PART I

Disorientating Kant

CHAPTER 1

Introduction
Sublimity and Abjection

The Versatility of the Sublime

This book revives a contested moment in the history of aesthetic theory in which Romantic-period writers exploit the growing awareness of irresolutions in Kant's third *Kritik*. Read with hindsight, these openings can be seen to have generated the literary opportunities for Romantic writing that embraced the philosophical significance delegated to the aesthetic by Kant, but then took advantage of the licence he conceded. Romantic writing returned upon its philosophical parent, claiming a wider significance of its own that a startled philosophy now had to learn to rationalise. The choice of texts studied here is calculated to emphasise the range of writing Kantian philosophy had rashly empowered; and the unexpectedness of some of the writings recruited for this purpose is part of the book's argument.

If this argument works, the choice of texts might look arbitrary: we are to conclude that it is a characteristic of the literary as such that it carries, embodied in its discourse, the philosophical riposte studied here. My first two authors, Heinrich von Kleist (Chapter 2) and Friedrich Hölderlin (Chapter 3), qualify for discussion because they explicitly address this literary combativeness, making it the subject of their writing. But what of the others? In the chapters on Felicia Hemans (Chapter 4) and Thomas Moore (Chapter 5), I argue that they are unusual because of their claims to be representative. Hemans's feminism is a humanism, Moore's Irish nationalism takes its bearings from Europe generally and so is international, if Eurocentric. Both authors are chosen because, polemically, they try to redefine what we have in common. Ugo Foscolo (Chapter 6), on the other hand, is perhaps unique in his expression of the questionable aspects of such literary empowerment. When literary brio is symptomatic of a disabling lack of social and political recognition, then an author making literary profit from his protests against such disadvantage can look hypocritical.

But then hypocrisy becomes a hermeneutical tool. Consequent disillusion with an aesthetic heritage in which values have become unstable in this fashion is nowhere more obviously entertained than in Balzac's human comedy (Chapter 7), where splendours become depressingly interchangeable with miseries. And George Sand's novels (Chapter 8) attempt, like no others, to write in a manner free of the requirement to address this crux: they are positive precisely where Balzac's novels are pessimistic. Finally, in Chapter 9, a contrastingly modernist linguistic positivism, most strikingly represented by Rilke's idea of a *Dinggedicht*, finds a way to avoid Foscolo's hypocrisy by recovering the magic of linguistic sufficiency, the *Sprachmagie* that Rilke's translation of 'L'infinito' hears at work in Leopardi.

For this summary of my choice of texts and authors to become intelligible, the philosophical back-story has to be pursued in some detail: firstly, to understand its ramifications; secondly, so as to appreciate the later reinventions offered the aesthetic by this scenario. Historicist criticism is habitually tempted to take the aesthetic to be a fairly simple ideological mechanism for distracting from the political and social context actually determining supposedly autonomous art. What the aesthetic deserves is then what much recent scholarship has given it: either its dissolution in those contexts, when its supposed difference is collapsed into unaestheticised determinations; or else an unmasking of its devious translation of social and political problems into artistic solutions that, because they are aesthetic or fictional, are by definition unquestionable by and unaccountable to ordinary scientific or empirical scrutiny.

In fact, though, the aesthetic is historically and ideologically a far more subtle player, constantly refashioning itself, 'a markedly contradictory concept to which only a dialectical thought can do justice', as Terry Eagleton once described it.[1] Its ambitious relativising of mediation and then of itself was always more politically pragmatic than Geoffrey Hartman's great study, *The Unmediated Vision*, conceded. But any historicist reductions of it can sound uncomfortably close to Carl Schmitt's dismissive indictment of the aesthetic as a kind of secular occasionalism, as if to accept reality or not were a decision for the artist to make from one moment to the next.[2] Yet to damn the aesthetic in this way can be shown to be as self-serving as the crimes of which it stands accused. From the start, the aesthetic was philosophically entitled to measure those institutions supposedly representing us – political, religious, educational, scientific – against *the subject* it was conscious of prior to any such determinations of it. Correspondingly, post-Kantian Romantics could release an undetermined feeling for that surplus *the object* always possesses in addition to our scientific definitions

of it. But, by its nature, this undetermined appreciation was not subject to any single set of rules. Aesthetic or teleological judgements continued irreducibly particular as in Kant, but they no longer equated to pleasurable feelings for existing contractual obligations between mind and world.

