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The Ethics and Politics of Force in Hemsterhuis, Herder, Goethe, Schiller and G nderrode

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ABSTRACT

Romantic art and philosophy often draw upon the concept of force (*Kraft*) to reimagine ethical and political relations. A decisive impulse for the Romantic concept of force can be found in the work of Franois Hemsterhuis, who articulates a paradigm of *ecstatic* force. This paper examines two divergent and productive responses to Hemsterhuis' account of ecstatic force: on the one hand, *redirected force*, here represented by Herder's and Goethe's reinterpretation of Hemsterhuis, both of whom seek to channel the form-dissolving potential of force into appropriate and stabilizing collective forms; and on the other hand, *unconditioning force*, represented by Friedrich Schiller (before his encounter with Kant) and Karoline von G nderrode, in which tendencies toward disindividuation are directed against hegemonic and hierarchizing political forms. G nderrode draws on the nature-philosophical ontology of force in the poem "Brutus" to preserve a democratic republican ideal and to contravene the course of history in its movement from Republic to Empire.

Keywords: aesthetics, ethics, *Naturphilosophie*, ontology, politics

R SUM 

Les  uvres artistiques et philosophiques de la p riode romantique s'appuient souvent sur le concept scientifique de force (*Kraft*) afin de repenser les relations  thiques et politiques. L'une des sources majeures de cette nouvelle conceptualisation de la force se trouve chez Franois Hemsterhuis, qui d finit celle-ci   l'aide d'un paradigme qu'on pourrait qualifier d'« extatique ». La pr sente contribution examine deux r interpr tations productives quoique divergentes de cette conception hemsterhuisienne d'une force extatique : d'une part *la force redirig e*, dont les repr sentants sont Herder et Goethe, et qui engage l'id e de canaliser le potentiel destructeur de la force afin de stabiliser les formes collectives ; d'autre part *la force qui lib re de tout conditionnement*, telle que l'entendent Friedrich Schiller (dans les  uvres ant rieures   sa r ception de la pens e kantienne) et Karoline von G nderrode. Schiller et G nderrode mobilisent le potentiel de d sint gration de la force contre des formes politiques h g moniques et hi rarchiques. Dans son po me « Brutus », par exemple, G nderrode invoque l'ontologie des forces de la nature pour pr server un id al r publicain d mocratique et s'opposer au cours de l'histoire dans le passage de la R publique   l'Empire.

Mots-cl s : esth tique,  thique, *Naturphilosophie*, ontologie, politique

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1. Introduction

Force, by definition invisible, only ever manifests itself through material effects that point to something beyond themselves, an inscrutability that compels, governs, attracts, repels, potentiates, actualizes, creates, destroys.¹ From its inception as a key term of Aristotelian metaphysics (force as potentiality, *dunamis*) to its centrality in Newton's theory of universal gravitation, force functions as a boundary concept. As an imperceptible physical given, it generates and regulates differences, indicates the frontiers that organize the emergence of individuated beings; as a concept, it is replete with multiple attractors, binding and separating diverse discursive domains: the empirical and the ontological, the theological and the scientific, the aesthetic and the political. Flexible, pliable and protean, force contains multitudes.

The concept of force, within its specific field of operativity, exhibits a tendency toward expansion: ontologically across all beings, but also discursively into all forms of organization and differentiation. It is thus not surprising that, over the course of the long history of the concept, key contributions to philosophical thought and aesthetic production have expanded the concept of force to encompass the domain of ethics and politics. The intersection between the semantics of force and practices that draw upon this semantics to reimagine or rethink the entirety of ethical or political relations constitutes a significant task for thought, one that extends into the present. Works drawing on the Romantic philosophy of nature (*Naturphilosophie*), above all as inaugurated by Friedrich Schelling, intimate the contemporaneity of such a programme by developing the concept of force (*Kraft*) as unconditioned (*unbedingt*), and hence, as invested with a power of unconditioning.² Unconditioned force “unthings” entities by refusing to reduce them to objects to be known, grasped, manipulated, or contained. Even more capaciously, Romantic processes of unconditioning are not limited to the human, but extend over the entire domain of appearances: the inorganic, the vegetal, the animal, as well as the human.

¹ Numerous recent publications associated with the Centre for Advanced Studies “Imaginarium of Force” (*Imaginarium der Kraft*) have foregrounded the centrality of this concept to the cultural imagination of the West in multiple discursive realms—scientific, philosophical, and aesthetic, to name only a few. See, for example: Frank Fehrenbach, Lutz Hengst, Frederike Middelhoff, Cornelia Zumbusch (eds.), *Form- und Bewegungskräfte in Kunst, Literatur und Wissenschaft* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2022); and particularly relevant for Romanticism, Adrian Renner and Frederike Middelhoff, *Forces of Nature: Dynamism and Agency in German Romanticism* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2022).

² For the unconditioned as a process of unconditioning, see Iain Hamilton Grant, *Philosophies of Nature After Schelling* (New York: Continuum, 2006).

The conditions for speculative experimentation with ethical and political relations through the semantics of force can be found long before Romantic thought takes up this task. Dante's *Divine Comedy* had already established the tension between gravity and light as constitutive for the history of salvation (indeed, for history as such), and the cosmologies of Marsilio Ficino, Giordano Bruno, and Jakob Böhme equally harness the concept of force (physical, erotic, theological) to redress the problematic conditions of their cultural status quo. Even more decisive for the Romantic concept of unconditioning force, however, is the work of François Hemsterhuis, which rethinks modes of human relationality, sources of cultural and political normativity, and the order of history by means of an idiosyncratic consonance between Newtonian force and Platonic operations of the soul. Aesthetic and philosophical thought experiments indebted to Hemsterhuis' thought—this paper will specifically consider works by Herder, Goethe, Schiller, and Günderrode—draw upon force to initiate a reevaluation of the ethical and political conditions of existence.

