In the first case study, the theoretical framework outlined in the opening chapters will be put into practice through the words and images of Heinrich von Kleist’s famous essay on the marionette theatre. Writing in the context of German Romanticism, Kleist was a torn figure who, on the one hand, believed strongly in the rational tenets of the Enlightenment but, on the other hand, found many of its principles as deeply incongruous with his own world view – and none more radically than those proffered by Kant. Then again, as the Age of Reason was one in which many traditional methods of instruction and tuition – the marionette theatre included – were being undermined, it is surely indicative of Kleist’s refusal to give in to the time’s demands that he should choose to demonstrate his thoughts in the unique form of a presentation on the brink of becoming obsolete.

With that in mind, I will argue that the possibility of transcendence in the philosophy of Kant and the literature of Kleist plays at the limits of what can be presented in language. Starting out from the former’s objective to establish a new idealism, I first move on to reiterating the importance of hypotyposis to Kant’s system, and then turn to Kleist’s Romanticist struggle with and ultimate rejection of that system. His essay ‘Über das Marionettentheater’ (1810, see Appendix 1) is used to point to the pitfalls of linguistic presenting. Paul de Man’s readings of both Kant and Kleist will be helpful because of their insistent focus on language, but I will also indicate where his rigorously formalistic approach might fall short. When that happens, the failure of Kleist’s puppet show as a transcendental presentation may be experienced as
the end beyond which there is absolutely nothing. That, if anything, is an experience of horror.

**Kant’s idealism**

As a whole, beside the notions introduced in the opening sections, Kant’s aim was to establish a break between his own thinking and the old theologies, dualisms and logical rationalist systems that, in Sebastian Gardner’s words, seemed to operate out of a metaphysical sphere which had us ‘vacillate between dogmatism, skepticism and indifference’. With them it was either God, the division of body and mind, or natural reason that was deemed the transcendent ‘real’ on which everything else was built: there was something in such an understanding of experience that Kant sought to fix with his effort. For instead of considering thought as a process that only came into being after ‘reality’ was already well in existence, he wanted to make it clear that thought in a way preceded reality and made it available for experience, time after time, by supplying form. In other words, against what he saw as the metaphysical rule of transcendent, reality-legislating entities such as God and nature, and our struggle with them, Kant proposed to install new knowledge for ‘conditions of possible experience’.

Kant called this philosophy transcendental idealism. First, it was to be transcendental because the question of metaphysics refused to go away: metaphysical discourse did employ ‘the same cognitive power as is employed in commonsense and scientific judgments about the world of experience’. This means that metaphysics, along with its ruling transcendent entities, did not just suddenly become invalid or useless – there had to be a new, transcendental way of conceiving and talking about these entities, making ‘cognition itself an object of philosophical enquiry’. In this context, we do not need to dwell on how and whether Kant achieved the feat in all of his writings. We only need to recognise the persistent necessity of the metaphysical question and the transcendental space it keeps open for such experiences which at any time appear to transcend understanding.

Second, Kant’s philosophy was idealism because it dealt with the conditions that first make cognition and experience possible, and such a priori conditions cannot be made into a principle except in the