Alternatives were communicable. Neither Kant, nor of course Schmitt, could agree. Such thinking, Habermas pointed out, seemed to be 'shockingly' shared by philosophers as opposed as Adorno and Heidegger. Again, the mix of texts inheriting and exploiting Kantian freedoms resists classification. The 'mindfulness ["Eingedenken"] of nature' prized in Horkheimer and Adorno's *Dialectic of Enlightenment* is embarrassingly comparable to the 'recollection ["Andenken"] of Being' pursued throughout Heidegger, supposedly taking its cue from Hölderlin's poem of that name.[3] Schelling is there already: awareness of this surplus's indivisible remainder, in his words ('unaufgehende Rest'), need not settle into what Adorno called Heidegger's 'jargon of authenticity', although to see what else it might become we have to return to its originating moment. Existentialism eventually looks like a way of foreclosing, through authenticity (Heidegger) or freedom (Sartre), the post-Kantian abyssal possibilities opened up here.

On Wordsworth's 'redundant energy', the initially vexatious imagination of *The Prelude*, and on Blake's apocalypse is mapped a comparable economy for these disturbances: in Wordsworth's case a sovereign Kantian faculty, in Blake's the systematic mythopoeia of the Prophetic Books.[4] Most striking about a different post-Kantian literary opportunism is that through its own inventiveness it now can commandeer and extend the aesthetic authority it had been granted, a process in which it can be seen to be both *falling* in the estimation of its original Kantian philosophical sponsor and *rising* upwards in that of fellow artists. It falls upwards, in a locution of Hölderlin I find very useful throughout this book.[5] Its power of metamorphosis or 'elastic spirit' can be helpfully grasped by contrasting it with histories of literature such as that of the Russian formalists, histories that record a strictly internal sequence of art's continual uncovering of its own devices. Post-Kantian creative writing does not follow this logic of the avant-garde, whereby art is a self-differing process that always recuperates itself as art, adding to the tradition it has just defamiliarised. Escaping that aesthetic containment, and contrary to the influential literary purism of the interpretation of the Kantian aesthetic heritage by Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe and Jean-Luc Nancy, art can stretch to reconfigure itself in unaesthetic contexts. It transfers a creativity now no longer bound to its original aesthetic field and so appears retooled and contracted

out for different ideological purposes appropriate to changed historical circumstances.

For Adorno, the inalienable authority of the aesthetic was to offer a position critiquing identity–thinking or classification generally, a negative attitude that, 'shockingly' as Habermas said, could look as empty as the reverence for undifferentiated 'Being' Adorno had so little respect for in Heidegger's philosophy.[6] But Adorno's impatience with any artistic establishment does perpetuate the post-Kantian aesthetic mobility I am describing here. Nothing is easier today, as the Marxist critic Peter Bürger pointed out, than to criticise Adorno's aesthetic theory. Bürger, in his own critique of idealist aesthetics, himself tries to escape its Kantian framework with recourse to Herder. The intention is to circumvent Kant in order to find a way into a post-Kantianism indebted to but also breaking with Kant.[7] Romanticism certainly corroborated Kantian aesthetics, but its creative reworking of itself actually suggests departures from Kant in need of explanations not found in his philosophy. Hence the periodic references to the ideas of J. G. Hamann in this book.

