The Drama of Language

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MY SUBTITLE may sound incongruous, even paradoxical. Prussia, it would seem, is dead: a name in history books, a slogan in old newspapers, surviving only as an adjective to denote goosestepping regimentation, monocled arrogance, and bureaucratic aridity of heart. What could the poet as Prussian have written but heavy-footed marching songs and odes to duty? If he sprang from that infertile soil, it must be in spite of his having been a Prussian; it must be because, in a stiffly uniformed society, he refused to let the subtle rhythms of the heart be drowned out by the brutal cadence of command.

But even if this is too stereotyped an image of Prussia—and of course it is—there is still good reason to feel that something radically unpoetic, even anti-poetic, clings to its name. Consider the potency of names of countries: of sweet France and Mother Russia, to say nothing of Greece and Rome. Even to the stranger, names like these call up a rich penumbra of meanings, feelings, and memories: of landscapes and climates, art and architecture, song and legend and history; the names are distillates of abundant and colorful national being. Prussia, by contrast, has about it an abstractness, a univocal poverty of connotation, which forbids us to speak of it as the Song of Roland speaks of France or as Shakespeare’s John of Gaunt speaks of England: “This royal throne of kings, this sceptred isle . . . this precious stone, this blessed plot, this earth, this realm.” Prussia means not earth nor realm, even less a precious stone; it means a state.

It is for this reason that Prussia poses, far more nakedly than other such names, the question of order: political, moral, even universal. For John of Gaunt, England by herself exists in all her inalienable splendor; of herself she is sceptred, a throne and a diadem, endowed with all the attributes of royalty; that in Richard II she has a king unworthy of her is her temporary misfortune. But if it were meant for Prussia, Gaunt’s plaint would make no sense; for Prussia is its government. It exists only in and as the order by which a group of territories were welded into a state.

To use an analogy: the state should stand to the nation in a relation like that of a prose abstract to a poem; the poem is there in its rich and
incommensurable primacy, and the abstract expresses it more or less adequately. On this analogy, the poem of which the Prussian state should have been the abstract never existed. There are, of course, historical reasons for this, which it is not my purpose to go into. But it is worth noting how programmatically the true founder of Prussia—Frederick William I, the father of Frederick the Great—went about making this state what it was to be. Admittedly Frederick William was penurious, anti-intellectual, and brutally despotic; but he did have a perfect sense of the fitting political style. Instead of following an irrelevant tradition, he ruthlessly stripped himself, his court, and his administration of all the symbolism and ritual in which other states still garbed the nakedness of power. He saw Prussia in the image of an army—which is to say, of that pure, abstract order which scorns disguise and makes its austere appeal through the rigorous logic of its own structuring. Frederick William’s fame rests not so much on his having been the effective founder of a major European state as on having discovered a new political style. He reduced to Newtonian simplicity and explicitness a traditional model of political order that was still Ptolemaic in its profusion of colorful mythical constructs.

The style was sheer prose, sheer function. The state articulated Prussia, not as a statement articulates feeling or experience, but as syntax articulates a sentence. No richly fraught words were admitted, no rhetoric of pomp and circumstance, nothing that would make the harsh voice of authority fall more melodiously, more insinuatingly and majestically on the subjects’ ear. In Prussia, order did not express a higher harmony beyond it: It was—and, by being—it lifted incoherence into meaning. There is, I think, a far from superficial relation between Prussia and the United States, though in part it is a relation by contraries. The United States also was somewhat abstractly conceived, a traditionless, functional, and—some thought—essentially prosaic order. Many of her artists have felt her to be anti-poetic. But Walt Whitman, the American poet par excellence, felt very differently; “the United States themselves,” he said, “are essentially the greatest poem.” The difference, amounting almost to an inversion, between America and Prussia was that America was conceived as somehow exempt from the Fall, Adamic, a virginal commonwealth. It was no syntax but rather an unabridged dictionary, an inexhaustible reservoir of natural and moral resources begging to be tapped and shaped. Her basic charter was not the state’s definitive utterance so much as it was a self-denying ordinance, as open as the Western frontier. We can almost hear Whitman shaping for himself and his countrymen the first elements of ordered speech. He is as a child, enrap-
tured by the verbal riches about him, speaking words as though he were the first to say them, sure that of themselves they glow with the meaning and beauty of discovery and creation. America, for Whitman, is the very opposite of prose; if she, like Prussia, does without all the traditional ceremony of "poetic" splendor, the reason is not that she is prosaic, but on the contrary: because she is, of herself and naturally, a poem—still in that blessed state of innocence in which natural speech is poetry.

