

Preface: Poetic Force

The force at issue in this study resists becoming one. It is less a capacity than an incapacity expressed by the irreducible plurality of language as a communicative medium. This incapacity makes it possible to speak of an unforce or an adynamism in language. Aristotle states that “every force is unforce,” insofar as forcefulness and forcelessness are both defined in relation to the same thing, namely, a power over or a possession of something. Unforce is a modification, specifically a lack or “privation” (*steresis*), of force (*Metaphysics* 1046a 29–30). Like force, unforce also resists becoming one and must be understood, Aristotle points out, in multiple ways: “It is applied (1) to anything which does not possess a certain attribute; (2) to that which would naturally possess it, but does not, either (a) in general, or (b) when it would naturally possess it; and either (1) in a particular way, e.g., entirely, or (2) in any way at all. And in some cases if things which would naturally possess some attribute lack it as the result of constraint, we say that they are ‘deprived’” (*Metaphysics* 1046a 30–35). Simply not having something else, not having something else that should be had—either altogether, for the time being, only to a certain extent, or in a certain way—all of these are states of the “privation” of force that Aristotle calls non- or unforce. Martin Heidegger insists that the *non-* and *un-* of non- and unforce “are not merely negations” (in that case the *un-* would unify and reduce the multiplicity of

unforce and thus of force) (*Aristoteles* "Metaphysik," 109; *Aristotle's* "Metaphysics," 92). As a "negativum," Heidegger proposes, the *steresis*—what he translates as the "withdrawal" (*Entzug*)—of unforce "does not simply stand beside the positive of force but haunts this force in the force itself (*lauert dieser in ihr selbst auf*), and this because every force of this type according to its essence is invested with divisiveness (*Zwiespältigkeit*), and so with a 'not'" (*Aristoteles* "Metaphysik," 154; *Aristotle's* "Metaphysics," 132).¹ Unforce is an internal lack or a loss that "haunts" or "lies in wait of" force: it is the impending death or, as Heidegger suggests, "the inner finitude" of force. . . . Where there is force and power," he concludes, "there is finitude" (*Aristoteles* "Metaphysik," 158; *Aristotle's* "Metaphysics," 135).

What I am calling poetic force bears within it the "not" of unforce. It resists the unity of oneness but also the multiplicity of a finite or even an infinite set of individual forces in language. It is marked by the "divisiveness" of force and unforce that Heidegger underlines in Aristotle and thus expresses a finitude and multiplicity internal to language. The study of poetic force calls for a capacity to be affected by a "privation" or "withdrawal" of force—a *steresis* of unforce in language. Kant claims that certain spectacles of natural power affect us mentally as a privation of cognitive force. The incapacity experienced as what he calls the "dynamic sublime" gives the feeling of the supersensible force of reason (of its superiority over the cognitive faculty). The criterion of this feeling, Kant argues, is its communicability: we must be able to communicate it. Thus the finitude of the cognitive faculty that is overcome by the feeling of the dynamic sublime returns in the capacity (and incapacity) to communicate. The communicability of the feeling bears the inner finitude and divisiveness of force and the "privation" or "withdrawal" of force that Heidegger explicates in Aristotle's *Metaphysics*. The poets, according to Kant, exemplify this ability to communicate the feeling of the supersensible force of reason. Not only able to see the world in a way that goes beyond cognitive experience—as withdrawing from a capacity to possess it mentally in the form of something extended in space and time—the poets are also capable of communicating the

feeling of seeing the world “merely (*bloß*) . . . in accordance with what its appearance shows” (*AA* 5: 270; *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, 152–53).² But the capacity of poetic language to exceed the grasp of empirical consciousness—for example, by breaking free from spatial and temporal metaphors that draw on an empirical view of the world—does not simply make it into a medium of rational or philosophical communication after Kant.³ The ability to communicate the feeling of reason transcending cognitive experience also brings with it internally a “withdrawal” of communicability. The language of the poets expresses the capacity and the incapacity to communicate the feeling of the divisive finitude of reason as a force and an unforce.