The historical character in which the Kantian aesthetic acted in ways most difficult to predict and control was the sublime. As I will rehearse in a pointed way in introducing Chapter 2 on Kleist, Kant's sublime tried to police the aesthetic freedom accessed by uses of language reaching beyond the concepts out of which we construct our world and ourselves. The experiences prompting sublime usage were potentially nonsensical, fanatical, humiliating, confusing, and had to be somehow reorientated within the economy of experience they had apparently outstripped. The sublime, in other words, had to re-establish the pattern of the beautiful, but at a higher level of organisation. The beautiful was our pleasurable relish for the way our faculties properly combine to produce knowledge. When we judged something to be beautiful we were actually saying nothing and everything about the object itself. Reflected back to us in our experience of beauty were our collaborative powers to produce knowledge independently of using them to determine the character of the object, although were they to determine anything that would be it. Orientation is maintained, as it is when Kant sees in the sublime the beautiful as it would be experienced by a higher intelligence. In other words, the excess released in self-consciousness is still the reflection of a coherent world of objects. It's just that the world of objects is beyond our power to understand, but could we understand it, it would observe the same decorum as the one celebrated in our own experience of the beautiful. What else could be reflected back to us in sublime experience?

Kant's bringing to rule of the unruliness of the sublime was an ostensibly paradoxical activity. It entailed preserving loyalty to law-governed discourse by referring the experience of scientific and moral limitations to a higher court. The only possibility permitted by Kant was a juridical hierarchy obliging compatibility between indeterminate things in themselves and things determined so that they could appear to us. We are obliged to think of *nature* as binding itself together in such a way as to make possible our systematic experience of it, otherwise there would be nothing to think beyond or imagine. Comparably, beauty was a symbol of morality: our pleasurable sense of *ourselves* as free agents reinforced a categorical imperative to behave in a law-bound way. For Friedrich Schiller, such an equation was the essence of aesthetic education, and in his own essay 'On the Sublime' ('Über das Erhabene') and the corroborative essay 'On Grace and Dignity' ('Über Anmut und Würde'), the function of the sublime was to support the dignity of the subject. Freedom then would be perfect service: not the freedom to cultivate a new sense of what we might be collectively, one capable of redefining individual and social identity on its own terms. 'The possibility that things might become truly different', writes Adorno, 'is hidden from Schiller the idealist'.[8] Schiller's aesthetics show that a sense of freedom unbounded by the law is only realised in our *free* acceptance of the law. The legitimating faculty of Reason must necessarily play ball. Nothing else would make sense for Schiller's master, Kant. If freedoms beyond current modes of jurisdiction did not result in a *sensus communis* analogous to law-governed knowledge and behaviour, then those freedoms would be incommunicable: they wouldn't mean anything. The Romantics, though, saw in the priority Kant gave to the communicability of aesthetic judgement their chance to escape his legalism.

At the same time, post-Kantians also escaped from another kind of faithfulness to Kant's letter of the law – that expounded by Johann Gottlieb Fichte's claim to have written a philosophy in which Kant was properly understood. Fichte saw that self-consciousness must be isomorphic, its own thing, a kind of performance of itself, not a knowing of itself. He didn't alter the cipher-like, content-less quality of Kant's transcendental unity of apperception; his original insight, as Dieter Henrich famously argued, was to realise that self-consciousness required a logic different from the referential model that worked for our consciousness of everything else. As an idealist, Fichte believed that if the subject grounded our knowledge of everything else it could not be just another object of that knowledge. But Fichte has very little to say about aesthetics.[9] The academic character of his philosophy was what post-Kantianism broke down. It most obviously did so when it expanded

considerably our sense of the ways in which other discourses could flesh out the otherwise very formal presentation of the Fichtean 'ich'. Post-Kantians like Hölderlin, Hegel and Schelling, and their *Älteste Systemprogramm des deutschen Idealismus* ('The Oldest System Programme of German Idealism'), written by one or all of them, held that 'the philosopher must possess as much aesthetic power as the poet'. Currently, the 'people without aesthetic sense are our pedantic philosophers' ('Buchstaben Philosophen').[10] The point here was less to insist that philosophers be arty and rather to put poets in the driving seat of philosophy. In adjacent political speculations, one can see analogies. The difference between Fichte's strict Kantianism and post-Kantian aesthetics is like the difference between the German exceptionalism advocated by Fichte's *Reden an die deutsche Nation* (1807) and Friedrich Schlegel's free and easy republicanism. One is reminded of Victor Hugo's remark to Swinburne that he moved from conservatism into republicanism 'as you would pass from a river into the ocean'.[11]