There was nothing virginal or Adamic about Prussia. By a singularly expressive accident of history, its colors were black and white, the abstract poles where color in its rich multiplicity ceases. Prussia's sense of order was Hobbesian, a desperately functional shoring against chaos. The prose of its political habitus was no self-denying ordinance; it claimed to be the last word, the definitive proposition. Like its army, it was so fully and tautly articulated that it seemed to leave no room for spontaneous communion and free creativity.

II

Into this Prussia Kleist was born, not as an ordinary subject but as the son of an old family of officers. As a matter of course he was brought up to be an officer himself and duly entered the king's service. So that, when the inevitable moment of rebellion came, his rebellion was bound to be absolute. He could not rebel in the name of a higher patriotism—to restore his fatherland to its true self. Prussia was itself, the state an sich as it were, the very thing he was rebelling against. Thus the question of a higher legitimacy—in the name of what do I rebel?—assumed for him from the start an extraordinary bareness and urgency.

What makes this question so acutely modern is the progressive weakening of Western man's belief in a higher jurisdiction: a divine or natural law to which the positive laws of the state are morally accountable and by which they can be pronounced just or unjust. The problem is by no means merely, or even primarily, a philosophical one. For unless the idea of a supra-political order receives some palpable symbolic embodiment—as it used to in the religious ceremonial that enveloped even the secular power—it is unlikely to maintain its hold on men's minds with sufficient authority to withstand the very palpable images of order and power the state surrounds us with. In Darkness at Noon Koestler has furnished a frightening demonstration of how weak the naked human consciousness is against this massively concrete order, how it will betray its own certainties, in fact its very existence, in the attempt
to escape from its fearful seclusion, to become once more a meaningful
part of a greater, ordered whole. The advocates of natural law, whatever
the strength of their case in logic, are defeated by the brute fact that
their ideas have increasingly lost those symbolic embodiments by which
vital ideas of order demonstrate and maintain their vitality.

Of course, the ideas and ideals of his time stood ready to furnish
Kleist with an answer to his question; the great legitimator of rebellion
was Nature. For a brief space he thought the answer would do. He had
only to believe that Nature was innocent and existing society unjust,
that simple men were noble and benevolent—in short, that the Fall was
reversible. In one of his earliest stories—"The Earthquake in Chile"—he
shows how the destruction of a merciless, petrified order releases men,
now stripped of law and rank and prejudice, to join in natural fellowship
and harmony. But even in this story the end is tragic; it turns out that
the shattering of the order releases not only benevolence but likewise
fear and brutal unreason. However cruel the law, it is less cruel than
man's unchained emotions can become.

This insight also—at a time which had just witnessed the Reign of
Terror in France—is commonplace enough, though the intensity with
which Kleist pits the cruelty of order against the savagery of chaos and
between them embeds a poignantly brief moment of paradisal harmony
is far from commonplace. But what is unusual even here is that Kleist
measures the order, not so much by a higher order, whether natural or
divine, but by its capacity, or incapacity, for inclusion. Morally, the
element before which the order breaks is a pitiful and disreputable
datum: an illegitimate child. With this story, illegitimacy becomes one
of Kleist's major motifs. But unlike many of his contemporaries, he does
not celebrate it as an assertion of nature over artificiality and conven-
tion; he uses it, in what I will call a characteristically Prussian manner,
to test the orders men live by.

