

Review*Poetic Force: Poetry After Kant*

by Kevin McLaughlin

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**A**s the author announces in the “Preface” to his book, *Poetic Force: Poetry After Kant* is concerned with a force of language that bears within it a certain “unforce.” Poetic (un)force expresses a capacity of language to communicate that is always also an incapacity (to communicate).

The densely argued “Preface” presents this claim not only as the main thesis of the book, but also as a thesis that can ultimately be traced to Kant. According to Kant’s account of the dynamic sublime, its aesthetic experience rests on a privation of cognitive force; on an incapacity to cognize a certain phenomenon of nature empirically. This aesthetic experience gives us the communicable feeling of a force of reason “in us” that supersedes our (in)capacity to cognize nature empirically. For Kant, the poets “exemplify this ability to communicate the feeling of the supersensible force of reason” (xii), as the author rightly notes. McLaughlin proposes that the following twofold claim is implicit in this account:

Kant discovers that 1) there is “an a priori capacity of [poetic] language to free itself from having empirical content” (xiv) — a capacity of poetic language that exceeds “the grasp of empirical consciousness (...), for example by breaking free from spatial and temporal metaphors that draw on an empirical view of the world” (xiii). This capacity is expressed when language communicates a mere feeling of the supersensible

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force of reason. 2) In its expression of a capacity to communicate this feeling, poetic language also “expresses (...) [an] incapacity to communicate” (xiii).

While it seems immediately promising to trace part 1) of this double thesis to Kant, it may seem implausible that part 2) can be shown to be implicit (even if “perhaps aptly unstressed,” xiv) in Kant. However, as it turns out in the course of the book, McLaughlin refrains from attributing claim 2) directly to Kant. The fact that this contradicts his overt announcement in the “Preface” is one of the very few points that I will critically note in what follows. For its impressive scope, brilliant philological analyses, compelling and interesting arguments on the highest theoretical level, the book deserves outright praise.

The four main chapters explore the more or less direct bearing of a Kantian notion of reason, and its expression in/as aesthetic and poetic *force*, on the poetry of Hölderlin, Baudelaire, and Arnold. And it is only in the subtle philological readings of these authors, where McLaughlin brings out an “intensification,” or even a break with a Kantian force of communicability, and discloses, in poetic language itself, a poetic unforce or adynamism internal to it. The study as a whole is a prime example of substantial work in comparative literature — and each of its chapters reveals the importance and instructiveness of such work. To take just one example, chapter four not only unfolds Kant’s influence on Arnold, but also re-reads and further develops a suggestion by de Man, that the Victorians’ struggle to come to terms with the force of linguistic unforce in Wordsworth parallels the importance of Hölderlin’s enigma (arising from the same force of linguistic unforce) for the Germans.

The “Preface” itself goes on to offer an overview of the entire book, which connects the four main chapters and the “Epilogue” into a single thread of discussion. Since this connective summary is held on a highly abstract level, and also because the chapters are in themselves rather disconnected (they do not successively unfold a single deductive argument; rather, they each individually, like monads, offer an

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individual perspective on what comes to be seen as a common constellation), I found it most fruitful to read this part of the book at the very end. However, before I discuss each chapter in turn, I do wish to point to a perspective that McLaughlin opens up at the very end of this introductory part—a perspective that perhaps best captures what is ultimately at stake in this important book.

The return to Kant by this literary study points to an answer to contemporary forms of uncritical empiricism (present especially in tendencies to reduce human experience to neurophysiological brain processes). This answer, however, modifies the most well-known answers to empiricism around 1800—those offered by the movement that came to be called “German Idealism”—in a crucial respect. For while McLaughlin’s return to Kant insists with Hannah Arendt on “the communicability of an empirically unaccountable feeling” (ibid.), this does not lead him to posit or presuppose a necessary unity of reason. His analyses of poetic language as an exemplary manifestation of Kantian universal communicability instead confront us with “a force of language that resists (...) [the] determination [inherent in empirical cognition],” (xx) while revealing a finitude and unforce that this resistance bears within it.

