

Prologue

I

IMMANUEL KANT died on February 12, 1804, at 11:00 A.M., less than two months before his eightieth birthday. Though he was still famous, German thinkers were engaged in trying to get “beyond” his critical philosophy. He had become almost irrelevant. His last important contribution to the philosophical discussion had been made almost five years earlier. This was the open “Declaration Regarding Fichte’s *Wissenschaftslehre*” of August 7, 1799. In it, he had stated clearly his conviction that all the more recent philosophical developments had little to do with his own critical philosophy, that “Fichte’s *Theory of Science* was a totally indefensible system,” and that he was very much “opposed to metaphysics as defined by Fichte.”¹ Urging philosophers not to go “beyond” his critical philosophy, but to take it seriously not only as his own last word, but also as the final word on metaphysical questions in general, he, in effect, took leave of the philosophical scene. Nothing more, certainly nothing different was to be expected from him. German philosophy, and with it the philosophy of Europe as a whole, was taking a course he could not appreciate. Yet these developments had little to do with the dying man in Königsberg. Some said he had outlived his time, but he no longer took any interest in them.

“The great Kant died indeed just like the least important human being, but he died so gently and quietly that those who were with him, noticed nothing but the cessation of his breathing.”² His death followed the gradual and prolonged deterioration of his mind and body that had begun in 1799, if not earlier. Kant himself had said in 1799 to some of his friends: “I am old and weak. Consider me as a child.”³ Scheffner had found it necessary to point out years before Kant’s death that everything that had made him the genius that he was had disappeared. He had long been “*ent-Kanted*”

or “de-Kanted.”⁴ Especially during his last two years, no signs of his once-great mind could be observed.

His corpse was so completely dried out that it looked “like a skeleton that one might exhibit.” Curiously enough, that is precisely what happened. Kant’s corpse became a public sight during the next two weeks. People stood in line to see the corpse until it was buried sixteen days later. The weather was the main problem. It was very cold in Königsberg, and the ground was frozen so hard that it was impossible to dig a grave – as if the earth refused to take what remained of the great man. But then, there was no need to hurry, given the state of the body, as well as the great interest of the citizens of Königsberg in their dead celebrity.

The funeral itself was a solemn and grand affair. A large crowd was in attendance. Many citizens of Königsberg, most of whom had known Kant either not very well or not at all, came to see how the famous philosopher was put to rest. The cantata written at the death of Frederick II was adapted for Kant: the greatest Prussian philosopher was honored with music written for the greatest Prussian king. A large procession followed the coffin, and *all* of the churches in Königsberg rang their bells. This must have appeared fitting to most citizens of Königsberg. Scheffner, Kant’s oldest surviving friend, “liked it very much,” as did most citizens of Königsberg. Though Königsberg had ceased to be the political capital of Prussia in 1701, it was in the minds of many Königsbergers the intellectual capital of Prussia, if not of the world.⁵ Kant had been one of its most important citizens. He was their “philosopher king,” even if the philosophers outside of Königsberg were looking for another.

It was still brutally cold on the day of the funeral; but, as winter days in Königsberg often could be, it was also beautifully bright and clear. Scheffner wrote about a month later to a friend:

You will not believe the kind of tremor that shook my entire existence when the first frozen clumps of earth were thrown on his coffin – my head and heart still tremble . . .⁶

It was not just the cold that made Scheffner shiver. Nor was it simply the fear of his own death, which might have been awakened in him by the hollow sounds of the frozen clods of earth falling on the almost-empty coffin. The tremor that would reverberate in his head for days and weeks had deeper causes. Kant, the man, was gone forever. The world was cold, and there was no hope – not for Kant, and perhaps not for any of us. Scheffner was only too much aware of Kant’s belief that there was nothing to be expected after death. Though in his philosophy he had held out hope for

eternal life and a future state, in his personal life he had been cold to such ideas. Scheffner had often heard Kant scoff at prayer and other religious practices. Organized religion filled him with ire. It was clear to anyone who knew Kant personally that he had no faith in a personal God. Having postulated God and immortality, he himself did not believe in either. His considered opinion was that such beliefs were just a matter of “individual needs.”⁷ Kant himself felt no such need.