The irreducible tension between force and unforce that Heidegger amplifies in Aristotle is at the crux of Nietzsche’s approach to art, and especially to lyric poetry. Indeed Heidegger’s 1931 lecture course on the first three chapters of book 9 of the *Metaphysics* opens up a reading of force along lines that extend through his interpretation, from the late 1930s and early 1940s, of Nietzsche’s theory of “the will to power as art.” The guiding question of Heidegger’s inquiry—whether the theory of “the will to power” constitutes a metaphysics of immanence—turns on the evidence of Nietzsche’s adherence to an uncritical concept of force (of belief in a force without unforce).⁴ There can be no doubt about Nietzsche’s commitment to the primacy of aesthetic experience in human life. This experience, he asserts, suspends the traditional teleological reductions of the truth of human existence promoted by religion and in particular Christianity, on the one hand, and by what Nietzsche regards as the cult of reason instituted by Greek philosophy, on the other. Instead of a means to an end—something ultimately to be redeemed by faith in God or in reason—man as a living, thinking being is, according to Nietzsche, primarily a “way” (*Genealogie*, 340; *Genealogy*, 66). But this way is the manifestation, not of one, but rather of multiple forces that act on and as human being and that keep its path open by resisting preconceived purposes.⁵ And the capacity of human being—what we call living—is expressed above all, he argues, as an “incapacity

not to react” to forces that resist, not only conscious awareness of the cognitive faculty (as in Kant), but also the transcendent ends of a supposedly truer existence from which we are separated by life.⁶ Under the influence of these forces, living becomes an aesthetic phenomenon: what Nietzsche describes as “an aesthetic doing and seeing” (*Götzendämmerung*, 116; *Twilight*, 46). Such aestheticization does not result in a beautiful image of life in the form of a self-contained medium of human existence, like the image of a particular individual or of mankind in general progressing toward a redemptive goal or purpose. Rather, the forces in question produce interruptions in movements toward such a unifying and ultimately false soteriological end. This incapacity breaks free from cognitive constraints while also resisting determination by an end to which living is subordinated, whether it be the end of what Kant calls a “purposiveness without purpose,” or the end of remaining a self-integrated individual or collective entity that can be saved as such. Nietzsche’s approach to language as the medium of such forces (and unforces), and his interrogation of the connection between language and power, have been exceptionally influential in recent decades. Important work in history, philosophy, and literary criticism has started from the Nietzschean characterization of truth as “an army of metaphors” and his declaration that the “lordly right” (*Herrenrecht*) of giving names to things points to the origin of language itself as an “expression of power by the rulers” (*Machtäußerung der Herrschenden*) (“Wahrheit und Lüge,” 374, and *Genealogie*, 274; “On Truth,” 46, and *Genealogy*, 13).⁷

In what follows I propose that this reflection on linguistic force and its connection to poetry can be traced ultimately to a thesis implicit in Kantian philosophy: that of an a priori capacity of language to free itself from having empirical content. This linguistic capacity, which is derived indirectly from a cognitive incapacity, emerges as a key motif or theme in Kant’s thinking. But by virtue of its very ability to communicate or produce the feeling of the faculty of reason, this force of language is also accompanied by an unforce that must be felt in Kant’s writing even as it remains (perhaps aptly) unstressed. In this sense the productivity of the

poetic force emerging in Kantian philosophy is haunted by the unproductivity of apoetic unforce.