The relation between force, ethics, and politics is not merely of antiquarian interest. In one strand of the tradition that examines this relation—a strand that has a robust afterlife in the twentieth century and in contemporary thought—the concept of force (*Kraft*) drifts from its natural-ontological paradigms (Aristotelian potentiality or Newtonian universal gravitation) into modes of relationality suffused with violence: force as domination. Simone Weil, writing on the cusp of World War II, inscribes herself in the tradition of a nature-philosophical ethics and politics in dialogue with mystical and Gnostic sources by construing force—a transcendental-material condition of being whose natural expression is the force of gravity—as the principle of evil and injustice: “obedience to the force of gravity” is “the greatest sin.”³ As a cultural paradigm of human relationality and dominion, Weil claims that force names the most deeply entrenched interpersonal, cultural and political tendencies of the West. *The Iliad*, as the first and greatest “poem of force,” already brings this paradigm to full expression (hence its eternal contemporaneity, rather than antiquity, as a key to latent or explicit cultural antagonisms persisting into the present).⁴ According to Weil, force is primarily ontological, a root condition of embodied existence, and as such, a source of generic operations that apply to all beings, beings who share with one another a necessary subjection to

³ Simone Weil, *Gravity and Grace*, trans. Emma Crawford and Mario von der Ruhr (London: Routledge, 2002), 3.

⁴ See Simone Weil, *The Iliad or The Poem of Force*, trans. Mary McCarthy (Wallingford, Penn.: Pendle Hill, 1956).

matter, the attendant vulnerability of their bodies and minds, and the permanent threat of violence as constitutive of human relations: “Force employed by man, force that enslaves man, force before which man’s flesh shrinks away.”⁵ Political, economic, and social practices, inasmuch as they are constituted by and saturated with material force, turn subjects into the *subjected* through processes of reification: “Force is that x that turns anybody who is subjected to it into a thing.”⁶ However, the force of force itself is not absolute; there is “something in us which lies completely outside the range of relationships of force, which does not touch force and is not touched by force.”⁷ According to Weil, that which lies outside relations of force in the human being—outside the human being as subjected to matter—has its source in divine grace, which in turn opens a field of counterpractices to force as domination. Practices or modes of relating to others—for Weil, in a manner commensurate with grace, love, and justice—depend on the immaterial potentiality in the human soul capable of counteracting processes of reification: the human outside the pull of gravity.

Weil explains mechanisms of subjectification (technological, capitalist, imperialist, colonialist) through the development of a theologically inflected nature-philosophical politics of force. The attempt to think human relationality as inextricably and perhaps tragically conditioned by force is not new to Weil; indeed, this very question takes shape with particular intensity in Romantic literature and thought. If Weil construes matter univocally as subject to gravity, Schelling’s *Naturphilosophie*, in the *On the World Soul*, grasps matter as bifurcated, equally conditioned by light (the expansive force that overcomes boundaries) as it is by gravity (the contractive force that produces differentiation). If, as Weil would later assume, the primary and most immediate concept of force culminates in the conditioning of people—much in the same way humans attempt to condition animals—the Romantic concept of force poses a different question: what are the available cultural resources for *unconditioning* beings, political regimes, and frameworks of intelligibility, and how can such resources render conditions and processes of conditioning contingent and malleable, thereby constituting a space for the purpose of reimagining the human being and its manifold relations?

⁵ *Ibid.*, 3.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 3. See also Roberto Esposito, *The Origin of the Political: Hannah Arendt or Simone Weil*, trans. Vincenzo Binetti and Gareth Williams (New York: Fordham University Press, 2017), 45.

⁷ Simone Weil, *The Notebooks of Simone Weil*, vol. 2, trans. Arthur Wills (New York: G. P. Putnam’s Sons, 1956), 457.

The works of Hemsterhuis contribute to this task by articulating a paradigm of *ecstatic* force. The ecstasy of force is commensurate with, indeed constitutes the very essence of a form of ethical agency that is simultaneously universalizing and deeply alienating inasmuch as it produces subjects that potentially stand outside of given frameworks of intelligibility as paragons of moral achievement.⁸ This paper will examine two divergent and productive responses to Hemsterhuis' account of ecstatic force: on the one hand, *redirected force*, here represented by Herder's and Goethe's reinterpretation of Hemsterhuis, both of whom seek to channel the form-dissolving potential of force into appropriate and stabilizing collective forms; and on the other hand, *unconditioning force*, represented by Friedrich Schiller (before his encounter with Kant) and Karoline von Günderrode, in which tendencies toward disindividuation are directed against hegemonic and hierarchizing political forms.

2. Ecstatic Force: François Hemsterhuis

What follows does not attempt to provide a synoptic and comprehensive view of Hemsterhuis' concept of force. Rather, I draw attention to certain tendencies in Hemsterhuis' account of force inasmuch as they provide a springboard for ethical and political thought experiments: both in Hemsterhuis' own writings, but also inasmuch as they stimulate further reflection and experimentation by subsequent authors, in emulation or through resistance. These postulates approach the concept of force only insofar as it is invested with a power to analyze and reconfigure relations (*rappports*), which is the most foundational concept of Hemsterhuis' work: relations to oneself, relations to others, relations to objects, and relations to the cosmos as the totality of all that is.

a) Postulate I: Force is desire

This postulate—force is desire—is provocatively expressed. More accurately, Hemsterhuis describes the relation between physical (Newtonian) force and the immaterial desire of the soul as one of analogy. Nevertheless, Hemsterhuis' thought contributes to a speculative thrust moving toward the identification of force and desire. In the “Letter on Desires,” Hemsterhuis draws attention to a property of the soul that he considers to be “analogous

⁸ For this reason, Daniel Whistler calls Hemsterhuis an “untimely” philosopher; his ideal demands a “universal affinity to all times” that can paradoxically produce an “absolute untimeliness” within one's own historical moment. Daniel Whistler, *François Hemsterhuis and the Writing of Philosophy* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2022), 56.

to the attractive force that we constantly observe in what we call matter.” (*EE* 1.79)⁹ Just as matter attracts, so does the soul desire. The aim of desire is ecstatic inasmuch as it seeks self-transcendence, complete oneness, without remainder; according to Hemsterhuis, desire seeks “the most intimate and perfect union of its essence with that of the desired object.” (*EE* 1.80) The primary interface of the human being with the world, in all of its manifold practices and attitudes, is fusional.

