Poetic Force: Poetry after Kant

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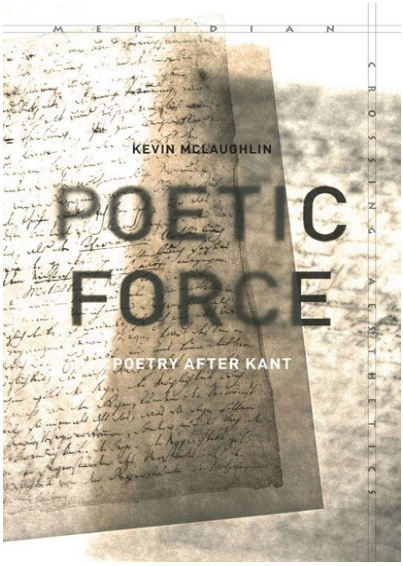
All ground must at some point have been made arable (urbar) by reason . . .

Walter Benjamin



Earthquakes, volcanic eruptions, tsunamis and countless other natural wonders have been a part of our experience since the dawn of humankind. They have been destructive, fearful, yet awe-inspiring. Our perception of such events is always grounded in their majesty coupled with human cognition. However, until the 18-th century philosopher Immanuel Kant, and in part, Rousseau before him, have naturalized the human experience, there had been a certain divide between that which is natural and that which is human. Kant's famous *Critiques* have, once and for all, inseparably linked the force that is present in the natural world with that which is a part of human nature.

Kevin McLaughlin's cogent and surprising exegesis of Kant's teachings on the sublime present in his *Critique of Judgement* (1790) constitutes the pinnacle of the successful and practical transference of philosophical thought into the realm of literary criticism. In his *Poetic Force: Poetry after Kant* McLaughlin focuses on several key concepts which Kant has delineated in his aesthetic

philosophy, namely *the dynamic sublime, violence (gewalt), power (macht), force, and unforce*. All of these concepts native primarily to Kant's aesthetics are remarkably intertwined with Kant's philosophy concerning the state which, as it is well known, was inspired by the events of the 1789 French revolution. What McLaughlin emphasized in his book is that Kant's understanding of the *dynamic sublime* is not limited merely to natural phenomena, but it extends to all human endeavor, particularly to the events of such magnitude as it was in the case of the French Revolution. Revolutions, similarly to natural disasters, are awe-inspiring and fearful events, however, according to Kant, they do not instill the emotion of fear in human beings. This human perception of an object (or event) as fearful without one being afraid of it is what demonstrates our cognitive superiority over nature.

The *dynamic sublime* itself is a category that is positioned outside of our every-day empirical experience and it can be closely linked to Kant's notion of the *thing-in-itself*. Although in his text, McLaughlin steers away from explicitly mentioning this concept, he links Kant's understanding of the sublime with Walter Benjamin's attempt at the transformation of the Kantian project in the form of his formulation of the concept known as the "*dialectical image*." When a natural phenomenon (in the Kantian sense), such as an avalanche or a revolution, is witnessed by a human being, out perception of said phenomenon seems to be two-fold. On the one hand, we see such an event as a temporal and spatial object, but on the other hand, such events also possess a quality that is of an ethereal character – the quality of the sublime.

The sublime, and the dynamic sublime in particular, is what constitutes the central pillar of McLaughlin's interpretation of three different, yet strikingly similar poets, namely Friedrich Hölderlin (1770 - 1843), Charles Baudelaire (1821 - 1867), and Mathew Arnold (1822 - 1888). Even though each of these three poets had lived in different countries, had composed radically different poetry, and had been separated by the temporal and spatial dimensions from one another as well as Kant, what resonates throughout their work is the undeniable influence attributed to the giant of the German Enlightenment, Immanuel Kant. *Poetic Force: Poetry after Kant* is a curious testament to the creative potential that is harbored by philosophy and transposed into the production of cultural artefacts. It is a book that is well worth reading, and not only for scholars of poetry or literary theorists. This work also offers a fresh, innovative and well laid out outlook on the link between Kant's aesthetics, metaphysics, and his moral philosophy, and each and every philosopher searching for a place to break new ground in the bewildering philosophical forest planted by Immanuel Kant would do well to read it carefully.

Even though McLaughlin's book is very well crafted, it would behoove him to delve a bit deeper into post-structuralist metaphysics. The Kantian *thing-in-itself*, resonating throughout the philosophical project of Walter Benjamin, after all, finds its expansion and gains a dimension of temporality in the though of Benjamin's direct philosophical descendant, Jean Baudrillard and his revolutionary notion of the simulacrum. The exploration of a defining moment in history, such as the French Revolution, as well as the examination of Kant's moral philosophy through the eyes of Baudrillard would undoubtedly yield results that would be truly surprising for anyone dealing with Kant's understanding of freedom. For genuine freedom is something that has been gone for a long time. Even during the course of the French Revolution the notion of genuine freedom has become perverted – it has begun to gain the contours of Baudrillard's simulacrum. That is because freedom, as it is understood nowadays, comes with more restrictions than rights, a claim that can be best illustrated by the proclamation of one of the key figures of the 1789 French Revolution, Marquis de Lafayette who once said: "insurrection is, for the people and for each portion of the people, the most sacred of the rights and the most indispensable of duties."

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