What is order? There are those—Goethe was perhaps their last great
spokesman—for whom it is the outer expression of an inner harmony,
something that is generated rather than imposed. But there are others—
more numerous and, I fear, more modern—for whom order is a con-
struct, moral, legal, or conceptual, which divides the world of phe
omena into an inside and an outside, which purchases intelligibility at
the cost of inclusiveness, coherence at the cost of relevance. This kind
of order is wholly explicit and tends to justify itself by the tautological
perfection of its interior workings. Franz Kafka invented the ultimate
metaphor of it in the execution machine of his Penal Colony, that
cruelly perfect and self-defining mechanism which in one precise opera-
tion communicates to its victims their crime, their punishment, and the release of full comprehension.

To seek refuge in such an order, to condemn in oneself and others what the order defines as irrational and illegitimate, is a great temptation. No man can live for long in chaos, a rebel without a cause; and where he has no higher order to appeal to, he must, it seems, succumb to the positive and explicit one, which rewards his submission by assigning him a place and a role. There are many who make this submission with a mental reservation, who cling to the sentimental belief that there is a public sphere and a private one, who learn to split their individuality and their moral responsibility, until finally as men they can grow roses while as functionaries they run concentration camps. But there are others, though few, who will not recant, with or without mental reservation, but will keep faith with the inchoate and incomprehensible stirrings within them. Of these Kleist was one.

It was, he found, his art that was illegitimate; the words, images, and tales he felt himself unaccountably pregnant with were offensive and disorderly in an order that was, within its own terms, definitive and complete. And so he shaped a style and a series of great fables which are unmistakably his own and have, nevertheless, an authoritative impersonality. The motif of illegitimacy takes various forms. It is translated into religious mystery in the high comedy of *Amphitryon*, where, after first following Molière, Kleist suddenly breaks into the easy ménage of classical French comedy, a god in disguise, to extort from Alcmene a glory of knowledge and purity she never knew she possessed. But next to this play he puts the prose narrative of the “Marquise of O.,” who likewise finds herself mysteriously pregnant, but who must solve the mystery with pain and reproach before her purity is vindicated. No divine epiphany announces the impending birth as virginal; the Marquise is compelled to discover her child’s very natural father by the sordidly secular means of advertising for him in the public prints. This descent from the sphere of classical and religious myth to the level of prose and ordinary reality is Kleist’s decisive step, for it forces his characters to find within themselves the strength to defend their inner truth against the legitimate claims of the establishment. The Marquise’s pregnancy seems to defy reason as well as morality; it is an inexplicable novum, which everyone tries his utmost to deny and ignore, until at last it can be ignored no longer. At that point the pressure to recant and repent becomes almost irresistible; the order puts all its vast authority into the effort to sustain itself, to compel submission. But at the decisive moment the Marquise does not break; she stands by the reality within
her and submits only, to quote Kleist, “to the great, holy and inexplicable scheme of things.” Because she does so and at the same time honors the claims of legitimacy enough to wish to find her child’s father and to marry him, she succeeds in solving the mystery and in establishing a truer, i.e. more encompassing order.

As with other great poets, so with Kleist, a problem once worked through becomes implicit, enters wholly into the body of his language. Every sentence almost of Kleist’s mature prose style is a verbal re-enactment of the illegitimacy motif, a little victory of inclusion. His syntax is notorious, even in German, for its tense complexity, which strains at the limits of rational order. What Kleist does is to call into question the easy rationality of the classical sentence, which gains its victories by keeping out unfitting detail—the streaks of the tulip that Samuel Johnson forbade the artist to paint. What the rational order—which claims to be “natural” but in fact is as positive as Prussia—proscribes as illegitimate, accidental, and irrelevant, Kleist forges into a larger, tenser structuring. He does so, not with the naturalist’s comfortable faith that out of accumulation order will somehow arise, but from the positivist’s knowledge that there can be no truth without order, yet that every order stands under the judgment of what it cannot admit.