Yet Scheffner, a citizen of Königsberg almost as famous as Kant, clearly had such a need. Scheffner, one of the most respectable and respected citizens by the time of Kant’s death, professed to be a good Christian, and he probably was one. Scheffner was a pious, if not strictly orthodox, member of his congregation, and he was happily married. His piety had not always been obvious. During his earliest years he had been a poet of some note, or perhaps better characterized as of some notoriety. Indeed, he was still remembered as the (anonymous) author of a volume of erotic poetry in the French tradition, which had created quite a stir some forty years back. Many considered the poems to be among the most obscene verses ever written in German. Kant’s reputation as an unbeliever might cast even more of a shadow on his own reputation. Furthermore, he had to have doubts about Kant’s eternal soul. As a friend, he took Kant seriously. Is it surprising that these doubts cast a spell not only over the ceremony of Kant’s burial, but also over Scheffner’s very life?

Some of the more righteous Christians in Königsberg found it necessary to stay away entirely from the funeral. Thus Ludwig Ernst Borowski, a high official in the Lutheran Church of Prussia, one of Kant’s earliest students and an occasional dinner guest during Kant’s last years, someone whom many viewed as Kant’s friend, stayed home – much to the dismay of Scheffner.⁸ But Borowski was pursuing still higher career goals. Only too aware of Kant’s shaky reputation among those in government who really counted, he felt it was better not to attend the funeral. He had serious reservations, if not about Kant’s moral character then about his philosophical and political views, and he did what he felt to be most politic.

On the day after Kant’s death, the *Königlich Preussische Staats-, Kriegs- und Friedens-Zeitungen* published a note, which among other things stated:

Kant, being eighty years old, died completely exhausted. His achievements in the revision of speculative philosophy are known and esteemed by everyone. His other virtues – loyalty, benevolence, righteousness, and politeness – can be missed only here in our city to their full extent. Here, the memory of the departed will remain more honored and more lasting than anywhere else.⁹

Relatively few would have disputed the fact that Kant really possessed the virtues of “loyalty, benevolence, righteousness, and politeness” that were especially singled out in this notice. Still, there were some who did feel differently. One of the earliest publications on Kant’s life to appear in Königsberg was an attempt to put into question Kant’s benevolence, righteousness, and politeness, while at the same time raising questions about his religious and political views. The *Remarks on Kant, His Character, and His Opinions by a Fair Admirer of His Merits*, which appeared anonymously and without any indication of its place of publication in 1804, was almost certainly written by Johann Daniel Metzger, a professor of medicine (pharmacy and anatomy) at the University of Königsberg. Kant and Metzger seem to have found themselves often in agreement. Since Kant took a great interest in medicine, the two frequently had occasion to discuss matters of mutual interest, but they also had had several disagreements concerning administrative matters at the university. As a result, Metzger had tried to embarrass Kant more than once during his turns as rector of the university.¹⁰

It is not altogether clear why the author thought the book needed writing. What is clear is that he had a certain degree of animosity toward Kant, and that he felt the record concerning Kant’s private life needed to be set straight. Metzger’s diagnosis was that “Kant was neither good nor evil.”¹¹ He was not particularly hard-hearted, but then again, he did not have a particularly kind heart either. Metzger intimated that he probably had never given any money to anyone except his immediate family. He concluded from the evidence that Kant had once refused to contribute to a collection for a colleague whose house had burned down that he “was an egoist to a quite considerable degree.”¹² Yet Metzger went on to explain, this was probably not his own fault. First, being a misogynist, Kant had never married.¹³ Secondly, almost everyone deferred to Kant as the famous author. This was also the reason why he could not accept disagreement. Indeed, Metzger told his readers that Kant could become quite insulting when someone dared to disagree with him. As if that were not enough, Metzger revealed that Kant had the audacity to endorse the principles of the French Revolution, defending them even at dinners in the noblest houses. He was not afraid of being blacklisted (as it was done in Königsberg). Kant was impolite and insensitive. Furthermore, he mistreated his servants. Even his own uneducated sister, who took care of him during his dying days, was not allowed to eat at his table. “Wasn’t Kant broad-minded enough to have his sister sit at his table at his side?”¹⁴ Kant was reported to have said before his death that “he was leaving this world with a clean conscience, never

having intentionally committed an injustice.” Metzger concluded, “this is the creed of all egoists.”¹⁵

While not wanting to say much about Kant’s view of theology, Metzger could not help noting that Kant was “an indifferentist” – and probably worse. He was unfair to theologians, and he disliked religious people. Nor did he know much of jurisprudence; as a result he did not think highly of it. He was unfair to members of the faculty of law. While he appreciated medicine, he allowed himself to judge in areas where he was unqualified. For example, he did not know anything of anatomy, but he pronounced on subjects that presupposed such knowledge. He was also inconsistent: although a “misogynist,” he liked Hufeland’s *Macrobiotics*, which claimed that marriage increases a man’s lifespan. Metzger claimed that he did not really want to dispute the importance of Kant’s philosophy. While he was willing to admit that Kant’s books contributed greatly to the fame of the University of Königsberg, he found the man lacking.