Fusion comes to infiltrate every possible domain of human experience; in art, in sculptural form, in all forms of social interaction, humans seek fusion in their relations to that which surrounds them. Those who observe a beautiful statue thus do not grasp the object as an analog of the rational cosmos (as Baumgarten, the father of aesthetics, would); they do not care about the rules that make this object beautiful or not; they do not care about judging the work of art, or the free play of faculties, as Kant would have it (indeed, Kant was at pains to distinguish the disinterested or contemplative nature of aesthetic experience and the consuming drive of desire); nor would viewers grasp the work of art as an embodiment of shared values or that which makes sensible something intelligible (as would Hegel). For Hemsterhuis, aesthetic experience presupposes a subject who desires to become one with the totality of the object in all of its complexity. This fusional tendency is not limited to art, although Hemsterhuis wrote about this tendency as particularly pertinent to sculpture. Rather, it comes to animate all fields, including the social and political field as well. This analogization of force and desire invokes, or produces, a concept of the human being whose primary drive consists in seeking out relations that maximize possibilities for fusion.¹⁰

b) Postulate II: The blockage of attractions (*Anziehungen*) generates relations (*Beziehungen*)

The drive toward fusion posits a goal that cannot be realized; in a formulation that is significant for the German Romantics, Hemsterhuis describes the movement of desire as “the hyperbola with its asymptote,” (*EE* 1.87)¹¹ or the striving for an ideal not as achieved or achievable, but only as a second-order infinity of desire generated precisely by the structural lack of the ideal. The

⁹ On the citation of Hemsterhuis’s published work using the Edinburgh Edition, see the editor’s introduction to this special issue.

¹⁰ See Daniel Whistler, “The Discipline of Pious Reason: Goethe, Herder, Kant,” *Moral Powers, Fragile Beliefs: Essays in Moral and Religious Philosophy*, eds. Joseph Carlisle, James Carter, Daniel Whistler (New York: Continuum, 2011), 63.

¹¹ This motif was the subject of an important book by Manfred Frank on Early German Romanticism (although Hemsterhuis was not the focus of this work), see “*Unendliche Annäherung*”: *Die Anfänge der philosophischen Frühromantik* (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1997).

failure to achieve a local union with the desired object does not constitute a failure from a systemic or global point of view; on the contrary, this failure is the very condition of differentiation, of life. The non-coincidence between the soul and its objects of desire transforms attractions into relations, *Anziehungen* into *Beziehungen* (*rappports*).

The desire for relations, as a second-order form of desire, thus comes to supplant, or at least supplement, the desire for the object itself. The realization of this second-order desire demands a maximization of relations and the development of strategies and techniques aiming at this maximization. Desire becomes invested with a world-altering charge; the world must be organized such that the possibilities for generating relations are themselves maximized. Underlying this imperative is a presupposition that homogeneity—or the close homologous fit between desire and object—best maximizes relations, as the homogeneous object comes closest to realizing unity with the soul. Hemsterhuis' project of world alteration consists “in making the desired object more homogeneous, and in making it more perceptible to us from a greater number of viewpoints – that is, in increasing the possibility of the desired union.” (*EE* 1.83) One consequence of this imperative is that the desire for union dialectically turns into its opposite, becoming a multiplicity generator. Paradoxically, the desire to eliminate difference *produces* the proliferation of differences.

The dynamics of desire described above form the foundation of a complete rethinking of the structure of human society and political organization: collective forms must be so organized such that human beings can maximize relations in the movement of their souls. The key concept—which describes a cognitive capacity, but equally applies to that of a social or political order—is that of *coexistence*. The blockage of desire produces not just the multiplication of ideas, but the simultaneous coexistence of ideas, or as Hemsterhuis writes: “absolutely perfect intelligence could, in the full force of the term, make many ideas coexist.” (*EE* 1.91) Hemsterhuis' concept of force thus culminates in an ethical and political imperative: develop that ethical and political subjectivity capable of making as many ideas coexist as possible. However, another question arises. What is that political form, or more properly, what are the ethical and political subjectivities that would generate as many relations as possible together *with* beings who are themselves heterogeneous, rather than homogeneous? Hemsterhuis' analogization of force and desire—the central operation of which consists in modulating the interaction of attractions and beings in order to maximize coexistent relations—poses a question to which contemporary thinkers are still trying to

find a response,¹² namely: how can one reconcile law and desire, or what form of social and political organization would be most adequate to the operations of desire if its singular goal is to maximize opportunities for fusion and relation? For example, in the dialogue *Alexis II*, a sequel to his famous dialogue on the Golden Age, Hemsterhuis (through the character of Diocles) draws upon the primacy of fusional desire to de-naturalize war, making armed conflict into a contingent practice rather than a natural law. At the same time, force facilitates the emergence of localized groups of relatively homogeneous beings as strategic agglomerations of fusional desire—in friendship or nationality, for example (although such a dynamic could extend across all relations predicated upon solidarity).