From Longinus onwards, the sublime was tied to notions of elevation; but it was also deemed irresistibly infectious, an experience impregnating the language of its admirers with its own qualities.[12] Typically, the sublime object became appropriated by the language used to describe it. From the start, then, its exaltation could potentially be compromised by the words taking over responsibility for its philosophical deficit. The indeterminate object reflects the indeterminacy required of the subject in order to get on terms with it. The feeling of subjective indeterminacy it precipitates becomes the only possible expression of the indeterminate object. But, obviously, an afflatus relying on indeterminacy to guarantee its superiority is in a precarious situation! The Longinian sublime is an experience whose capitulation to its own expression allows a radical reformulation of the original exaltation. The sublime is inherently figural, not for the literal-minded philosophers. Its intrinsically tropical nature encourages a reflexive turn whose contagiousness is already prophetic of the instability exploited by the Romantics and by those repurposing it up to the present. The *sensus communis* is suddenly up for grabs, if it is a product of communicability, as Kant believes. Instead of being the necessarily shared configuration of faculties producing experience, it becomes a debateable culture subject to continual reconfiguration. Provided you can persuade people to agree with you, the metaphysical reality of what you are agreeing about does not matter. Communication has not only taken place, its having taken place has consolidated a new community. The experience traditionally communicated by ideas of elevation and exaltation in excess of knowledge is now open to redefinition.

Let me give a short, explanatory history of recent, competing versions of this problematic. For Jean-François Lyotard, the sublime's definitive elusiveness to pre-existing concepts figured an exemplary politics in which society abandoned fixed criteria for membership in order to preserve a desirably unregulated openness to difference. Every new applicant has the potential to change the definition of what it is to count as a citizen, irrespective of the qualifications demanded so far. Justice becomes an aspiration, not a rule – and we can all aspire to justice, *au juste*.[13] Lives, black and white, of any gender, rich and poor, matter equally in the definition of what might be representatively human. For Slavoj Žižek, on the other hand, if the 'Beautiful' was for Kant the 'symbol of the good', then by implication the sublime was the symbol of 'radical evil'. Contrary to Lyotard, Žižek argued that the community of agreement evoked by Kant's sublime could be Hegel's 'Pöbel', a mob who have chosen an ethic in which evil is the rule, not the exception.[14] On these readings, Kant is thought, symptomatically, to have opened the door to thinking communities perversely opposed to the *sensus communis* he wanted. One might have expected Hegel to level this charge against someone he famously called the philosopher of the French Revolution. The American critic Thomas Weiskel initiated a continuing examination of the sublime as aestheticising something now more commonly understood through psychoanalytic interpretations of repression. More recent psychoanalytically inclined critics have let us see that poetry can be read to show that the queering or castration of the subject expelled from the symbolic order can be recuperated by an avowedly queered or feminine sublime, a recovery of dignity that it had been the purpose of the exclusion order to rule out of court.[15] Neil Hertz and other American deconstructive critics working with Derrida made the sublime the sign of yet another kind of openness, this time semiotic, arising from the impossibility of any closure whatsoever. The sublime reflexively problematises its own status, generating what Derrida would call autoimmunity, and suggests an unmanageability constantly repressed by any of our uses of language, even psychoanalytic ones. What psychoanalysis is a repression of is just this recognition of the absence of any transcendental signified anchoring the meanings of words and terminating their endless figuring of each other.[16] This deconstructive turn is confirmed by the endless proliferation of literary interpretation, uncontrollable both empirically (now too many for us to read them all) and conceptually.