Metzger let it be known: Kant’s works were great, but Kant himself was a far-from-admirable human being. He was as petty as human beings come, sharing in most of their faults. All in all, Kant, far from being a model of virtue, was an average person. He was neither particularly good nor particularly bad, but it would be better if students did not emulate him.

Metzger’s short book was occasioned by other books on Kant that were meant to praise him.¹⁶ There had already been a few biographies before Kant’s death, all of them extremely flattering, but it appears to have been one book in particular that motivated Metzger, namely Johann Gottfried Hasse’s *Notable Remarks by Kant from One of His Friends at Table*, which had appeared shortly before.¹⁷ Hasse was a professor of oriental languages and theology. He and Kant became close after 1786, and Hasse frequently attended Kant’s dinner parties, especially during the three years before his death. Hasse’s short work was intended to be “neither a sketch of his life nor a biography,” nor was it meant to “stand in the way of anyone who might have something more important or better to say about the great man.” His *Remarks* are notable only because they provide evidence of Kant’s incompetence during his final years.

Hasse claimed that he only wanted to “express his thankful heart.” Yet most of Kant’s friends wished he had not done so. In his “Declaration Regarding Fichte’s *Wissenschaftslehre*,” Kant himself had alluded to the old Italian proverb to the effect that if God protects us from our friends, we can take care of our enemies ourselves, and that “there are friends who mean well by us but who act wrongly or clumsily in trying to promote our ends.”¹⁸

Hasse's publication was clumsy and wrong-headed. Though he praised Kant's greatness and intended to give examples of his ingenuous mind and noble character, he succeeded chiefly in raising questions that are interesting in quite different respects. Thus Hasse tells us of a book that Kant was writing during his last days. The old philosopher had himself at times declared this to be "his chief work, . . . which represents his system as a completed whole," but Hasse goes on to observe that "any future editor would have to treat it with caution because, during his last years, Kant often deleted things that were better than those he replaced them with, and he also interjected much nonsense (like the meals which were planned for a given day)." ¹⁹ Many of the stories Hasse tells seem to be designed only to raise doubts about Kant's mental competence. ²⁰

This was not the worst aspect of Hasse's book. He also raised questions about Kant's character, and especially about his loyalty to members of his family. Thus, after pointing out that Kant spent a considerable amount each year supporting his relatives, Hasse went on to note that he "never mentioned" these relatives to anyone. He also told his readers that Kant never answered any questions about his relatives when asked, and that, when his sister came to assist him during his last years, he tried to conceal her identity from his friends – "even though he gave her food from his table." He showed his gratitude for his sister's able care by asking his friends "to forgive her lack of culture." ²¹ All in all, Hasse's *Notable Remarks by Kant* amount to a strange tribute. No wonder Scheffner found the book despicable, observing that "it would not be easy to put such a great number of trivialities, minutiae, and indelicacies on so few pages." ²² Metzger, on the other hand, seems to have found in Hasse's ambiguities useful reminders of Kant's true character. Indeed, his *Remarks on Kant* can be seen as Metzger's attempt to put Hasse's remarks in a more proper light.

Hasse's and Metzger's efforts were not the only biographical accounts that were published in Königsberg during 1804. Nor were they the most significant. Indeed, they were soon completely overshadowed by a project started by Kant's publisher, Friedrich Nicolovius, who saw to it that a collection of biographical sketches by people who knew Kant well during different stages of his life was published. Nicolovius was not alone. Others, like Scheffner, were also involved in urging this project along. The collective enterprise was designed, at least in part, to forestall and undermine further contributions like those of Hasse and Metzger. In this, it was quite successful. The resulting book, *On Immanuel Kant*, came to be viewed as the most extensive and most reliable source of information concerning

Kant's life and character, but it is neither as reliable nor as extensive as we might wish.