c) Postulate III: The maximization of relations demands ethical and political reform

The blockage of desire and the generation of relations from attractions establishes an ethical and political field with its specific set of problems. The first problem can be described as that of the political subject itself; the second encompasses that of the form of collective—whether a state, a religion, a culture (nation), or some other form—with a view to its capacity to facilitate or inhibit the maximization of attractive force. Regarding the first problem, Hemsterhuis argues that maximizing one's attractive force requires developing organs specific to individual beings. Just as sight can be trained to perceive more and diverse relations in that which is seen, so too can the soul be trained to perceive more and diverse ideal relations between beings. Such is the function of the organ Hemsterhuis calls the "moral organ," or that organ through which the soul perceives cosmological and moral order. Perceptions through this organ can attain the pinnacle of relation-maximizing desire, as the cosmos itself designates that superobject capable of generating as many coexistent ideas in the finite space of the soul as possible. According to Hemsterhuis, the development of the moral organ could resolve the—only apparent—conflict between law and desire, or as Kant would express it, between duty and inclination. Hemsterhuis' regime of training and its specific form of organ mediation develops a *cosmoerotic* programme (to draw upon but also displace the *cosmotechnics* of Yuk Hui).¹³ The cosmoerotics of the moral organ constitutes the precondition for the development of an ethical and political subjectivity and their corresponding collective forms (it

¹² See, for example, Alain Badiou, *Philosophy for Militants*, trans. Bruno Bosteels (London, New York: Verso, 2012).

¹³ See Yuk Hui, *The Question Concerning Technology in China: An Essay in Cosmotechnics* (Falmouth: Urbanomic, 2016), 19-20.

is hard to understate the importance of this doctrine for the German Romantic political imagination; for example, one can find traces of this cosmoerotics in Schleiermacher's conception of religion as an intuition of the universe, which also produces operations of collectivization).

Modern legislation and statecraft, instead of enabling the maximization of desire by facilitating the unity of subjects with the superobject cosmos, and by extension, with one another, impede or suppress this potential. Hemsterhuis laments that law, as a substitute organ, "[has] replaced the moral organ." (*EE* 1.113)¹⁴ One may detect a subtly anarchistic strand in Hemsterhuis' thought, at least in respect to the moderns who are over-dependent on the state for their moral code and forced operations of unification. A certain type of stoic, for example, does not depend upon the laws of the state to harmonize with the universal order of the cosmos (even though, following Marcus Aurelius, they would organize the state according to this order): such a stoic trains the soul *and* shapes an ethical-political order at one and the same time. Whereas subjects in antiquity had a more fully developed moral organ and thus were more able to perceive the manifold relations in the superobject cosmos and the moral order resulting from these relations, the state and legislative processes of modernity began constructing relations *for* subjects, thus taking over the tasks—and ecstasies—of cognition. The moral organ atrophied in the transition from antiquity to modernity.

Some consequences follow from these postulates. First, the blockage of desire is generative; only because desire remains unfulfilled can an attraction become a source of relations. The imperative of force aims at maximization: to maintain desire in a state of dynamic movement such that as many relations as possible can be cognized as quickly as possible (again, desire and cognition are not oppositional). Second, the ethical and political problem of modernity cannot be solved solely by means of state forms, but requires the cultivation of an ethical and political training or practice that recognizes heterogeneity while at the same time seeking out zones of homogeneity among others, where "others" are to be taken as capaciously as possible (human beings, aesthetic objects, the superobject "cosmos"). Homogeneous structures shared between beings become erogenous zones. The soul, which seeks out such homogeneities, thus constitutes the ultimate erogenous zone—one in which desire becomes commensurate with ethical duty and political order. Third, the training of the moral organ, as that organ capable of perceiving ideal relations, can theoretically coexist with the state, as it did in antiquity (the state even helped train the moral organ in antiquity,

¹⁴ See Whistler, *François Hemsterhuis and the Writing of Philosophy*, 225-26.

according to Hemsterhuis). However, the moral organ also enables a subject to stand out from a collective, to enter into explicit and dramatic conflict with a given symbolic order. Hemsterhuis draws on the example of Brutus to illustrate this point—an example that will become particularly important for Günderrode:

In killing Caesar, Brutus committed a crime in the eyes of the people, and perhaps vis-à-vis society; but in the soul of Brutus this action no doubt conformed to the eternal order. (*EE* 1.112)

The soul operates in this instance in excess of the shared normative commitments in a given time and place, occupying a position of non-identity with respect to the dominant symbolic order. Hemsterhuis' ethics and politics of force thus culminate in a regime of exercise rather than in a state, a training of the organ of the soul or the moral organ capable of suspending the collective beliefs and social and political norms of its age. There are thus at least two senses in which force can be said to be ecstatic for Hemsterhuis. First, the movement of the soul analogous to attraction in matter tends toward a union with objects of desire, from the work of art to the superobject cosmos, thereby establishing a cosmoerotic regime that aims to dissolve the self—the self as situated and embodied in time and space—since it seeks to unify itself with the eternity of all things. And second, the multiplication of relations that emerges from the frustration of this desire nevertheless enables a subject to “stand out” of its time and place, thus becoming an ecstatic subject, not in its dissolution, but in the idiosyncratic manner in which it inhabits and perceives cosmological order.