In this and other respects, the book bears witness to McLaughlin’s continuous engagement with the writings of Benjamin, Derrida and de Man as well as to a rich exchange with colleagues such as Peter Fenves, Samuel Weber, Thomas Schestag, and Werner Hamacher. Accompanied by a splendid corpus of scholarly notes and in-depth discussion of literature, it assumes the sovereign form of a document of critical thought not claimed to be owned by a single author. Or as McLaughlin suggests with Hamacher’s case for philology as a *philia*—as a “feeling of ‘friendship’ with language as an ambiguous and fragile medium of community” (xx) shared by everyone who speaks and writes: “It raises the possibility of (...) a philological sociability and a *socius* emerging out of philology (xxi).”

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The first chapter, “Ur-ability: Force and Image from Kant to Benjamin,” proposes to conceive of Kant’s capacity of aesthetic judgment as a “poetic force” (4). It opens with an inspiring discussion that connects the double sense of the *sensus communis* “as a shared and a sharing ability” (5)—as a power both universally shared by all rational beings and as expressing the universal communicability of a feeling—to Kant’s notion of community in the *Critique of Pure Reason*. The latter denotes a merely thinkable, non-empirical simultaneity (*communio*). This allows the author to reveal the fundamental affinity of Benjamin’s critical project with his proposed Kantian notion of poetic force. According to what seems to me to be an indisputable reading, Benjamin is from early to late periods concerned with a peculiar power of philosophical thinking ascribed to the image. And this, as McLaughlin argues, goes hand in hand with a reinterpretation of time, a thinking of time, in the image, as a “peculiar temporal simultaneity” that is also “characteristic of the nonempirical community to which Kant alludes (6).” McLaughlin develops this initial presentation of Benjamin’s position in its relation to Kant’s theory of aesthetic judgment largely along the lines of some of Samuel Weber’s recent suggestions. Of particular interest among these is the argument which McLaughlin goes on to pursue in the remainder of the chapter and also at later stages of the book, on which the communicability, or more literally: im-part-ability (*Mit-teil-barkeit*) of Kant’s aesthetic judgment returns in Benjamin’s images as an imparting of an ambiguous time, as both an impartability of “a genuinely historical time” (8) and a time that “sets itself apart from the time and space of empirical experience” (*ibid.*).

The bulk of the chapter then divides into two related parts: a) a fascinating and succinct close reading of the relation of two orders of violence or two kinds of force in Kant’s theory of the dynamic sublime—with a detour

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through some of Kant's later suggestions on the relation of forces in the *Opus postumum*, and b) a highly compelling reading of Benjamin's early essay "Two Poems by Friedrich Hölderlin." McLaughlin argues with great subtlety, both philological and philosophical, that this essay, which deals with the reworking of the poem "Poet's courage" ("Dichtermut"; 1801) into what is then titled "Timidity" ("Blödigkeit"; 1803), allows us to read Hölderlin's poem as a "reinterpretation" (17) and "intensification" (24) of Kant's account of the dynamic sublime.

Under the force of what Benjamin calls "the more rigorous power of a world-image" (22), time in Hölderlin's poem becomes figurable, a function of space. Likewise, space becomes a function of time. This figurability "makes time impartable" and presses "through the boundary that separates space from time under conditions of cognition" (23). On McLaughlin's reading, the analogy of this poetic figurability with Kant's account of the dynamic sublime goes thus far: Space and time as forms of cognition of physical nature are superseded in Hölderlin under the force of the image, just like the greater inner force of reason is recognized in Kantian aesthetic experience to surpass the power of nature to destroy us as empirical beings.