The three people who had known Kant well during different periods of his life, and who were to give accounts of Kant's life as they knew it, were Ludwig Ernst Borowski, Reinhold Bernhard Jachmann, and Ehregott Christian Wasianski. All three were theologians born and raised in Königsberg. Borowski had known Kant the longest, having attended his lectures in 1755 and remained friendly with him through the early sixties. He had also been his opponent in a disputation on physical monadology in 1756. Though he could not give a firsthand account of Kant's funeral, he could be counted on to tell the story of Kant's life from his earliest period as a lecturer until his final years. Jachmann had studied with Kant and had become closely associated with him between 1783 and 1794.²³ As his "amanuensis" or academic assistant, he knew Kant well during the years in which he published his most famous works. He could speak with authority on the eighties and nineties. Wasianski was a deacon who had taken care of Kant during his final years. He had studied at the University of Königsberg between 1772 and 1780. Indeed, like Jachmann, he had also been Kant's *amanuensis*. He could have said much about Kant's life during the seventies, but strangely enough he says nothing about these years, restricting himself to an account of Kant's last years. After Wasianski left the university in 1780, he had no contact with Kant for a decade, meeting him again only in 1790 at a wedding reception. Kant seems to have invited him immediately to his regular dinner parties, and gradually came to rely on him. Over the years he entrusted him with more and more of his personal business. Indeed, Wasianski ultimately earned Kant's complete trust. Having been chosen by Kant as his personal secretary and helper, as well as the executor of his will, he knew the aged Kant's circumstances very well.

These three theologians were expected to set the record straight. They were to tell the public who Kant really was, and they were to make sure that others who were dealing in mere anecdotes could not harm his reputation. The project was thus essentially an apologetic enterprise. As such, it had the blessings of Kant's closest friends in Königsberg. In a certain sense, they all closed ranks to "save" Kant's good name. It is important to understand this function of the book *On Immanuel Kant*, for it explains why certain things are emphasized in the book and others downplayed. The apologetic nature of the project explains also the somewhat monochromatic picture of Kant we get from the three biographies. Its authors clearly felt that there were a number of things that were "not appropriate for the public."²⁴

Furthermore, each of them had prejudices and views that could only stand in the way of an objective account of Kant's life and work as a whole. For one thing, these three Königsberg theologians could not be expected to paint a colorful picture of the "all-crushing" philosophical libertine, whose audience was the world. Rather, they sketched, all gray on gray, the dull outlines of the life and habits of an old man, who just happened to have written books that made him famous. Telling us next to nothing about the first sixty years of Kant's life and more than enough about the last twenty years or so, they continued in some ways the tradition started by Hasse and Metzger. Yet, it is their picture that still largely determines the way we see Kant. Kant was made into a "flat character" whose only surprising feature was the complete lack of any surprises.

Some of Kant's friends thought that the only one who was really qualified to write about both the man and his ideas was Johann Christoph Kraus, Kant's former student, longtime friend, and colleague in philosophy. But Kraus refused to do so. Scheffner explained: "Kraus is the only one who could write about him; yet, it might be easier to cut off a piece of granite with a knife than to get him to prepare something for publication."²⁵ We do not know whether it was just Kraus's perfectionism that kept him from writing a biography of Kant. There may have been other reasons. Kant and Kraus had had a falling out. Though they did not quite avoid each other late in life, they did not talk to each other either. Some thought there was a certain rivalry between them – and there probably was. Metzger, who denigrated Kant's character, praised Kraus. We do not know whether this was a reason for Kraus's reluctance. All we know is that he never wrote anything on Kant. Scheffner might have been an even better candidate, but he showed no interest, or perhaps better, he urged on Borowski.²⁶ Another person who might have opened up new perspectives on Kant was Karl Ludwig Pörschke, professor of poetry at the University of Königsberg. An early admirer of Fichte in Königsberg, he wrote to him in 1798, reporting that Kant was no longer capable of "sustained thinking," and that he was withdrawing from society:

Since I often must talk to him for four hours at a stretch, I know his bodily and mental condition very well; he hides nothing from me. I know from intimate talks his life's story starting with the earliest years of his childhood; he acquainted me with the smallest circumstances of his progress. This will be of service when the buzzards are making noise around his grave. There are in Königsberg a number of people who are ready with biographies as well as with poems about the dead Kant.²⁷

Unfortunately, perhaps, Pörschke did not publish a biography either.