2. Redirected Force: Herder

Hemsterhuis' ethics and politics of force is likely to elicit a certain discomfort, perhaps due its universalism, perhaps due its dependence on the categories of homogeneity and heterogeneity, perhaps due its desire for fusion, which entails its own sort of violence. Such was the case for Johann Gottfried Herder, who found himself equally attracted to and repelled by Hemsterhuis' thought. Herder, like Hemsterhuis, sought to analogize matter and mind through the concept of force, and like Hemsterhuis, he claimed that such operations were critical to the development of the capacities of the soul. He was, however, no ecstatic thinker; any form-dissolving potential inherent in the concept of force had to be met with a countertendency, something that would assure the integrity of the individual. Unlike Hemsterhuis, Herder developed an agonistic concept of force, a notion of repulsion *opposed to*

attraction, according to the laws of polarity; for Hemsterhuis, individuation takes place not because of opposing forces, but because of the internal heterogeneity intrinsic to the composition of bodies, a compositional form that in turn inhibits fusional processes. Hemsterhuis designates this excess generated by compositional impediments to attraction as “inertia,” which in turn secures the possibility of freedom and ethical agency. In contrast to Hemsterhuis, Herder develops a different ethics and politics of force, partially in response to the dangers of ecstasis in Hemsterhuis’ thought.

Christoph Menke has recently associated Herder with a *poetic*—and non-normative—concept of force, one disclosed in the activity of the genius who has an immediate contact with nature, who expresses their self along with the totality of nature from a dark and obscure ground in the soul.¹⁵ But there is another concept of force—just as equally poetic, albeit irreducible to subjectivity—that Herder claims can ground ethical and political ways of being in the world. As we shall see, this concept of force enables democratic forms of relationality.

Herder’s essay “Love and Selfhood” responds to Hemsterhuis’ fusional account of desire by inscribing the univocity of force as attraction into a dual and oppositional structure: love (oriented towards others) and selfhood (oriented towards the self). In this essay and in others around this time, Herder does not simply construe force as an obscure, non-normative source for creative self-poiesis. On the contrary, Herder initiates an inquiry into social and political forms adequate to his particular conception of force as a basic ontological structure of existence. First, Herder begins, like Hemsterhuis, by analogizing force in the physical universe and the movements of the soul; unlike Hemsterhuis, he sees force in the universe not as that which draws human beings towards fusion, that is, not primarily as attraction, but as a source of struggle and conflict as well, as attraction *and* repulsion. To Hemsterhuis’ *ecstatic* force, then, Herder posits *agonistic* force. The irreducibly oppositional structure of force drifts into a naturalization of violence (thereby contributing to the strand of nature-philosophical politics that would later be taken up by Weil). In “On the Sense of Feeling,” Herder writes: “in the universe all is attraction and repulsion and therefore violence.”¹⁶ Force thus posits an ineliminable potential for conflict as part of the structure of reality. Such is one limit point or danger that Herder grasps

¹⁵ See Christoph Menke, *Kraft: Ein Grundbegriff ästhetischer Anthropologie* (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 2017).

¹⁶ Johann Gottfried Herder, “Zum Sinn des Gefühls,” *Werke in zehn Bänden*, Bd. 4, *Schriften zu Philosophie, Literatur, Kunst und Altertum 1774 – 1787*, eds. Jürgen Brummack and Martin Bollacher (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1994), 235-243, 239.

as part of the dynamic of force to which human beings must craft a response: given that the structure of the real is internally inconsistent, in opposition to itself, how can one find forms in which the violence of oppositional forces can coexist with human thriving?

Another danger for Herder lies precisely in Hemsterhuis' definition of desire as the yearning for fusion, and here the danger is twofold. First, as pure fulfillment of a drive, desire destroys its object: Herder remarks, "also here, enjoyment is *unification*,"¹⁷ but "now the object is consumed, destroyed."¹⁸ The second danger of fusional desire refers not to the destruction of the object, but to that of the subject, namely, in mystical or ecstatic limit experiences, a yearning for God in which "I would lose myself in God without any further feeling and consciousness of myself."¹⁹

The challenge Herder seeks to meet is the following: given this double danger of force—force as the naturalization of violence and conflict, on the one hand, and force as that which would destroy the integrity of the subject or the object, on the other hand—are there sustainable forms of sociability and communication that would nevertheless be commensurate with the forces of attraction and repulsion? To meet this challenge, Herder develops an organization of desire capable of resisting the destructive tendencies of force without denying the ever-present dynamics of force as a necessary ontological background of all forms of social and political organization. He develops a concept of force that is rooted neither in the desire of the subject nor in the dark ground of the soul, but rather, as a regulatory force that moves *between* bodies and governs the distances between subjects:

As soon as many creatures exist mildly next to one another, and want to enjoy one another, it thus follows that no one of these creatures can take its point of departure from its own pleasure, that is, from the *highest pleasure*, or it will destroy everything around it. It has to give and take, suffer and act, attract to itself and gently impart from itself.²⁰

If force has to maintain a system in a state of dynamic equilibrium constituted by polarity, attracting and repelling as needed, then friendship (*philia*) rather than love (*eros*) becomes primordial with respect to cosmic order.²¹ The ontological primordially of *philia* also functions as the basic interrelational

¹⁷ Johann Gottfried Herder, "Liebe und Selbstheit," *Werke in zehn Bänden*, Bd. 4, *Schriften zu Philosophie, Literatur, Kunst und Altertum 1774 – 1787*, eds. Jürgen Brummack and Martin Bollacher (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1994), 405-425; 409.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid., 419.

²⁰ Ibid., 420.

²¹ See Whistler, "The Discipline of Pious Reason."

model for a democratic and non-hierarchical horizontality (*nebeneinander*). Force is thus reinterpreted *as* the ground of a specific ethical and political order predicated on differentiation rather than on the elimination of differentiation. Central to this model are the phenomena of distance and degree (or degrees of difference), which become the precondition for multiplicity and coexistence; the structure of the world, the godhood, has “posited so many forms of distances, with such different degrees and varieties of attractive force”²² [so mancherlei *Entfernungen* gesetzt, mit so verschiedenen *Graden und Arten* der Anziehungskraft]. Herder thus redirects desire from objects to distances between objects; if distance makes multiplicity possible, then distance becomes the real object of desire.

