for an adequate explanation. There is a curious abundance of pastoral letters: the Abbess had previously had to call on the authority of the Archbishop of Trier, and the Archbishop's own certainty had, in turn, to be validated by the Pope. The Pope himself, we soon realize, also only stands in for a higher Authority, which would be *God's Word*.

The Catholic interpretation is unstable for another, even more compelling reason. The four brothers are the only visible signs of God's will—and yet, their integration into the Catholic order is interpreted as "madness" by the community. Even if the reader argues that the four have been punished with insanity for their misdeed, such a claim only succeeds in rendering innocuous the frightening proximity of Catholicism and madness.

The *mise en abyme* can also be rewritten as the contamination of the Catholic and Protestant positions. A traditionally Catholic interpretation can only appeal to a relation to truth that is mediated by the institution of the Church.

The four brothers may have abandoned the new theology, which claims that the individual's relation to God can be immediate. Still, in order to explain their reintegration into the Catholic faith, the brothers appeal, paradoxically, to their privileged, quite *subjective* knowledge. When accused of being insane, the brothers' response is a superior indifference:

Die Vorsteher schlossen mit der Versicherung: . . . daß sie [die jungen Männer], wenn man sie für verrückt erklärte, mitleidig die Achseln zuckten, und daß sie schon mehr als einmal geäußert hätten: wenn die gute Stadt Aachen wüßte, was sie, so würde dieselbe ihre Geschäfte bei Seite legen, und sich gleichfalls, zur Absingung des gloria, um das Kruzifix des Herrn niederlassen. (C, 220)

The abbots concluded with the affirmation . . . that they [the young men] shrugged their shoulders with pity when they were declared insane, and that they had expressed more than once: that if the good city of Aachen knew what they did, then the former would place its affairs aside and would also kneel down around the cross of the Lord to sing the gloria in its entirety.

Since their conversion is the only marker of the miracle, the irrepressible Protestant overtones of this change suggest that the Catholic explanation is not completely successful in imposing *one* code of values and meaning upon the story. Such an impression is only reinforced by the brothers' death, which is described as "heiter und vergnügt" [bright and cheerful], supporting the protagonists' own evaluation of their fate. Their death only contributes, then, to the confusion of the reader already perplexed by the conflicting interplay of various narrative perspectives.

The final narrative depiction of death only highlights the empty series of substitutions, which both structure the tale and undermine one another's finality. It is the empty progression of sequence—that ambiguous marker of death, which has implicitly unbalanced the (adequate) relation of the word to truth—that recurs insistently, and not only in "Die Heilige Cäcilie," as we shall see.

The dichotomy of Catholic and Protestant forms of truth in "Die Heilige Cäcilie" marks only one example of the epistemological dilemma underpinning Kleist's *Erzählungen* (short narratives).¹¹ What is presented as an unresolvable religious conflict—privileging no one position—can be detected equally well in the social antithesis of the revolutionary and the conservative positions. Even if, as in "Michael Kohlhaas," the confrontation between a "revolutionary" (Lutheran-based) and traditional (here: institutional) structure tends to undermine the more individualistic attitude (a stance, it seems, inherently more vulnerable to excess or madness), neither narrative—"Michael

Kohlhaas" or "Die Heilige Cäcilie"—is completely successful in reestablishing the primacy of stable, traditional, and enduring values.

The contamination of the two positions is impossible to avoid, as is apparent through the example of Luther's narrative function in "Michael Kohlhaas."¹² A brief summary might help here to throw the story's moral puzzle into relief. Upon travelling to Saxony with his horses, Kohlhaas, a relatively wealthy horse dealer, is mistreated by petty aristocrats in charge of levying tolls upon all travelling merchants. The narrative investigates Kohlhaas's increasingly violent claims for retribution, foregrounding him as a character who problematizes moral judgement; he is simultaneously the most righteous and the most terrible individual. Kohlhaas's insistence on his personal rights in the face of institutional corruption seems to place him firmly in Luther's camp. Surprisingly, that (of course fictional) character does not support Kohlhaas's attack on the institution. Still, even though Luther may urge Kohlhaas to submit to social order, to suffer injustice at the hands of the Law rather than to appropriate the role of an avenging angel, Luther's explicit conservatism does not transform him into a simple emblem of the institution. Luther, because he stands outside the political structure, takes up Kohlhaas's cause himself; he assumes, as it were, his position. The personal letter he writes on Kohlhaas's behalf counters the powerful letter of the Law, both by overtly attacking the Authority of the "Kurfürst" [Elector] and by deliberately redirecting (rewriting) the course of legal action:

Am anderen Morgen erließ Luther ein Sendschreiben an den Kurfürsten von Sachsen, worin er nach einem bitteren Seitenblick auf die seine Person umgebenden Herren Hinz und Kunz, Kämmerer und Mundschenk von Tronka, welche die Klage, wie allgemein bekannt war, untergeschlagen hatten, dem Herrn, mit der Freimütigkeit, die ihm eigen war, eröffnete, daß bei so ärgerlichen Umständen, nichts anderes zu tun übrig sei, als den Vorschlag des Roßhändlers anzunehmen, und ihm des Vorgefallenen wegen, zur Erneuerung seines Prozesses, Amnestie zu erteilen.¹³

The next morning, Luther issued a letter to the Elector of Saxonia, wherein, after [casting] a bitter glance at the men surrounding his person, Mr. Hinz and Kunz, Chamberlain and Cupbearer of Tronka, who had, as was generally known, suppressed the complaint, [Luther] disclosed to the [Elector] with the frankness that was particular to him, that under such annoying circumstances, nothing else could be done but—because of the events—to accept the suggestion of the horse dealer and to grant him amnesty until the review of his trial.

The effect of Luther's doctrines—both in "Michael Kohlhaas" and in "Die Heilige Cäcilie"—is quite ambivalent and helps to lay bare another manifesta-

tion of Kleist's troubling preoccupation with the coincidence of death and empty progression. Luther's duplicity, his double role as authority figure and insurrectionist, makes of him a particularly clear representative of the vacillation already noticed in "Die Heilige Cäcilie" and equally present in "Michael Kohlhaas." Because of his contribution to the text's undecidability—one that centers on how Kohlhaas can be both "der rechtschaffenste" [the most righteous] and "der entsetzlichste Mensch" [the most dreadful person]—Luther becomes one of the important figures to help explain the uneasy, endless series of substitutions that seem to characterize Kleist's narratives.

Luther's ambiguous role in the narrative seems especially pertinent, because his own work, *An den christlichen Adel deutscher Nation* [*To the Christian Nobility of the German Nation*], is reminiscent of the tone of Kohlhaas's mandates. Since both texts denounce the world through their appeal to Truth and Justice, Luther's self-justification and criticism of legal society is significant to our analysis of the crisis of Authority and meaning, so closely bound up with Kleist's obsession with death in his narratives—particularly as it is portrayed not only in "Die Heilige Cäcilie" but also especially in "Michael Kohlhaas."

The thrust of Luther's (historical) argument is aimed at equating the Pope with the Antichrist: in his letter Luther seems less concerned with modifying the religious hierarchy in Rome than with abolishing it completely. Luther justifies his appropriation of power on several grounds: as baptized Christians, all are equal; the different functions (*Ämter*) that priests, bishops, and the Pope assume are based on democratic choice and, therefore, cannot be considered absolute. Most compelling, however, is the reason Luther cites at the end of his letter:

Ich acht auch wohl, daß ich hoch gesungen hab', viel Dings für geben, das unmöglich wird angesehen, viel Stücke zu scharf angegriffen. Wie soll ich ihm aber thun? Ich bin es schuldig zu sagen. Könnt ich, so wollt ich auch also thun. Es ist mir lieber, die Welt zürne mit mir, denn Gott; man wird mir ja nicht mehr denn das Leben können nehmen.¹⁴

I do notice also that I have sung loudly, presented many things that will be considered impossible, attacked many aspects too sharply. How else should I act however? I am bound [indebted, guilty] to speak. If I could, I would also act this way. I prefer that the world be angry with me rather than God; one can do no more to me than to take my life.