The following chapters are devoted to outlining the theory of this force (and unforce) in Kant, and in the writing of three poets working in diverse languages and different intellectual contexts more or less directly influenced by Kantian philosophy. The first poet is Friedrich Hölderlin. In immediate contact with the Kantian exposition of an aesthetic force exceeding sensible comprehension, Hölderlin also develops a theory of poetry and of poetic language predicated on an adynamic interruption in the sphere of supersensible ends—a radical pause in verse that he developed along the lines of the caesura in Sophoclean tragedy. The effects of this halting point are evident in the way Hölderlin's poetry reacts to the most powerful political event of his age, the French Revolution. Of particular significance is the way this reaction diverges from that of Kant, the philosopher whose critical project exerted the greatest influence over Hölderlin's thinking. For Hölderlin, as for Kant, the empirical event of the revolution was certainly of enormous import. Yet of still greater consequence to both was the feeling that it gave to those who looked on from afar. For Kant it was the supersensible feeling of mankind progressing on the path to a "republican constitution"—a forceful feeling of humanity's capacity for progressive development and of an ability to communicate this capacity that must be attributed to every member of the species. There is plenty of evidence that Hölderlin shared this sentiment. But ultimately the poet was also left with a feeling of what goes beyond, not just the empirical event, but also the feeling of the ability to communicate the promise of human progress that the event appears to make. The poet in Hölderlin is also affected by a revolutionary incapacity of mankind to serve as a medium of progressive history. In the particular case of the 1801 poem "Celebration of Peace," which I examine in detail below, the poet is shown intercepting the direction of a world history that is driven by the goal of global domination, and thus of war, as well as by the higher end of gradual republican development over time. This poetic intervention does not change the course of history and

establish a millennium of peace. Nothing that happens in the years and decades following the composition of the poem supports such a claim. Yet, in a sense that is captured by the irony of Kant's famous essay written during these same years, the peace of the poem exists and persists on paper in the form of the poem itself that did not in fact appear in print until the middle of the 1950s, when the manuscript turned up in London. The revolutionary peace celebrated by the poem is marked, in other words, as a strange persistence of a piece of writing demonstrating its incapacity to give the feeling of a time transformed into a self-consistent medium of rational historical development.

The exemplarity of Hölderlin's poetry for twentieth-century literary criticism has been recognized for some time.⁸ But the specific theory of force (and unforce) connecting this poetic output to the philosophical genealogy I have outlined has yet to receive specific attention. This link is fundamental, however, to the work of one of the most significant literary critical projects to emerge during the years immediately following the appearance of the first collection of Hölderlin's writings in the second decade of the twentieth century, that of Walter Benjamin. The term *poetic force* appears nowhere in Benjamin's work. But beginning with his early essay on Hölderlin the theory of such a force is at work in Benjamin's criticism. In his early Hölderlin essay, but also his late studies of Baudelaire, Benjamin is receptive to the unforce underlined by Heidegger in Aristotle's discussion of force. The first three chapters of this book seek to elucidate this aspect of Benjamin's critical approach to nineteenth-century poetry, and to follow its lead. The last chapter argues for the importance of a divisive interpenetration of force and unforce in the critical writings of Paul de Man. An early encounter with Hölderlin, which parallels in an important way that of Benjamin, led de Man to make some valuable suggestions about poetry and force in the work and literary career of Matthew Arnold—suggestions that I pursue further.

Among the earliest entries on Baudelaire that Benjamin made as part of his unfinished study of nineteenth-century Paris is one containing a quotation from Paul Valéry. According to Valéry, Baudelaire