More radically, however, the ontology of forces calls into question the very idea of an *object of* desire as ontologically primordial; instead of an object of desire, there is a process of desire, and in turn, the distance necessary to keep the process in a state of perpetual activity. Unlike Hemsterhuis, for whom desire aims at unification with every object through the superobject cosmos and the cosmoerotics of the moral organ, Herder develops an account of desire that takes the perspective of the cosmos itself, which desires not objects, but the processes through which objects self-organize and realize their individual potentialities. This second-order systemic form of desire—which desires the attraction-repulsion dynamic itself rather than the object—generates in turn an ethics and politics of friendship: a free-flowing reciprocation of desire between discrete individuals that never comes to an end precisely because it desires the gap between itself and its others. Herder’s *redirected* force—force redirected to desiring its own non-fulfillment, the distance between itself and its objects—forms the foundation for a democratic model of multiplicity and relationality.

3. The Force of Unconditioning Objects: Goethe

Goethe develops key aesthetic, philosophical, and natural scientific concepts in dialogue with Herder in the 1770s: genius, development (*Bildung*), polarity, holism, monism, cultural difference, among others. Particularly important for Goethe is Herder’s reinterpretation of Spinoza in *God: Some Conversations* (1787), undertaken in the wake of Jacobi’s *Letters on the Doctrine of Spinoza* (1785). In *God: Some Conversations*, Herder emends Spinoza’s monist and immanent ontology of nature by supplanting the mechanistic notion of substance with a dynamic concept of force—an interpretation that

²² Herder, “Liebe und Selbstheit,” 408.

was also taken up and developed by Romantic nature-philosophical thought in the works of Schelling, Novalis, Günderröde, and Friedrich Schlegel, among others. While Goethe integrates aspects of this interpretation of Spinoza into his own view of nature, for example, in his claims for the centrality of polarity (*Polarität*) and intensification (*Steigerung*) in the order of natural appearances, Goethe's tendency towards the concrete and his practice of "object-oriented thought" (*gegenständliches Denken*)²³ tended to approach force phenomenologically rather than ontologically. Given Goethe's object-oriented perspective, it should be no surprise that Goethe was one of the only thinkers—if not the only thinker of the eighteenth and early nineteenth-centuries—to substantially develop the aesthetic consequences of one of Hemsterhuis' most underappreciated texts: the *Letter on an Antique Gemstone*.

Hemsterhuis' earlier essayistic work concentrates on a series of letters: the *Letter on Sculpture*, the *Letter on Desires*, the *Letter on Man and his Relations*. The first text in eighteenth-century editions of his collected writings, *Letter on an Antique Gemstone*, in contrast to the other works, is generally held to have had little to no afterlife in the aesthetic tradition; it is often regarded as a quaint antiquarian piece. Not only is this assessment false, but Goethe—albeit implicitly—makes this particular letter into a foundational context for the development of a symbolic aesthetics of force in his *Campaign in France*, a text written 1819–1822 in which he narrates the disastrous retreat of allied forces from revolutionary France that took place in 1792. Long misrecognized as a mere autobiographical account of historical events, *Campaign in France* articulates (even performs) an aesthetic ontology that grasps history as the manifestation of form-dissolving and form-generating forces. If the centrality of the *Letter on an Antique Gemstone* to Goethe's aesthetic programme has not been acknowledged by the scholarship, it is perhaps because Goethe engages with the ideas of this text not through direct allusions to Hemsterhuis' letter, but through the engraved gemstones themselves. More importantly, engraved gemstones become counter-symbolic aesthetic objects in the context of Goethe's own reflections: in a field of contested symbolic forms, these objects function as a dispersed reserve of energy, as repositories of cultural memory, capable of countering

²³ Johann Wolfgang Goethe, *Sämtliche Werke, Briefe, Tagebücher und Gespräche*, eds. Hendrik Birus, Dieter Borchmeyer, Karl Eibl, et. al., 40 vols, vol. 36 (Frankfurt am Main: Deutscher Klassiker Verlag, 1987–2013), 318. Hereafter references to Goethe's works will be cited FA, followed by volume and page number.

the daemonic forces of history as they manifest themselves in the entropic and disintegrative effects of war and revolutionary destruction.²⁴

The *Campaign in France* undertakes nothing less than a morphology of historical reality, capturing the play of agonistic forces as they manifest themselves on the world stage. Goethe provides the key to this morphology of history at a critical moment in the narrative when, after the retreat, he travels to Münster to visit the social circle surrounding Amalie Gallitzin—an episode in which the memory of Hemsterhuis, who had died two years earlier in 1790, becomes ever more present and significant in the narrative arc of the text. He describes this morphological and phenomenological key to historical complexity by referring to Kant’s *Metaphysical Foundations of Natural Science*: “I had not failed to notice from Kant’s natural science that the force of attraction and repulsion belongs to the essence of matter and that one cannot be separated from the other in the concept of matter; from this observation occurred to me the originary polarity of all entities, a polarity that saturates and vitalizes the infinite multiplicity of appearances.”²⁵ The polarity of forces, as that which constitutes the field of appearances, posits a field of tension between the disindividuating effects of war, a mode of appearing that breaks down boundaries and tends toward formlessness, and the counter-force of preservation and sublimation that Goethe finds in the reifying potential of aesthetic objects. The primary representative of aesthetic potentiality—that is, of the specific force of the aesthetic, which counters the destructive force of disindividuation—can be found in the gemstones collected, categorized, analyzed, and left behind as a legacy, as the trace of a particular way of being in the world, by Hemsterhuis himself. Hemsterhuis’ gemstones—as figures of crystallization accruing historical sedimentation, melding formative processes drawn from nature and from art, inorganic form and technics—counter the destructive momentum of cultural and social disintegration with their cohesive and generative force. From this point of view, the *Campaign in France* tells the story of a struggle between two very different, and seemingly asymmetrical, symbolic objects: the cohesive and individuating force of the aesthetic as crystallized in gemstones on the one hand, and the dissolving and disindividuating force of the French Revolution on the other hand.