But while McLaughlin wants to establish a certain continuity between a Kantian concept of reason as a capacity of free critical thinking independent or even destructive of the order of a cognizing/determining understanding and a "primal potentiality or *Ur-ability* of reason" in Benjamin's image-force (see 28), he marks as fundamentally different from Kant the freedom from all ends whatsoever, even a "radical suspension of (...) 'purposiveness'" (26), in Hölderlin's poem. While in Kant, aesthetic experience leads to a "vision" of human progress and to an "explicit recognition" of the moral force of reason "in us" (see 23), what emerges instead in Hölderlin is an "authority" or "supreme sovereignty" (26) of the mere (poetic) medium. The reader can only guess here that the suspension of all ends in this medium is supposed to relate to the notion of *unforce* in which the author is ultimately interested, as we

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know from the “Preface,” though this notion does not explicitly appear anywhere in the chapter. This, then, would be my single critical comment on this highly inspiring opening chapter: It tells us too little about why or in what sense poetic force in Hölderlin is poetic *unforce*, a force “that resists becoming one” (xi).

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The first part of the second chapter, “Hölderlin’s Peace,” draws on a number of Kant’s writings on practical philosophy, including the essay “Toward Eternal Peace,” *The Metaphysics of Morals*, *Religion Within the Boundaries of Mere Reason*, as well as the *Conflict of the Faculties*, again in relation to the *Critique of the Power of Judgment*. McLaughlin’s comparative and combinatory reading of these many different texts is much more than an ordinary scholarly interpretation, and this for two reasons: First, the idea that is ultimately brought out here is productively developed by McLaughlin *with Kant*, in an attempt likely inspired by Hannah Arendt’s late lectures on Kant’s political philosophy. In these lectures, Arendt also draws on Kant’s practical and political writings and relates them to the power of aesthetic judgment. Yet especially in its messianic dimension that links his reading again to Benjamin, McLaughlin ultimately takes a direction quite different from hers. He pursues Kant account of a moral revolution in man as the ethical ground of a non-empirical, aesthetic impartability of a political revolution. On McLaughlin’s interpretation, the feeling of this impartability expresses the justified belief in a “redemptive peace” that is the messianic “end of historical time” (of all war and conflict) (see in particular 39 and 42ff). Secondly, and perhaps even more importantly, McLaughlin offers a genuinely philological reading of Kant’s imaginative philosophical language with special regard for what could be called the “pure sensible” dimension in it. These are Kant’s

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many figures of and references to (a moment in) time and (a region of or place in an inner) space, e.g. in his appeal to the non-extended moment of the moral revolution or to the “room” reason makes for rational faith “in” man, which are no empirical time and space. Because these figures of time and space do not stand for anything in the empirical world, and because McLaughlin seems to want to define the metaphor as a figure in which an x always stands for a y that can exist in the empirical world (see 30—no reasons are given for this contestable position), he can thus conclude that “the poetic force of thinking in Kant’s writing (...) emerges as a linguistic force that frees itself from the metaphorical character of the language of empirical experience (42).”

Poetic force is expressed in the non-empirical, philosophical and aesthetic participation in the French Revolution, which is with Kant at the same time an expression of the “moral disposition” (*Anlage*) in man. And as McLaughlin’s philological analysis beautifully shows, it is figuratively a manifestation of an “outward dimension of inwardness” (50). In the second part of this chapter, McLaughlin turns again to two poems by Hölderlin, to “The Rhine” and the enigmatic “Celebration of Peace.” As in the first chapter, he finds in Hölderlin what he calls an “intensification” of Kantian poetic force, which, however, breaks with the idea of a gradual historical progress that in Kant parallels and supports the idea of an absolute end to historical time. (We can here see that the structure of argument of the second chapter is in many ways analogous to that of the first, though this formal analogy is not accompanied by an explicit discussion of dis/continuities between them — this is a point that concerns the overall entwinement among parts of the book as a whole, to which I return below). Re-reading and further developing de Man’s reading of Hölderlin in *Rhetoric of Romanticism*, McLaughlin argues that the Rousseauian feeling of inwardness and peace to which “The Rhine” alludes “is a ‘participating’ in the name of the gods that is at once a sharing in their spoils (their ‘immortality’), and also a taking of their position (*Nahme* also meant the seizure of an enemy’s position) by one alien to them (*ein*

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*Anderer*) (49).” In this sense, this feeling is closely related to the possibility of an aesthetic participation in a historical event in Kant. The difference between Kant and Hölderlin McLaughlin marks lies in the political and revolutionary effect of a non-cognitive feeling of participation: While in Kant it expresses (among other things) the idea of a “peaceful purposiveness shaping human affairs gradually over time” (54), and so is seen as promising a historical effect as well, the figuring force or poetic force that Hölderlin’s “Celebration of Peace” imparts in the pure form of a “linguistic medium” (see 53) and “celebrates” as “a *peace* of language disowning an illusory power to appropriate the world” (54) is language’s “capacity to resist the effort to designate things as well as the effort to make it into an instrument of mastery” (ibid.).