III

But self-vindication, however impersonal and unsentimental, was not enough for Kleist. As a poet he was bound to aspire to being a founder of unions in his own right, to perform what Shakespeare calls “the marriage of true minds,” independent of, even in opposition to the social order. Like Shakespeare, Kleist wanted and needed to be a matchmaker in the most profound sense—i.e., to be a writer of comedies. But, again like Shakespeare, the intensity of this need drove him to test all hidden assumptions, all built-in safeguards, which would beg the question of unmediated human fellowship. And so he took the classical test case—the Romeo-and-Juliet situation—and divested it of its consoling elements. Shakespeare had shown the way when he made his lovers re-enact their story in the guise of Troilus and Cressida and watched with bitter cynicism how a love that is buttressed by nothing but private faith and feeling turns into betrayal. Kleist chose as his lovers Achilles and Penthesilea, Queen of the Amazons. Their only possible meeting place is the battlefield, and combat their mode of union. By the contradictory laws of their sexes and nations, to possess each other they must vanquish
each other; the whole play moves at the driven and driving pace of attack and counter-attack, flight and pursuit. There is a central interlude of illusory peace: the warrior-lovers sit together, divested of their armor, in what appears to be intimate and unguarded understanding. But the deception is revealed and the battle resumes; only now it has turned bestial. In the end Penthesilea kills Achilles, not in human combat but in a hunt; maddened by what she sees as a betrayal, she tears her lover’s flesh.

It is easy to interpret this play, and much else in Kleist, as evidence of a deep psychic disturbance, an obsessive sado-masochism. But such an interpretation misses the essential point: that the play is a test, arranged with a scientist’s cunning guard against specious solutions. Unsupported by any common order—of thought or custom or law—what promised to be the sweetest fulfilment turns into the most savage tragedy. What we are being shown is not merely the battle of the sexes, but rather the truth that outside some sustaining order union is not to be had. The poet’s highest ambition—to show and celebrate the possibility of men joining beyond the preestablished orders into which they normally must fit themselves before they can hope to reach understanding—this ambition had proved unattainable. Union, it seemed, must remain the question-begging achievement it is, possibly only where the community is already there to found and guarantee it. There is no realm which is the poet’s own, no marriage which he alone can perform, unless he has the prior sanction of the state. As Achilles lies mutilated and Penthesilea is killed by the comprehension of what she has done, the tertius ridens appears to be the authority Kleist had desperately tried to prove superfluous—Prussia.

But before I pass beyond this tragic failure, let me stress once more that its being a failure is its greatness. Kleist did not pride himself on his “tragic sense of life,” did not try to provide us the inhuman satisfaction of being able to look unflinching into the face of horror. The modern tendency to proclaim tragedy as the highest and truest attainment of art should leave us suspicious and dismayed. Shakespeare wrote, as his last play and testament, The Tempest; Bach ended the St. Matthew’s Passion with something very much like a cradle song; Goethe said of himself that he could never have written a real tragedy, because it would have killed him. Kleist, who did write one under the bitter compulsion of his need, did not think that he had thereby shown humanity raised to its highest form and potential. Precisely because he was capable of creating Penthesilea, he was able to have her say, at the moment of seeming fulfilment, lines which show that a genuine tragedy is a comedy that failed:
Das Unglück, sagt man, lautert die Gemüter,
Ich . . . empfand es nicht. . .
Wie seltsam war, auf jedem Antlitz, mir,
Wo ich sie traf, der Freude Spur verhasst;
Das Kind, das in der Mutter Schosse spielte,
Schien mir verschworen wider meinen Schmerz.
Wie möchte ich alles jetzt, was mich umringt,
Zufrieden gern und glücklich sehn! . . .
Der Mensch kann gross, ein Held, im Leiden sein,
Doch göttlich ist er, wenn er selig ist!