But what, precisely, is a symbolic object? In a famous letter to Schiller in August 1797, Goethe writes about special types of object that he calls

²⁴ I had the opportunity to read sections of a manuscript in preparation by Joel Lande entitled *Vagantenweisheit: Goethes Schaffen im Licht der Französischen Revolution*, in which he touches on similar themes; Lande reads Goethe as a “Phänomenologe gesellschaftlicher Umwälzungen” (forthcoming), an assessment with which I agree.

²⁵ FA 16.520.

“symbolic objects” (“*Gegenstände*, die eigentlich symbolisch sind”).²⁶ Symbolic objects produce multiple effects: they stand out from other objects, they are thus out-standing (“eminent cases”²⁷); they have a “characteristic multiplicity or variety”²⁸ (*charakteristische Mannigfaltigkeit*); as “representatives of many other objects,”²⁹ they *stand in* for other objects (standing out and standing in belong to the operations of symbolic objects); they produce a “certain totality”³⁰ (*eine gewisse Totalität*)—not a dogmatic or enumerated totality but a totality whose boundaries are not set in advance and are under negotiation; symbolic objects generate “a certain series”³¹ or succession (*eine gewisse Reihe*); they call forth “similarity and foreignness”³² (*ähnliches und fremdes*); they produce a “certain unity and generality”³³ (*Einheit und Allheit*). In perceptual, imaginative, and cognitive experience, symbolic objects stand out from others in their power to disclose something beyond themselves; Goethe calls them “happy” or “fortunate”³⁴ objects, *glücklich*, inasmuch as they produce in space what the *kairos* generates in time.

A further secondary effect not explicitly discussed in the letter to Schiller also plays a role in Goethe’s approach to symbolic objects: they produce a punctuation or articulation that introduces a caesura into the flow of temporally continuous experience. Symbolic objects open up a counter-space for imaginative practices that would otherwise not be granted a horizon of emergence. When they function in this way, symbolic objects become *unconditioning objects*. Unconditioning objects draw upon and expand the dynamics of symbolic objects in two ways: first, they are not merely sensuous representatives of the idea (i.e. the ideal form of the plant as a virtual source from which all other forms can be derived or imaginatively reproduced), but open up onto a more foundational ontology of becoming, what Goethe calls “the lawful living power”³⁵ (*das gesetzmäßig Lebendige*); and second, these objects are unconditioning inasmuch as they suspend the conditions governing a status quo and intimate a different order of things.

When considered as an autobiographical text, Goethe’s *Campaign in France*, along with the *Siege of Mainz*, purports to narrate the story of Goethe’s

²⁶ FA 31.389.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Ibid.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Ibid., 546.

“whimsical military career” (*wunderliche Militairlaufbahn*).³⁶ Both texts document historical catastrophe: the political catastrophe of the military defeat and the siege of Mainz, but more broadly, the catastrophe of violence and war itself, of the entropic forces of history. Autobiographical interpretations of the *Campaign in France* tend to obscure the latent aesthetic-ontological drama running parallel to the more immediately visible historical and subjective catastrophe. This other drama unfolds in the contemplation of different types of symbolic objects: unconditioning objects produced by and intervening within force dynamics.

In a first step, then, this supposedly autobiographical text, which on the surface aims to construct the persona *Goethe*, can be turned on its head: it evinces another aspect, not so much as a subject-centered text, but as one that cultivates an attentiveness to objects that disclose the fundamental forces governing appearances. Second, the object attractions in this text track relatively closely to the political-existential situation in which the narrator finds himself; Goethe’s fascination with objects indexes the agonistic domain of social and political reality, what Goethe characterizes as “the inner antagonism of the citizens,”³⁷ riven by class and national conflicts, constantly brushing up against the persistence of an apparent death drive. However, if the tendency toward dissolution constitutes one of the central features of Goethe’s unconditioning objects—thereby indexing divisions in various social bodies and collective formations—a second tendency within these objects draws upon a counter-force, namely, that which could repair such seemingly ineluctable antagonisms.

This internal object dynamic—disclosing antagonisms and then repairing them—mirrors the narrative arc of the *Campaign* itself. If Goethe, over the course of the narrative, encounters war as a symbolic object in its own right, as a source of historical entropy that turns against the cohesiveness of things and subjects all beings to contingency and vulnerability, Goethe eventually retreats from the destabilization of the unconditioning object of war into a confined and controlled domestic and social space at the end of the text. In this seemingly closed-off space (an aesthetic counter-space not unlike Schiller’s conception of the chorus in *The Bride of Messina*, which draws a wall around reality not only to protect itself from the real, but to unlock the autonomous power of the aesthetic in relation to this reality), he is drawn toward objects that illustrate the possibility of a binding force to counter the “internal discord”³⁸ (*der innere Zwiespalt*) of revolutionary disintegration. He

³⁶ FA 36.250.

³⁷ FA 16.395.

³⁸ Ibid.

discovers the symbolic paradigm of this other sort of object towards the end of the narrative among the social circle in Münster surrounding Amalie Gallitzin. It is at this moment that Goethe's *Campaign*, in its crowning final section, undertakes an aesthetic resuscitation and reinterpretation of Hemsterhuis' philosophy.