### III

Chapter three, “Poetic Reason of State: Baudelaire and the Multitudes,” offers a reading of Baudelaire’s poetic stance towards modernity with and beyond Benjamin’s “On Some Motifs in Baudelaire.” McLaughlin suggests that for Baudelaire, poetry “must become an exposition of” (57) that which threatens, in modernity, trans-subjectively communicable aesthetic (e.g. lyric) experience. Such experience, according to its Benjaminian notion, is unconscious in the sense that it is not determined by the self-affirming logic of an ego. Benjamin famously contrasts this loaded sense of a genuine “experience” with what he calls a mere “*Erlebnis*,” a psychic measure of protection from shock which presupposes a stance of constant conscious alertness. Benjamin’s analysis had shown that modern conditions of life bring with them a reduction of experience to mere solipsistic *Erlebnissen*. However, in what I take to be one of the most ingenious and subtle dialectical moves of Benjamin’s essay, the argument, in the end, is that precisely by radically exposing himself to this modern threat,

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Baudelaire in his poetic work — if perhaps without fully knowing it — ultimately arrives at giving the modern *Erlebnis* (again) the “weight” of a historically impartable experience. McLaughlin does not follow this reading of Benjamin; indeed, he does not even discuss it. Instead he seems to want to propose that Baudelaire’s poetry envisions a constant fading of every kind of subjective human power (whether ethical, political, historical, or poetic) — and so offers a fundamental critique of the modern illusion of the ego-affirming *Erlebnis*, but without implicitly (“*untergründig*”) regaining an historical impartability that for Benjamin lies at the heart of Baudelaire’s belated success as a truly modern poet.

This is not to say that McLaughlin’s reading of an exposition of a fundamental poetic *incapacity*, in Baudelaire, is not in itself compelling. The author first discusses Baudelaire’s blurring of translation and commentary in the way in which he “amalgamates” Thomas De Quincey’s *Confessions of an English Opium Eater* in his *Artificial Paradise* as an example of the way in which this poetry exposes an incapacity of the poet to distinguish and affirm what can count as his own self (-production). At the same time, *Artificial Paradise* exposes a fundamental incommunicability between self and other (in this case: between the two works, between the two poets), in short: “a singular state of solitude that is, however, not governed by subjective self-relation—a solitude stripped of self-hood” (59). For Baudelaire, as McLaughlin goes on to suggest, this is also the “solitude of a multitude” (67), and the solitude of the artistic individual “disintegrating and shadowed” by the “unreceptive” masses of urban crowds (also: the mass reading public that was at Baudelaire’s time not receptive to his work) (see 65). A reading of the poem “The Widows” leads the author to the conclusion that “Baudelaire’s poems avoid the identification of poetry with the egological projections of community made by the Poet” (69f). The chapter closes with a fine analysis of the poem “The Little Old Women,” in which, as McLaughlin argues, language is finally emptied of meaning as it continuously cancels out the poet’s repeated

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but futile effort to *produce* an experience (in this case: a communication with the old women which he addresses): For this, according to McLaughlin, is “poetic reason of state” in Baudelaire, subordinating all means to the end of enforcing the *poietic* achievement, the mimetic production of experience, even to the point where the futility and absurdity of this undertaking manifests itself. “The end of the poem, and the tolling of the last rhyme, may [thus] be read as an acknowledgment of an inability to perfect the suspended action of the poet taking leave eternally of the women and the city of which they all become the ruined figures (76).”