[Misfortune purifies the soul, they say; but I . . . did not have this feeling.
. . . How strange that I should find hateful the trace of joy on every face in
which I encountered it; the child playing on its mother’s lap seemed to me
to conspire against my pain. How gladly would I now see everyone about
me contented and happy! . . . In suffering man can be great, a hero, but in
joy he is divine!]

IV

Thus Kleist painfully discovered that as a poet he could not escape
from the state, any more than man could; that man is a political animal,
and if the political is subtracted only the animal is left. At this point
Kleist must have felt tempted to forewear a faith in creative autonomy
which had proved so disastrous, to return contritely to the bosom of the
state, and to find purpose and reward through submission and service.

The temptations were manifold and subtle. Prussia, proud and self-
reliant when he had defied it, now was a humiliated and occupied coun-
try, struggling feebly to regain its self-respect. The political cause drew
dignity and passion from the patriot’s just hatred of Napoleon; Kleist
himself had become a fanatical anti-French publicist. More importantly
and insidiously, the rising Romantic school of political philosophy—led
by his friend and collaborator Adam Müller—furnished him with a per-
suasive rationale for surrender. It offered him the mystique of the
organic state, in which man, self-exiled from the City of God, could
escape from his cold isolation and find a new matrix. (What a consol-
ingly maternal metaphor we have found for a coordinate system!) In the
state, relation and relatedness were still possible; and if this kind of
relatedness seemed to be lacking in warmth, one could always endow it
with an oversoul. To poetize Prussia—to dissolve its explicit, denotative
outlines in the soft focus of patriotic feeling, to give the harsh rectangu-
larity of its matrix the gentler curvature of a womb—this must have
seemed to Kleist a very seductive way out of his dilemma.

The state itself beckoned him. King Frederick William III, to arouse
his people's spirit, had called for patriotic art, and Kleist now set himself to writing what he called a patriotic drama, which he intended as his last word and testament as a poet and a Prussian. The play, *The Prince of Homburg*, celebrates the victory won by the Great Elector over the invading Swedes in the battle of Fehrbellin. The Prince of Homburg, in command of the Elector's cavalry, attacks in violation of explicit orders; it is not clear whether, in doing so, he wins the battle or prevents a more complete victory. The Elector, in any case, is wholly committed to the view that the state rests on the law; he appoints a court-martial, which duly condemns the Prince to death. Faced with this verdict, the Prince collapses and miserably begs for his naked life; he surrenders all claims to rank, honor, even love, if only he is pardoned. Up to this point the Elector has rejected all pleas on the Prince's behalf on the grounds that he cannot arbitrarily intervene in the workings of the law without becoming a despot; but when he learns of the Prince's collapse, he completely reverses his position. He notifies Homburg that he need only declare himself unjustly condemned to win full reinstatement. Thus made judge in his own cause and thereby in effect sovereign, the Prince responds with a letter of which we are not given the text, but which must contain, or imply, an acceptance of the verdict. He recalls his comrades, who are close to mutiny for his sake, to their duty and calmly, in fact triumphantly, prepares for his execution. At this point the Elector feels empowered to do what before he could not do: he vacates the judgment, and instead of being executed the Prince is proclaimed the true victor of the battle and crowned with laurel.

The subsequent fate of this play is in the highest degree ironic; it is hardly too much to say that by its gradual acceptance on the German stage we can measure the progress of a creeping political malaise. At first it was condemned and neglected, because it presented the hero in a state of demoralization unthinkable for an officer and nobleman. But from the 1860's on it steadily gained in popularity. It was interpreted to show that the individual, acting in arrogant reliance on his private judgment, is bound to fall, but that the state, personified in the Elector can reclaim him by wise pedagogic management. By judicious dosages of power and manipulation, the erring individual can be made to acknowledge the state's overriding claims; by a genuine inner acceptance of his fault and the state's justice, he can regain grace and reinstatement. There was, in fact, greater rejoicing over one reclaimed sinner than over a hundred of the just.