laire's poetry must be understood as a response to an imperative comparable to the declaration of reason of state in the political realm. Although neither Valéry nor Benjamin mention it, this political principle that all means can be justified to the extent that they contribute to the end of preserving the state is the subject of a book that Baudelaire read with admiration at a moment when he was about to compose some of his greatest poetry. The book in question carries the title *Histoire de la raison d'État*, published in 1860 by the Italian philosopher and politician Giuseppe Ferrari, whom Baudelaire placed in his pantheon of "literary dandies" (*Correspondance*, 128). Ferrari's interpretation of a world history driven by the efforts of sovereigns and sovereign states to dissimulate their ultimate goal of maintaining political power corresponds to the vision of everyday experience that informs Baudelaire's poetry. On one level many of the poems and in particular the prose poems that were composed in the early 1860s dramatize in the daily existence of the poet the hypocritical self-justification outlined by Ferrari's world historical survey. In this sense it is possible to read many of Baudelaire's poems as documenting the ruses by which the "I"—like the "hypocritical reader" of *The Flowers of Evil*—seeks to cover up a self-centered will to power. But Benjamin suggests another way of building on Valéry's comment. Reason of state is declared for Baudelaire, according to Benjamin, in the name of an experience that resists the ability of the "I" to become conscious of it. This experience not only rejects cognitive processing; it also refuses to give the "I" the feeling of a higher purpose beyond the range of the life of which it is conscious. Instead, the "I" is left with the feeling of the disappearance or, to use Benjamin's word, the "decline" of such an ideal. Needless to say, this experience is hardly fulfilling. On the contrary, it is endlessly pointless: it points nowhere and is subject to ceaseless repetition. Yet, as Benjamin's adoption of the term *reason of state* asserts, the feeling of this experience is imposed as the supreme law of Baudelairean "modernity." The poet is incapable of *not* responding to it, even if there is precisely no "it" with which this sovereign force can be consciously identified. The reaction is thus on the order of an act of faith that is freed from the

command to believe *in* something. In this sense the reason of state to which Benjamin alludes in Baudelaire is marked by what Derrida has characterized as “the experience of belief,” in an interpretation of Nietzsche and Heidegger that, as I suggest in an epilogue to this book, extends the philosophical genealogy of what I am calling poetic force (*Foi et savoir*, 95; *Acts of Religion*, 97).

The capacity of language to break free from cognitive metaphors is the subject of a late lecture by Paul de Man on the dynamic sublime in Kant. The source of this reading goes back, ultimately, to an early encounter with Hölderlin, as de Man indicates elsewhere (*Rhetoric of Romanticism*, ix). This encounter, I suggest, places de Man on the literary critical path opened up by Benjamin in his own early confrontation with Hölderlin. De Man’s Gauss lectures of the mid-1960s, which are pivotal to the development of his late work, including the lecture on Kant, apply his reading of Hölderlin to Wordsworth in a way that introduces into the heart of British Romanticism a critical deconstruction of Heidegger’s tendency to align portions of Hölderlin’s poems too directly with the force of authentic “being.”⁹ The reading of Wordsworth offered by de Man reveals precisely that aspect of the British Romantic’s work that becomes the occasion for one of Matthew Arnold’s early poems, “Resignation.” In an essay on the anxious response of the Victorians to Wordsworth, de Man correctly diagnoses a certain defensiveness on the part of Arnold toward the peculiar “powers” of the Romantic poet (*Rhetoric of Romanticism*, 86). These “powers” are undoubtedly troubling to the author of *Culture and Anarchy* and “The Function of Criticism at the Present Time,” whose theory of culture and of poetry, its highest manifestation, is informed by the “aesthetic ideology” that de Man attributes to Friedrich Schiller’s misreading of Kant. But this assessment of Arnold overlooks the decisive precondition for the development of the theory of culture: Wordsworth’s poetry exposes the divisiveness and finitude internal to the lyrical force, and more precisely unforce, affecting Arnold’s own work as a poet during the first two decades of his career. Thus the cultural turn in Arnold’s work of the mid-1860s seeks to bring to an end an

early experience discovered in Wordsworth—that of an incapacitating affect haunting the very potentiality of poetic language, its impending lack of force. It is on the divisive strength of such an experience, I argue, that the poem “Resignation” ultimately allows for the incapacity exposed in Wordsworth’s poetry. In this early work the effort to surpass the Romantic poet gives way to the very element to which Wordsworth’s greatest poetry already yields. As an illustration I demonstrate how “Resignation” ultimately resists the urge not to repeat the caesura erupting in Wordsworth’s “Lines Composed a Few Miles Above Tintern Abbey.” In light of this analysis, Arnold’s cultural program appears as the anxious attempt to convert the ambiguous force linking his early poetry to Wordsworth into the redemptive power of culture set forth in his theory of criticism. This development at the midpoint in Arnold’s career turns on his interpretation of the category of the messianic in the letters of Saint Paul. The function of Arnoldian criticism is in the end the individual and collective redemption promised by the messianic force of culture.