For Luther denunciatory speech and writing is possible, precisely because the religious frame redefines the greatest threat to Man—death is replaced by the eternity of damnation. The religious frame supplies more; the threat of death (and, implicitly, of madness) can be repressed because Luther does not question

the equation of Scripture and divine will. Indeed, the written word becomes the new locus of God's Authority, and this mediation through Scripture makes unnecessary and corrupt any intervention of the religious hierarchy.

The significance of this shift is perceptible in many ways. It grounds Luther's own authority, by permitting him to perceive and then denounce the wrongs of the papal system. He attacks the Pope's monopoly of the Bible most vehemently, in particular, the Pope's appropriation of its interpretation. The papal law, prohibiting any personal readings of the Bible, is especially suspect according to Luther, because it suspends other Christians' ability to distinguish between right and wrong. Luther describes the importance of the Biblical text: "Wenn ich's nicht gelesen, wäre mir's unglaublich gewesen, daß der Teufel sollte zu Rom solche ungeschickte Dinge vorwenden und Anhang gewinnen"¹⁵ ["Had I not read it, it would seem incredible to me that the devil should propose so many inappropriate things in Rome and win followers"].

Luther does not simply quote heavily from the Bible; he even constructs the first part of his denunciation by drawing on a biblical example, by comparing the arbitrary proliferation of papal laws to the walls of Jericho. The parallel between the walls of Jericho and the Pope's own paper walls makes two conclusions immediately compelling: the Pope is opposed to God; and his weapons are ineffectual because they are only documents. The scene of confrontation between the Pope and Luther is, then, from the start a metaphorical one. It takes place between two writers.

The second, longer section of *An den christlichen Adel deutscher Nation* [*To the Christian Nobility of the German Nation*] is devoted to the enumeration of religious, educational, and social reforms. This discussion allows Luther to equate the misuse of Law (its excessive proliferation) with greed, leading him to affirm at one point that it is no longer the Pope who legislates in Rome but instead a personified greed.¹⁶ Each decision of the Pope, which introduces differences among Christians through the creation of saints, pilgrimages, or new religious orders, is unmasked by Luther as the desire to disrupt the uniformity of Christians in order to impose a logic of exchange and commerce onto the Christian world. This system of differences and substitutions, Luther argues, even threatens the status of language:

Es kann dir weder Engel noch Pabst so viel geben, als dir Gott in deiner Pfarrei giebt; ja er verführet dich von den göttlichen Gaben, die du kaufen muß, und giebt dir Blei um's Gold, Fell um's Fleisch, Schnur um den Beutel, Wachs um Honig, *Wort um's Gut, Buchstaben um den Geist*, wie du vor Augen siehst, und willst's dennoch nicht merken.¹⁷

Neither angels nor the Pope can give you as much as God gives you in your parish; indeed, he leads you astray from the divine gifts that you

must buy, and gives you lead for gold, fur for flesh, string for the bag, wax for honey, *words for the property [goods], letters for the spirit*, as you can see before your very eyes and still you do not want to notice it.

The disjunction of the word from the divine will is described through a language of finance, and a false exchange is the result of such a separation from God. The loss of the divine Spirit, indeed, of symbolic, in favor of metonymic, meaning seems to be the result of introducing laws common to the marketplace. Through the series of exchanges and substitutions only the valueless, meaningless letter remains. And although Luther carefully articulates that it is greed that has replaced the divine will as the foundation of papal law (thereby invalidating the Pope's prohibition), the confrontation he creates between two written laws already begins to be haunted by the spectre of endless exchange. By defining the danger of irresponsible law-giving as the series of escalating substitutions leading to the ever-increasing loss of value, he tacitly must admit the plurality of laws. The implication is: all written laws are potentially false. Luther may not problematize interpretation yet, because he does not here admit an involuntary difference between Scripture and the reading of Scripture. Still, once the equation between Scripture and interpretation can no longer be guaranteed, the replacement of one law by another can, theoretically, also no longer be controlled. Once again, a confrontation with death, with the death of meaning understood as empty progression, seems implicitly unavoidable.