The religious analogy underlying this interpretation is obvious; and it means that the divine and the political orders have become one. Where
formerly the political order was understood to be, at best, a metaphor of the divine one, it now is that order; the vehicle has become the tenor. And where the ruler used to rule by the grace of God, he now is God—the dispenser of ultimate justice and, upon the proper conditions, of mercy.

There can be no question that Kleist himself saw the Prince’s fate under the aspect of the archetypal drama of man’s fall and redemption—nor that he saw the state as an ultimate order, with no possibility of appeal to a higher jurisdiction. But what this meant to him was not that the state had to be deified so as to provide man with an ersatz heaven, but that the divine order had become secularized. In Adam’s fall we fell all—God included; it was irreversible and continuous. There was neither a paradise to which contrite man could be readmitted nor a utopia which proud man could construct. There were, instead, the positive, unanswerable order of the law and man’s inchoate intuitions of freedom and harmony; these, improbably, had to come to terms with each other, with no third, supramundane term provided in which, by definition, they were blissfully fused.

The remarkable thing about Kleist’s play is that it does not in any way soften the rigor of this polar opposition but on the contrary increases it. More and more, ruler and subject withdraw from each other until at the climax the subject is mere man, stripped of all the dignity and dignities society has to give, while the ruler has retreated into the order, a wholly impersonal embodiment of the law. The spheres no longer touch each other.

The moment has come, it would seem, for either tragedy or compromise. But Kleist gives us neither. When the Elector is made aware of the total irrelevance of the absolute order to the absolute individual, he abdicates. He does not try to preach to the Prince, to insinuate himself into the defenseless soul of his victim and lead him to contrition and amendment. He respects the Prince’s moral inviolability at the moment of his deepest degradation and takes the unsecured risk of entrusting him with the sovereign power. By making the Prince judge in his own cause, he throws himself and the state upon the mercy of the individual, as unre­servedly as the individual had thrown himself upon the mercy of the state.

This transfer of sovereignty creates a strange and paradoxical situation, which I will try to make clearer by comparing it to an analogous one. When Socrates is asked to speak in his own defense, and later, after his conviction, to propose his own punishment, he faces a choice not unlike the Prince’s. He could employ the formulas of contrition and beg for
lenience; by speaking as his judges expect him to speak, by making himself an echo of the public voice, he could save his life. But instead he speaks freely, by the sovereignty of the divine voice within him; doing so, he provokes a sentence of death, as surely and as knowingly as though he had pronounced it himself. Confronted with the ultimate authority of the state, he acknowledges it more fully than it wants to be acknowledged. What it wants is submission; but Socrates honors it by fulfilling his inalienable duty: the duty to speak truly. He sees himself so wholly pledged to the state that he cannot submit his inner truth to it; for if he did, the state would have no truth but turn into an empty tautology irrecoverably sunk into the error of its own devising. Hence Socrates is perfectly consistent when later he refuses to flee; for the laws, whose child he considers himself, have as just a claim to his life as to his truth.

The difference between Socrates and Kleist's Prince is that Socrates has a divine warranty; he knows he is not guilty as charged. The state has the right to translate its sentence into act, but it cannot thereby make it true. Truth resides elsewhere. Homburg, on the other hand, has no divine warranty; his inner voice was not infallible but has led him into an act which, by the only possible criterion—the law—must be defined as a crime. With Truth no longer resident among the absolute ideas, there is nothing for him to plead except guilty and to accept the verdict as just, not merely in the limited and contingent sense in which Socrates accepted it, but absolutely. His private sense of what he is and has done, unlike Socrates' daimon, is irrelevant to the matter, has no guarantor outside himself, makes no sense; there is nothing he has to offer the state, not even a meaningful death. Hence his demoralization.

But when he gets the Elector's note, his situation becomes still more confusing: he is put into the strange position of being whatever he says he is. By the terms of the note, he need only say: "I am innocent," and he is innocent. The Elector had the law to fall back on; in calling the Prince guilty he spoke meaningfully, for the law had pronounced him guilty. But the Prince now has nothing to tell him whether or not he speaks the truth if he pronounces himself innocent. Since whatever he says becomes true by his saying it, to say that he is innocent is nothing more than if he said: "I am that I am"—an empty tautology.