Arnold has been condemned for promoting a religion of culture founded on the belief in the redemptive power of literary works. The poetic force that concerns me in this book could also be seen to require a certain kind of belief. Not, however, a belief *in* poetry or even in poetic language, but rather an attestation to an experience of the capacity of language to free itself from sensible and supersensible ends while nevertheless remaining open to the finitude and divisiveness that comes with this linguistic force. There is a powerful tendency today to reduce experience to the neurophysiological processes of cognition based on a heightened fascination with the brain. Resistance to this neurocentric tendency often consists in asserting the power of the human mind—for example, the creative capacity of the imagination—to transcend the limitations of empirical experience.¹⁰ This debate renews the question posed by aesthetics in eighteenth-century philosophy in a way that calls for another return to Kant, and in particular to his insistence on the communicability of an empirically unaccountable feeling as the ground of human community. But going back in this case

means returning to a force that is unfamiliar and unrecognizable from the traditional perspective of a unifying faculty transcending empirical experience. A reconsideration of what is for Kant the exemplary manifestation of communicability and communability—the language of the poets—leads instead to a confrontation with a dynamic force that emerges exclusively within the horizon of its potential adynamism. Thus the return to Kant that is proposed in the following chapters introduces a modification in the terms of the traditional resistance to empiricism, avoiding an aesthetic as well as an empiricist ideology. It is confronted by the possibility of a force of language that resists cognitive determination, without denying the divisive finitude accompanying this very resistance. Returning to Kant's aesthetics in this way means becoming mindful of an aspect of collective human existence that arises from the feeling of incommunicability haunting the ability to communicate.

Recently Werner Hamacher has advocated for this feeling and for the study of this feeling of communicability and incommunicability. Hamacher makes the case in the name of philology, not in the traditional sense of the academic discipline devoted to the analysis of languages as historical and morphological objects, but as the inquiry and the questioning of a feeling of "friendship" (*philia*) with language (*logos*) as an ambiguous and fragile medium of community. Hamacher's provocative philological project insists on the withdrawal from communicability that comes with the communicability of language. If the capacity of language to communicate, as Kant argues, connects us to and reminds us of others in the possession of a similar ability, the incapacity of language to communicate removes this possession—of having an ability to communicate—as the ground of a relation to others. Such incommunicability occurs, not just as an inability to have possession of language (in the sense that "having" a language is sometimes meant to signify mastery of the proper use of a particular language), but also an incapacity of language to have anything. It is, in short, a withdrawal of *having* from language: an unforce that dispossesses and empties language. This is what Hamacher

calls an “openness of language,” or more precisely, in order to stress the elimination of every hint of possession, an “openness to language” (*Sprachoffenheit*). Above all poetry, Hamacher argues, makes it possible to speak of such “openness to language” and of the fellow feeling of this *philia* as a certain linguistic *pathos*: “And philology shares this *pathos* with everyone who speaks or writes, *a fortiori* with the poets, who speak of nothing other than the experience of openness to language: of language-possibility under conditions of its improbability, of language power under conditions of its powerlessness, of power within the horizon of its withdrawal (*Entzugs*). Poetry is the most unreserved philology and only therefore can it attract the privileged and persistent attention of philologists” (*Für—Die Philologie*, 33–34).

The philological community of which Hamacher writes is marked by the withdrawal of communicability. It exists as a public sphere (*eine Öffentlichkeit*) that is open to language (*eine Sprachoffenheit*). It raises the possibility of a communal human being arising from the feeling of a communicability—of a philological sociability and a *socius* emerging out of philology—that is threatened by the divisive finitude of incommunicability. Inquiring into the existence of such an endangered communability would require, perhaps first of all, the rigorous study of the capacity and incapacity of what I am calling poetic force. If, as Hamacher proposes, “poetry is first philology,” poetic force names the primal ability and inability of philological community (*Für—Die Philologie*, 14). The following chapters proceed from this thesis.