The significance of the historical Luther to Kleist's poetics is especially visible in "Michael Kohlhaas." We have already noted Kleist's skepticism with the word and its conventional or fixed relation to meaning, an anxious skepticism that seemed to be generated by Kleist's confrontation with the loss of his former ideals, indeed with his own near-fatal brushes with death. Kleist's abstract experience of death was, of course, but a corollary of his discovery that even knowledge is mortal. This discovery, in turn, seems to influence Kleist's construction of his narratives, in particular, of "Die Heilige Cäcilie": the reader is effectively blocked from reconstructing *one* interpretation, since the text's meaning is divided up among several, conflicting perspectives.

In "Michael Kohlhaas" Kleist exploits the instability created by Luther's denunciation of the papal (false) Law in order to submit the Law of justice [and of writing] to a fundamental crisis. Most of the narrative is devoted to the dramatization of the written laws. Their description and subversion mark the central conflict of the *Erzählung*. Whereas, for Luther, the Bible and its writers had remained undefined and therefore seemed placed beyond the manipulation of human forces, Kleist is careful to unmask the written Law as a human construct. This is not only perceptible if we examine the familiar beginnings of the narrative. Kohlhaas's familiarity with the laws of "die landesherrlichen Verfü-

gungen" (MK, 10)]; his possession of written proof that he has been wronged; and his formal complaint, which carefully follows the procedures of the law, only reaffirm the radical arbitrariness of the written word. Kleist's shifts in narrative perspective, his strategy to abandon the narration of Kohlhaas's experiences in order to focus on the meeting of Dresden's leaders, forces us to realize that the place of power is no absent, opaque locus from which "True Laws" can be dictated. The meeting between the elector and his councillors underlines how arbitrary power is, since here we must watch the actual drafting of a new law (Kohlhaas's amnesty)—one that can be used, one councillor suggests, as the (unjust) means to trick Kohlhaas into captivity.

Once the written word no longer is connected to a stable or just source in "Michael Kohlhaas," a series of substitutions results, which is reminiscent of the faulty, valueless exchanges that Luther had outlined in his critique of papal Rome. This instability is evident in the proliferation of the Kohlhaas Mandates, decrees which counter the official laws of Dresden. Although Kohlhaas argues that his written reforms will reinstate a system of proper exchanges (the substitution of gold for his mistreated horses, retribution for wrongs suffered), his attempt to impose this reform as the criterion distinguishing "good" individuals from enemies of his new state is immediately blocked by the example of the first "transgressor." The Mother Superior, aunt to "Junker Wenzel," violates the Law in ignorance of Kohlhaas's reforms and is, consequently, guilty and innocent at the same time.

The inadequacy inherent in written law is not only presented as the unbalanced relation between an experience and the evaluation of that experience. Kohlhaas's attempt to undo the corruption of Dresden laws only leads to greater injustice, culminating in his willful punishment of the innocent citizens of Leipzig. (Kohlhaas's oppressor—now cowering from the horse dealer's "righteous" persecution—is said to have sought refuge there; the rumor is soon unmasked as a ploy to throw Kohlhaas off balance in his pursuit of revenge.) It is at this moment, when Kohlhaas refuses to abandon his attacks on the decoy (that he recognizes as such), that the difference between his document and the State's abuse of mandates is obliterated:

Vergebens ließ der Magistrat . . . Deklarationen anheften, mit der bestimmten Versicherung, daß der Junker nicht in der Pleißenburg sei; der Roßkamm, in *ähnlichen Blättern* . . . erklärte, daß, wenn derselbe nicht darin befindlich wäre, er mindestens verfahren würde, als ob er darin wäre. (MK, 41–42, my emphasis)

In vain did the magistrate post declarations that affirmed definitely that the Junker was not in the Pleißenburg; the horse dealer declared, using similar pages, that if the same was not located there, he [Kohlhaas] at least would proceed as if he were there.