Thus, at this moment two tautologies face each other, self-referential, without meaning each for the other: the absolute law and the sovereign individual. The Prince could save his life by pronouncing himself innocent, by accepting the proffered role of being a creative speaker; but if he did so, he would deprive himself permanently of any possibility of vindic-
cation. He would encapsule himself in an unchallengeable emptiness, without reference or relation. He would, to put it differently, be a Poet, with a capital P, the kind whose utterances do not mean but are. This, then, would be one way out of Kleist's dilemma: to become a "pure" Poet.

If, on the other hand, Homburg pronounces himself guilty, his judgment merely endorses that of the law; his voice and the state's will be one, and he signs his death warrant, not merely in the sense that he is killed, but that he confirms the law in its self-defining perfection. When Socrates provoked his condemnation, he achieved something by it; he was able to tell the truth, to provide a point of reference by which the state's sentence could be judged. The Prince, by condemning himself, would accomplish the opposite; he would surrender whatever truth he has in him and thereby deprive the order of its chance of meaning and reference. The other way out of the dilemma would be to become the state's mere echo.

But in this seemingly hopeless dilemma the Prince does keep hold of one saving fact: that, like Socrates, he has been addressed and asked to reply. Moreover, he has been made sovereign, which means that he is not bound by the self-defeating alternatives of saying either yea or nay, the only possible discourse the absolute individual can hold with the absolute order. He recognizes that, oddly, in order to use his sovereignty for his own justification, he would be bound by the formula prescribed in the Elector's note; he might be speaking creatively but the very opposite of freely. But most importantly, he accepts the challenge, implicit in the note, to speak. He has no God to speak for; he can speak only in his own name. But he speaks to some one, and though he does not surrender to the state, he does deliver himself over, as every true speaker does, to the man he answers.

We do not know what he says in his reply; the only part we are told of it is the concluding formula. But this formula makes it clear that the Prince considers his letter at the same time his sovereign utterance and his death sentence. It could hardly be otherwise. It must be his death sentence because he has refused to accept the formula and definition of sovereignty which were the condition of his self-acquittal. It is his sovereign utterance because he has chosen to speak, freely and truly, rather than let himself be enslaved by the deadly alternative of absolutes.

As the sequel shows, he has also spoken to some purpose. True speech is between men, and by his answer he has freed the Elector, who, in fear of destroying the state, had retreated behind the gates of the law. As soon as the Elector receives the Prince's answer, he turns from an admin-
istrator of the law into a ruler, a man who takes the risk of action. The law is by no means set aside, but it becomes responsive to the needs and intuitions of those whom in the last resort it is meant to serve. Autonomy has replaced automatism; the communion of men in genuine speech lifts function into service, coordination into consonance, obedience into loyalty.

The first risk and action the Elector takes is the tearing up of the death sentence. He can take the risk now, not because the Prince has contritely acknowledged the necessity of absolute obedience—learned his Prussian lesson, in other words—but because has has demonstrated that where there is no divine law to fall back on, the burden of order need not be carried entirely by the state’s positive law. Autonomous man can bear his share and yet not diminish the order’s authority but rather increase it. While God can be merciful because He is omnipotent, the secular power can grant mercy because the risk rests not on it alone. Nor need law assume the certainty of self-definition, because where there is meaning, ambiguity can be chanced.

V

This, then, was Kleist’s response to the King’s demand for patriotic art. It probably was not what the King expected, any more than Homburg’s reply was what the Elector expected. It is, in fact, unlikely that the King ever read it or, if he had, that he would have understood it. The future, and not only in Prussia, listened to different and mostly worse replies; and when it finally gave Kleist a hearing, fifty years of drill-field barks and sentimentally patriotic warblings had dulled its ears. But all this did not matter to Kleist; two years after the completion of the play, disavowed by his family, largely ignored as a writer, in difficulties with the Prussian Government, and in despair over Prussia’s servile foreign policy, he committed suicide.