These selective elaborations suggest how the sublime moves on to play a part in problematising the original aesthetic role assigned it by Kant. This book looks at a tradition in which the apparent degeneracy of the sublime,

its loss of elevation, works to its advantage. It becomes a movement of speculation by which an original regulation of the deregulated continually recasts itself in different discursive locations, transgressing the boundaries of all sorts of constraint in order to find more symbols of its own freedom to do so. Freedom is necessarily free in its discoveries. It also, as Kant saw, entails equality, and raises the problem of balancing this birthright against an existing inequality of skills, which, pace Kant, may be desirable.[17] Aesthetic significance changes with motivation and, in Isobel Armstrong's avowed radicalisation of it, enables 'naming and renaming to negotiate experience in, with, and even against a speech community'.[18] Armstrong is most successful in showing aesthetic initiatives working through affect to support feminism, in a manner that I find anticipated in writings by Felicia Hemans and George Sand. The originally aesthetic context needs a little more detailed understanding first, in order to appreciate the liberation theology the original religion engendered – 'in, with and even against' inherited ideas of what is a speech community. A dissonant sublime is part of that context, but again its disruptions lead one to expect the subsequent history of its infectious transformations into other discourses.

Orientation and Disorientation

In 1786, four years before the publication of his third *Kritik*, Kant published an article called 'What Is Orientation in Thinking' ('Was heißt: sich im Denken orientieren').[19] There, Kant argues that when we speculate outside the regime of concepts we are still 'orientated' by a priori feelings that answer to the 'need' ('Bedürfnis') of Reason. Just as we know our right hand from our left subjectively, without recourse to objects or external checks, so our thinking is still regulated even when it has taken leave of known objects and 'extends beyond the frontiers of experience'. We possess subjective principles of intuition (space and time), but we also have subjective feelings of reason's need when we venture into the supersensible realm. In the dark, as it were, we can still take our bearings from ideas ('God' and the 'highest good') consistent with the possibility of the experience we have moved beyond.[20] When we orientate ourselves in relation to these principles, our speculations remain communicable; and without communicability, Kant argues, without an intended community, it doesn't make sense to say that we are thinking. If 'community' is meant to tie down our speculations, orientating them rationally, then community can never for Kant be part of the original speculative adventure as it was going to be for the Romantics.

In the *Kritik der Urteilskraft*, aesthetic and teleological judgements have become the left and right hand of Reason. The sublime is investigated as an extra-conceptual space in our experience, potentially antinomian therefore, but one recalled from such fanaticism ('Schwarmerei') by being referred to Reason.[21] Reason is the universal source of ideas ensuring the consistency of what we apprehend within the limits of our Understanding. In the same way, it is only by being referred to a faculty that we share irrespective of individual differences that the sublime is guaranteed communicability. Reason, that is, ensures the communicability of aesthetic judgement analogously to the way it guarantees the logic of understanding and the obligations of morality. Or we can't but assume that it does, otherwise experience of the world, cognitive and ethical, would be impossible. Another kind of referral to reason must be what ensures the communicability of aesthetic and teleological judgements exceeding its scientific remit.

The Romantics undo this familiar Kantian story in original ways as they seek to change rather than fall in line with the taste of their time. The criterion of communicability turned out to be a hostage to literary fortunes. The undoing of Kantian common sense took place sometimes explicitly, sometimes implicitly. In what follows, Heinrich von Kleist is perhaps the most explicit of the spoilers; others entirely unacquainted with the Kantian matrix nevertheless also enrich poetic authority until it is no longer manageable by Kant's philosophical prescriptions or assumptions of hegemonic cultural continuity. Literary significance advances, unawares, on what had been dreamt for it in that originally approving philosophy. Most spectacular, certainly in political terms, are those writings addressing the fact, more recognisable to modernity, that sublimity and abjection share the same space. Not to take something seriously, scientifically, ethically or politically, even to degrade it, actually consigns it to the same extra-conceptual, extra-moral field occupied by our most exalted conceptions of ourselves. Unlike Žižek, we might see this not as ruinous, not as cracking Kant's universal with radical evil, but as retaining the traditional authority of the sublime while granting it to the dispossessed and unempowered. They, too, can get us to see reason.

Hölderlin, on the other hand, deeply locked into the post-Kantian attempt to break out of the Kantian/Fichtean matrix, also gives us the writing of an experience no longer belonging to an organising subject. His tragedy is to be a subject disintegrating under a psychologically impossible vocation.[22] Chapter 3 on Hölderlin is the core of this book. Hölderlin tries to cast his self-destructive ambition as an attempt to match Greek