The circulation of legal papers subverts, by multiplying the misunderstandings, any reform that Kohlhaas hopes to establish. Finally, unsigned documents are introduced that only contribute to the confusion. No one in the text can identify the source of the new but deliberately falsifying declarations, nor describe even the chaos in the Dresden Residence that results from the false rumor: “und niemand beschreibt die Verwirrung, die ganz Sachsen und insbesondere die Residenz ergriff” (MK, 42) [“and no one can describe the confusion that overcame all of Saxonia and, in particular, the Residence”].

In “Die Heilige Cäcilie” the destructive force—unleashed by the appeal to subjectivity during the Reformation—could be averted through Music, but, at the same time, the logic of the Reformation (with its stress on “inner” truth) pervaded the narrative account of this “miracle.” In “Michael Kohlhaas,” the narrative structure also cannot resist the subversion of Authority produced by the Reformation; it too unmasks the loss of a stable center of power. Even though Kohlhaas willingly returns to Dresden and to the social order, neither can the political stability be maintained nor can the exchange of letters be suspended any longer. Luther denounces the corruption of Dresden, thereby defying the authority of the elector; Johann Nagelschmidt counterfeits Kohlhaas’s signature in order to augment and profit from the anarchy in the state; and the political relation between Brandenburg and Saxony deteriorates. The juxtaposition of the two legal systems leads to a conflict of interests, highlighting the impossibility of determining what might be the proper legal sentence to be imposed on Kohlhaas.

What remains to be said, then, is how the Law (and, by extension, the written word) is subverted by the narrative structure of “Michael Kohlhaas.” The Viennese Emperor’s letter may seem to reestablish a just law, which will halt the endless circulation of property. After all, not only can the endless rumors and letters concerning the objects of contention be stopped, the unjustly confiscated horses themselves become “honest.” They are saved from their symbolic death by being retrieved from the no-man’s realm of the butcher, whose very claim to them undermines the possibility of imposing a citizen’s name on the property, be this name Kohlhaas or Tronka. Yet, circulation or endless exchanges are actually not controlled at all, even despite the reintegration of the horses into the social order.

Even if we leave the introduction of the gypsy’s note to one side for the moment, we can see that the *Erzählung* does not end with a new, more stable social order, as Propp’s and Greimas’s narrative models might lead us to expect. The Emperor’s Law—his reestablishment of a singular judgment—can only occur through the mediation of another exchange. This new substitution, where Kohlhaas’s property is returned to him in exchange for his life, creates the condition for the return to order.¹⁸

The symmetry of this ending cannot mask, moreover, the continued subversion of a logic of causality, where the sequence of narrative consequences

only obfuscates the possibility of deciding who is at fault. For instance: Kohlhaas can be killed only because he accepted the plan of his anarchistic successor [Nagelschmidt] to break the new law of amnesty. Equally unsettling is the insurrectionist motive attributed to Kohlhaas, when he actually means only to withdraw from the legal struggle rather than to return to his policy of destructive revenge. His crime in wishing to flee from Dresden is, in addition, tempered by the fact that his stay in Dresden had begun to resemble an imprisonment; his crime is preceded, in fact, by the official law-givers' transgression. They are themselves ignoring the new code of amnesty.

This deliberate confusion of cause and effect is reinforced by the very end of "Michael Kohlhaas," where the death of the father brings about an even more drastic exchange. Kohlhaas's necessary execution ends up buying the nobility of his sons, so that the scene of death, which is meant to retrace the boundary separating the leaders from the people, becomes the place where such a line is effaced. Kohlhaas's appropriation of power, which marked the crisis of law in the narrative, leads, then, in the course of the story to the symbolic reshuffling of the power structure. The end, which supposedly marks the overthrow of the thrust toward reform, actually brings about the realization that the aristocratic and conservative order—by being constituted in part by the Anarchist's family—is fundamentally an arbitrary one.