It may seem that what happens to Kleist’s work is of little relevance to Walt Whitman’s country, that his was a special and desperate case. But there is not only the threat of losing the spirit of Whitman’s America; there is also the threat implicit in that spirit itself. If the extreme metaphor for the Prussian kind of order is Kafka’s execution machine, the one I would propose for us is Univac. A democratic order develops its own kinds of automatism. The daring democratic faith in free trade—of goods and, much more importantly, of ideas—this faith has a dangerous affinity to reliance on poll-taking, statistics, and market research. To flee from risk is a tendency from which no political arrangement exempts us;
the difference will be merely in the kind of security we seek. There is not much to choose between a cog and an IBM card; and a crystal may seem a more appealing arrangement than a colloid.

At times there is something distinctly colloidal even about Walt Whitman:

I speak the password primeval, I give the sign of democracy,
By God! I will accept nothing which all cannot have their counterpart of on the same terms.
Through me many long dumb voices,
Voices of the interminable generations of prisoners and slaves,
Voices of the diseased and despairing, and of thieves and dwarfs,
Voices of cycles of preparation and accretion,
And of the threads that connect the stars, and of wombs, and of the father-stuff,
And of the rights of them the others are down upon,
Of the deformed, trivial, flat, foolish, despised,
Fog in the air, beetles rolling balls of dung. . . .

Here is plenitude, but is there sufficient reason? One cannot quite escape the feeling that Whitman, having given the sign of democracy—and what with the United States already being the greatest poem—hoped that things were given a voice simply by being present and voting, “By God! I will accept nothing which all cannot have their counterpart of on the same terms.” It has a certain nobility, but it is the nobility of an unrealized sentiment. It is what a speaking super-Univac might say in rejecting an unrepresentative sample.

But there is another American writer, whose vision was shaped, not by the democratic vistas of a continent opening limitlessly toward the West, but by the gunwalls of a man-of-war: Melville. Human society as a ship’s company—a floating island of precarious and hence rigorous order on the chaotic waters: this is an image very close to Kleist’s of the embattled state. Billy Budd, suddenly transferred from the Rights of Man to the martial law of the Indomitable: this has a very close counterpart in Kleist’s development and that of his Prince. The automatic definition of crime by mere act, regardless of motive and provocation; the imperious need for punishment, regardless of personal feelings; the direct confrontation, outside the law, of judge and victim and the absolution of the judge by the victim: these parallels suffice to show how close Melville’s final vision came to that of Kleist’s last play. They argue that Prussia is not a local accident of history but a form or order with which modern man needs to come to terms. Kleist did: laboriously, unlyrically, with a rather obsessive and constrained energy, because
lyricism is like to find itself helpless before such an order; a tougher poetry, a harsher speech is needed for man’s necessary discourse with it. The sheer poetry comes only at the end, after the confrontation: in the description of Billy Budd’s hanging, or in what Homburg thinks are his last words before his execution:

Nun, o Unsterblichkeit, bist du ganz mein!
Du strahlst mir, durch die Binde meiner Augen,
Mit Glanz der tausendfachen Sonne zu!
Es wachsen Flügel mir an beiden Schultern,
Durch stille Ätherräume schwingt mein Geist;
Und wie ein Schiff, vom Hauch des Winds entführt,
Die muntere Hafenstadt versinken sieht,
So geht mir dämmernd alles Leben unter:
Jetzt unterscheid ich Farben noch und Formen,
Und jetzt liegt Nebel alles unter mir. (ll. 1830–39)

[Now, immortality, you are entirely mine! Through my blindfold, you radiate for me the splendor of a thousand suns! Wings are growing on both my shoulders, my spirit soars through calm, ethereal regions; and as a ship, driven by the gentle wind, sees the lively seaport sink away, so everything living is submerged in twilight: now I still discern colors and forms, and now everything lying beneath me is mist.]