#### IV

“Arnold’s Resignation,” probably my favourite chapter in the book, provides a new and fascinating interpretation of the complex shift in ethical-political theory accompanying Matthew Arnold’s resignation as a poet after he turned to critical writing in the 1860s. The argument culminates in a reading of the early poem “Resignation,” where Arnold, under the influence of Wordsworth, still imitates a peculiar poetic (un)force that he would later defensively dismiss.

McLaughlin first shows that Arnold’s cultural theory in *Culture and Anarchy* “takes on an explicitly messianic character” (83) as Arnold at the end of the book adopts ideas from the writings of Saint Paul. This involvement with Pauline messianism continues in *Saint Paul and Protestantism*. McLaughlin here refers to Agamben’s interpretation of the Pauline “now-time” (*Kairos*) in order to bring out Arnold’s peculiar way of adapting Paul in these works. On Agamben’s reading of Paul, having the experience of being called by God (the moment of vocation) “is *as not having it*” (86), because it resists self-conscious appropriation (it cannot be self-consciously experienced or recalled as being had by oneself). Similarly, truly moral action is *as not* (self-

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consciously) acting. By contrast, the force of vocation “that seizes the subject,” in the later Arnold, “is contained by self-consciousness of the experience: by the ‘feeling’ and ‘the sense of having it’” (89). McLaughlin goes so far as to suggest that “the [messianic] call to revoke worldly orders [in Arnold] yields to the sovereignty of a self-conscious subject that elevates its own position to an ultimate end” (89) and that the concept of disinterestedness at the heart of *Culture and Anarchy* is therefore a) equated with self-consciousness and b) together with self-consciousness exempt from the messianic vocation of culture. Self-consciousness is accordingly not part of the worldly order that is “revoked by (...) [Arnold’s] call to disinterestedness” (92). For these reasons, McLaughlin is deeply critical of the very notion of disinterestedness in the later Arnold. He finds it to be fundamentally limited, opposed to a truly Kantian “disinterested respect for the moral law” (91) and distorting the late Arnold’s theory of culture “into an instance of what Kant describes as ‘moral fanaticism:’ positing subjective self-consciousness (...) as the basis of ethical and political obligation” (91 f).

Defended along these lines, i.e., with Kant, this criticism is not well grounded. For it is based on the suggestion that Kant’s moral philosophy would involve a rejection of self-consciousness, which is wrong (not to say absurd). McLaughlin could have avoided implying as much by attending to the distinction between two kinds of selves in Kant’s practical philosophy, which is analogous to the distinction between transcendental and empirical self-consciousness in the theoretical philosophy. If respect for the moral law in Kant can justly be called “disinterested,” then only with regard to the empirical self, which is vulnerable to sensible desires and interests, and which Kant carefully distinguishes in various practical writings from the moral “person,” who is a thinking ‘I’ in many ways comparable to transcendental self-consciousness as the supreme condition of all theoretical cognition. For this moral self, who according to Kant *feels* respect for the moral law (i.e., is the self-conscious subject of a feeling), and who recognizes *its own*

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or *self-determined* duty to follow the law, surely is or presupposes a kind of self-consciousness, i.e., the thought of an ‘I.’ It is, nevertheless, construed by Kant as independent from the consciousness of the empirical self and its contingent determinations over chronological empirical time. The moral person is able to see herself as independent from her empirical identity and must be able to subordinate the preservation of this empirical identity in the sensible world to the higher prescriptions of reason — out of respect *for her own morality*, for the self-given law of reason *in herself* as a moral person. The passage at *AA* 5: 92 in Kant’s *Critique of Practical Reason* to which McLaughlin appeals does not support a reading that would deny this basic view. (Note also that mere self-consciousness of the moral person—which is obviously required even to merely think the categorical imperative—does not contradict Kant’s tenet that we can never know whether our actions are in fact good, i.e., whether they truly are actions motivated by reason alone). And once one sees this possibility to reconcile a notion of self-consciousness with truly moral obligation in Kant, one can also return to the passages in Arnold that McLaughlin so fiercely attacks. One can then justifiably ask: Is McLaughlin’s criticism of Arnold really substantial? For an interest in the affirmation and preservation of moral selfhood might very well be compatible with a call to disinterestedness as regards all sensible matters of empirical, historical, and cultural consciousness/identity. Indeed, a reader of Kant like Arnold may come to adopt the view that one demands the other.