CRITICAL RESPONSES TO KLEIST

Certainly it becomes compelling to read Kleist's narratives as self-destructive. Both "Die Heilige Cäcilie" and "Michael Kohlhaas" condemn the revolutionary forces explicitly, only to subvert political or religious conservatism through the narrative structure, through the logic governing the sequence of events. The force of the Revolution is not only implicitly acknowledged, it even seems to be rewarded: the four brothers' claim to a privileged, religious knowledge, validated by their joyous death, and Kohlhaas's personal triumph over his enemy as well as the integration of his family into the ranks of the leaders, are both examples of at least partially successful insurrectionists. Most troubling is the conjunction of explicit and implicit readings; such a juxtaposition seems to lead necessarily to aporia, to the suspension of meaning.

It would be tempting, then, to agree with the analysis Cynthia Chase provides of Kleist's "Unwahrscheinliche Wahrhaftigkeiten" ["Improbable Veracities"], to extend the principle of deconstruction she discovers in that anecdote to all his narratives. In the short anecdote, Chase points out that the cognitive effects achieved by Kleist's text are undone by the force unleashed by the performative aspect of his language. The stories she analyzes are about the disjunction between unbelievable but real experiences and the unbelievable narrative

accounts of these, that reenact, on a metatextual level, the breakdown that constitutes the subject matter of the anecdotes.¹⁹

To argue that the performative and cognitive levels of language are inconsistent with one another, or, to use Chase's vocabulary, to say that the text mutilates or even explodes itself through its own rhetoric certainly might be one way to unmask Kleist's preoccupation with death in his narratives. Still, if the loss of "truth" in narrative or the plurality of contradictory, mutually exclusive meanings created through language can be interpreted as narrative enactments of death, another, more insistent question must be raised. Why does the death of meaning have to be repeated over and over again, and how can the specificity of such repetitions be described? Most significantly: what alternative ideals can a poetics of death offer?

The plurality of different, contradictory, mutually exclusive meanings that undermine the easy identification of Kleist's ideological, epistemological or political ideals can be perceived no better than through the prism of the myriad critical approaches to his oeuvre. Accounts defining Kleist's "alternative ideals" or his literary specificity fall, roughly speaking, into three camps. To introduce a third mediating or synthesizing term as a solution to Kleist's playing one antithetical term against its opposite marks the most traditional response to the crisis of interpretation offered by his narratives. The second group of critics attempts to identify Kleist as a purer mimetic artist, who can even double as a demystifier. And the third category, which will be treated later and includes Helmut Schneider, David Wellbery, and Werner Hamacher, abandons the purely mimetic reading of Kleist's narratives in order to discover a rhetorical trope that could account for the structure of his short prose.

Fritz Lockemann's and Karl Otto Conrady's desire to discover a new third term that could bypass the stalemate resulting from the confrontation of pure chaos and stultified social conventions may appear hopeful, even legitimate from an historical point of view.²⁰ Yet, this perspective forces a straight, one-dimensional reading of the works. Fritz Lockemann, for instance, attempts to define the order which supposedly represents an alternative to society's conventions, but he is forced to twist and turn before he is able to discover such a new order in each of the stories. Kohlhaas's sense of justice; the power (rather than the violence) of music in "Die Heilige Cäcilie"; the Marquise of O . . . 's sublimity; Elvire's (ineffectual) purity; and the tombstone which ostensibly projects the reconciliation of the two estranged lovers in "Die Verlobung in Santo Domingo" become the symbols of Kleist's new ideal. The appeal to a tombstone as the emblem of a new order seems especially problematic. And Karl Otto Conrady's attempt to recuperate the moral dimension of Kleist's prose,²¹ which he interprets as "test cases" of ethical dilemmas and which ostensibly present models of behavior to the reader, still leaves unresolved the problem of determining whose values are to be accepted. In "Michael Kohlhaas," for instance, we have already noted the inadequacy of the law to be it revolutionary or con-