Later, other friends in Königsberg did publish some of their impressions of Kant. They added a detail or an anecdote here and there, but they did not fundamentally change the earlier picture or make a revision necessary.²⁸ Relying on the same stereotypes, they were content to support the official biographers. This is especially true of Friedrich Theodor Rink, in his *Ansichten aus Immanuel Kant's Leben* (1805). Rink, who studied with Kant between 1786 and 1789, and who was a frequent dinner guest during the periods 1792 to 1793 and 1795 to 1801, also said little about Kant's early years and much about the old man. He reinforced the view of Borowski, Jachmann, and Wasianski. Just as they were, he was interested in defending the role of Pietism in Königsberg culture.²⁹ All the other biographies that appeared during Kant's lifetime or shortly after his death are still less reliable, and can be used only with the greatest of caution. Most of them are based on mere hearsay and not on any firsthand knowledge of Kant and Königsberg. We must therefore rely mainly on the three theologians from Königsberg.

The most interesting later publication was Rudolph Reicke's *Kantiana, Contributions to Kant's Life and Writings* of 1860.³⁰ It reprinted the materials that were collected for the memorial lecture that was held for Kant in April of 1804. Some of the details in this work contradict the claims in the standard biographies, although it appears that some of the official biographers had access to this information as well. One might well wonder why they neglected these details.

Borowski is the least reliable of these three biographers. He was a reluctant contributor. Only after having been urged by several friends (including Scheffner) did he agree to publish his contribution. He himself never tired of drawing attention to his reservations about publishing his biographical sketch. Had friends not pressured him, he would have suppressed it. His reasons are not difficult to understand. Many contemporaries had made Kant's doctrines responsible for the empty churches at Sunday services in Königsberg and elsewhere. To make matters worse, some of the more radical clerics were themselves Kantians. Borowski was more of a conservative. He was also more of an opportunist, who obeyed the orders of the king's ministers without much reflection. He felt that an endorsement or defense of Kant would not help his career. While it might not end his advancement, it could well impede it.³¹

On the other hand, Borowski claimed – at least implicitly – that he had

the necessary qualifications for a Kant biographer. He argued that a biographer must be not only someone who can be trusted to know what he is reporting, but also someone who can be trusted to have “the *will* to relate the facts correctly.” He artfully left it up to the reader to determine, on the basis of his “quite simple narrative,” whether he himself “can and does give a faithful and true account.”³² A closer look at Borowski’s account reveals that the narrative is far from simple. His contribution consists of a number of quite disparate parts, more a collage than a simple narrative. The first part, entitled “Sketch for a Future Reliable Biography of the Prussian Philosopher Immanuel Kant,” dates back to October 1792. At that time Borowski had prepared a short biographical sketch of Kant for the German Society of Königsberg. As correspondence between Borowski and Kant, included in the introduction, shows, Borowski had submitted this sketch to Kant for review. Kant looked it over and made some corrections. Borowski notes what these changes were, but he does not always want to believe Kant. So, when Kant struck out the claim that he had first studied theology, Borowski insisted that he must have. The sketch is followed by another narrative. It goes over the same ground as the sketch but was written in 1804 for the purpose of the publication. Since Borowski was not very close to Kant during his final years, he relied on Pastor Georg Michael Sommer (1754–1826) for information.³³ The two narratives are followed by documents from Kant’s life as well as by a comment by Borowski on another biography.³⁴ The comment and the book end with a peculiar warning: “One should indeed not *write* too much about someone who is dead.”³⁵

Borowski followed his own advice. We certainly do not find out much about Kant’s life – and especially not much about his early life. There are a number of mistakes, both obvious and not so obvious.³⁶ Further, there seem to be many things Borowski did not tell because he seemed to feel they were inappropriate, even if they were true. At the same time, there are many things he did include because he felt they were appropriate, even though they were not strictly speaking true. To say that the contribution is an exercise in obfuscation is perhaps too harsh, but not altogether misleading. This should be already clear from the title, which reads “Presentation of Kant’s Life and Character, by Ludwig Ernst Borowski, Royal Prussian Church Counsel, Painstakingly Revised by Kant Himself.” As we have seen, if anything was painstakingly *revised* by Kant, it was less than one-third of what Borowski published, and it is questionable whether Kant revised even this portion *painstakingly*. As Kant himself said in the letter