Be this as it may, the notion of “inaction in action” that McLaughlin now traces in the *early* Arnold certainly differs fundamentally even from a properly Kantian stance of disinterested moral selfhood (which presupposes, on my reading, a self-consciousness of the moral person). McLaughlin first turns to a passage from the poem “Empedocles on Etna,” to contrast a revoking of the “regime of ‘consciousness’” (92), and a “more critical” (95) and “unselfish” (94) “force of disinterestedness” (95) in the latter with the aforementioned affirmation of self-consciousness

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and the arguably distorted notion of disinterestedness in the cultural writings. This offers a basis for the reading of “Resignation,” which, as McLaughlin proposes in a thoroughly argued and highly compelling analysis, *positively* engages with an enigmatic and unnamed poetic force that Arnold sensed in Wordsworth. While the later Arnold, as de Man has suggested, reacted defensively to this threatening “something” in Wordsworth (see *ibid.* and 79f), which also came to unsettle and occupy, according to de Man, “all subsequent Wordsworth interpreters’ [who] have sought ‘to domesticate [it]’” (95), McLaughlin shows that Arnold’s early “Resignation” exposes a “critical theory of force (and unforce)” (99) that it shares with Wordsworth’s “Tintern Abbey.” At a certain critical point, transmission of semantic content in “Resignation” is momentarily suspended due to a peculiar technique of rhyme. “[I]nstead of enacting the meaning of the sentence, language is [here] semantically inactive. The result is an idling of language — a manifestation of ‘inaction in action’ (*in opere otium*) in the medium of the poem (103).”

This is perhaps the point in the book where the notion of poetic (un)force becomes most concrete. For McLaughlin had earlier in the chapter traced Arnold’s 1845 encounter with Victor Cousin’s reading of A.W. Schlegel’s Latin translation of the Indian *Bhagavad Gita*, at the time of the composition of “Resignation.” Cousin there interprets Schlegel’s *in opere otium* as expressing the supreme requirement that one “act (...) as if one were not acting” (98). This, as McLaughlin suggests, bears a “structural similarity to the *as not* underlined by Agamben in his interpretation of Saint Paul” (*ibid.*). And when McLaughlin now turns to “Tintern Abbey,” suggesting that Arnold in “Resignation” repeats a poetic demonstration of such inaction in (linguistic) action in Wordsworth, we are shown that “a mere tropic movement” likewise exhibits “a void of communicability” (104) in “Tintern Abbey”: “The tropic idling of the turns in Wordsworth’s lines is like the whirl of rhyme at the end of ‘Resignation’: at both points a figure of mere language apart from any recognizable context is

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foregrounded. In this sense (...) [both poems] are fundamentally concerned with junctures at which (...) communicability (...) fails — due not to natural limits (the physical power of nature), but to the unforce or incommunicability that is internal to communicative force as such. Instead of supplementing and completing a communication or correspondence left unfinished in nature, the poet in both cases imitates in language an adynamic unforce in the ‘world’ [of human collective moral and political existence] (104 and see 99-103).”

## V

Where the reader might have expected a final conclusion that draws this impressive series of readings together, the “Epilogue” to this book instead surprises again with something ‘new.’ Beginning with a somewhat lengthy detour through Heidegger, McLaughlin argues that Derrida’s late book *Voyous (Rogues)* offers an important development of Kant’s continuous attempt to reconcile conditional and hypothetical reason with reason’s unconditional demands. I found this argument very compelling, not only in the philosophical substance that leads back to Kant, but also insofar as here, with Derrida, an additional, explicit case is made for conceiving of reason in and after Kant as a “poetic” force. It brings to light a pressing motivation for a critical theory of this force, and so for the project of this book as a whole, from the perspective of contemporary political thought. And seen in this light, it seems appropriate to avoid what could only have become an all-too generalizing summary of a highly complex and in itself already dense study, in which innumerable lines of thought continuously produce further connections and then part again, and to pursue the relation to political theory.

McLaughlin notes that Derrida calls reason “poetic” precisely insofar as it is able to negotiate between two

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antinomic demands of reason. It negotiates between what Derrida distinguishes with explicit reference to Kant as “the power of calculation and conditionality (the world under conditions of [global economic rationalization])” and the “greater power of the incalculable and unconditional (what (...) [Derrida] calls ‘the world of the Enlightenment to come’)” (109). In light of many detailed steps of argument developed especially in chapters 1 and 2, I would absolutely agree with the author that Kant’s conception of a coexistence of a merely gradually possible, political reform of mankind (under naturally purposive conditions and over time) and a revolutionary (absolute and immediate) moral obligation to be *unconditionally* good *right now* is the archetype of this poetic force of reason in Derrida.

In this way, the reading of Derrida leads McLaughlin to a point where he briefly opens up a general perspective on what holds together the preceding chapters: “[P]lacing faith [in Derrida’s sense, which resonates Kant’s] in this poetic ability [of reason] makes room for the end of the world as a thing to be used and defended. This way of seeing things, which Kant associates with the poets, responds to an unconditional demand for a peaceful condition that would nullify claims to possession of the land based on physical force. Such a pacific state, however, would have to remain as a nonempirical condition and at the same time resist becoming unconditional in the sense of transcending the world to which it must correlate. As I have attempted to demonstrate, this is the elusive condition to which the poetic projects of Hölderlin, Baudelaire, and Arnold allude in various overlapping ways that can be traced to Kant (112 f).”

Yet all of this, as the reader might worry, seems to bring us back to an overarching notion of a poetic *force* (of reason) — in and after Kant — but not to the notion of poetic *unforce* that McLaughlin so forcefully insisted upon in the “Preface.” The notion of *unforce* also remained explicitly absent in chapter one and has only been brought out slowly and with much hesitation toward the ends of each of the following chapters. The thesis at the outset, to remind

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the reader, was that poetic force — the force at issue all along — is always also and always already an *unforce*, a force that “resists becoming one.” This idea is certainly implicit in the above quote insofar as the force that grounds the unconditional “pacific state” must “resist becoming unconditional in the sense of transcending” our world. Looking back on the series of chapters, I would nevertheless desire a more explicit discussion of this intriguing dialectic of force and unforce that is only vaguely alluded to on the level of each philological analysis, of which McLaughlin has offered such brilliant examples.

McLaughlin explicitly returns to the notion of unforce at the very end of the “Epilogue,” which closes with a re-reading of Arendt’s lectures on what she calls Kant’s “political philosophy.” Arendt in these lectures offers an immensely fruitful discussion of Kant’s capacity of aesthetic judgment as a *sensus communis*: As McLaughlin rightly notes, it is a sense that testifies to and constitutes the human community independent of any empirical community or actual cognitive interaction. In other words, it is an a priori sense for what is communicable and so for the possibility of community with others (it is a sense for “communability,” see 114 f). McLaughlin is also right to argue, as far as I read Arendt, that her critique of an ideology of progress in this context can be traced to Benjamin’s “Theses on the Concept of History,” and in this way opens several further ways to link Kant’s *Critique of the Power of Judgment* with Benjamin’s thought more generally. With Arendt and Benjamin, there is a force of exemplarity in man to stand for humanity as such, a force and an exemplarity that forbids subordinating the individual or any individual empirical community under the allegedly progressive history of mankind (see 117). To this, McLaughlin now merely adds the following: “This greater force that enables the example of humanity to be singled out—as Arendt says ‘without any comparison and independent of time’—is also inhabited by a singular unforce. It is not only the exemplary capacity to stand for something other than progress but also the exemplary incapacity to stand still (117 f).” The motivation

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for making this final move here—especially as a derivation from Arendt — remains vague and enigmatic, a mere allusion to a further perspective (presumably to Benjamin’s “*Dialektik im Stillstand*”) that could be developed.