This aesthetic resuscitation harnesses a power within aesthetic objects to channel and redirect the ontology of force that Goethe develops in other contexts. In his *Theory of Colors*, Goethe approaches nature as constituted by forces of polarity that initiate operations of dividing and uniting: "To divide that which is united, to unite that which is divided, is the life of nature; this is the eternal systole and diastole, the eternal synchysis and diachysis, the inhaling and exhaling of the world in which we live, weave, and exist."³⁹ Goethe treats war in the *Campaign in France* as a symbolic and morphological object revelatory of this pulsing rhythm within the grain of historical reality. War, and the French Revolution more specifically, constitutes a morphological challenge; the *Campaign* undertakes a morphology of war presented from the perspective of the physicist, albeit with an important inversion, one in which the oscillating pulsation of things produces ruin rather than life. The observation of objects plundered from a weapons cache launches Goethe into a rumination on the alternation "between order and disorder, between survival and perishing, between stealing and paying... that probably makes war so ruinous for the mind."⁴⁰ The general tendencies of the objects Goethe observes throughout the narrative brings them into a horizon of contemporaneity where they are drawn into the maelstrom of war: any redemptive potential they hold to indicate a different order of things comes under assault by the conditions of violence, conflict and pessimism that suffuse the present.

The transfiguration of objects under the aspect of disintegration continues throughout the narrative, making objects resistant to the morphological gaze. Things begin to lose their integrity *as* objects, since the conditions of war—operating in tandem with disastrous weather—render fragile not just political or national boundaries, but the boundedness of all appearances, in a more concrete sense overwhelming them with the amorphous presence of dirt, mud, and rain.⁴¹ The universalization of war ultimately entails the destruction of all object-archives, objects as archives,

³⁹ FA 23: 239.

⁴⁰ FA 16.413.

⁴¹ See Hans Blumenberg, *Goethe zum Beispiel* (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1999), 153. My thanks go to Joel Lande for the reference to Blumenberg; Lande also writes of this tendency of the text to disintegrate into mud in his forthcoming manuscript.

repositories of personal and culturally bound values, or in a larger sense, art. Previously, in a 1772 review of Georg Sulzer's *Theory of the Fine Arts*, Goethe approached creative-destructive tendencies through the semantics of force (*Kraft*): "What we see of nature is force that consumes force, nothing lasting, everything transient, a thousand germs destroyed, every moment a thousand born, grand and significant, infinitely diverse; beautiful and ugly, good and evil, everything existing side by side with equal right. And *art* is precisely the counterpart to this; it emerges from the efforts of the individual to maintain itself against the destructive force of the whole."⁴² The turn toward objects—and above all to aesthetic objects—can, from this perspective, be regarded as a counterforce, a force that asserts itself against the leveling operations of anarchic, disintegratory force.

The ending of the *Campaign in France* turns to the aesthetic object in a gesture of withdrawal: a military retreat, to be sure, but also a retreat from the political-public sphere of world-historical events into the domestic sphere. The retreat from publicity, the turn toward the interior, is indicated by the final line of the *Campaign*, part of an occasional poem, which reads: "we turn, regardless of how the world captivates / To the confines of limitation, which alone grants happiness" [*wir wenden uns, wie auch die Welt entzücke, / Der Enge zu, die uns allein beglücke*].⁴³ In this inward retreat, Goethe seeks to re-establish the stabilization of a bounded concept of the real after his encounter with the oscillating conditions of war. However, Goethe does not retreat from sociality as such; instead, by turning to the interiority of domestic stability, he discovers an alternative logic of social order.

This alternative logic binds individuals together in their dedication to the perception and interpretation of sensuous objects. The end of the *Campaign* describes how an aesthetic community gathers around the cut gemstones that Hemsterhuis left to Gallitzin upon his death. Goethe describes these gemstones with some detail at various moments; in another text, written shortly after he wrote *Campaign in France*, Goethe claims that the collection of stones formed the "the spiritual-aesthetic midpoint around which friends united for several days—friends, by the way, whose thinking and feeling did not quite harmonize."⁴⁴ The gemstone, in this account, constitutes a theoretical object—that is, an object that brings the potential abstraction and disembodiment of theory into sensuous presence—inasmuch

⁴² FA 18.197.

⁴³ FA 16.572.

⁴⁴ Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, "Hemsterhuis-Gallizinische Gemmen-Sammlung," *Goethes Werke*, part 2, vol. 49 (Weimar: Hermann Böhlau Nachfolger, 1900), 101.

as it is folded into a series of explicit reinterpretations of Hemsterhuis' texts, which Goethe undertakes in the *Campaign*.

Goethe's analysis of Hemsterhuis' thought follows a triadic structure, beginning with Hemsterhuis' *Letter on Sculpture*, moving to the *Letter on Desires*, and finally culminating in the gemstones themselves as symbolic-theoretical objects. Goethe takes his point of departure from a dynamic interpretation of Hemsterhuis' notion of the beautiful, which Hemsterhuis formulates in the *Letter on Sculpture* as the production of the greatest number of ideas in the smallest amount of time. For Goethe, what Hemsterhuis describes as the law of the *optimum* is rooted in a vitalized and organized natural source, "the lawful living power" (*das gesetzmäßig Lebendige*); beauty sensuously mediates and intensifies this source, channeling a living dynamic that reproduces itself in subjects: "The beautiful is that through which—whenever we have a vision of the lawful living power in its greatest activity and perfection—we are stimulated to reproduce this dynamic and thereby feel ourselves equally vitalized and set into the highest form of activity."⁴⁵ He claims that this formulation and Hemsterhuis' law of the optimum say "exactly the same thing, only expressed by two different human beings."⁴⁶ In this redescription and reinterpretation of Hemsterhuis' principle of the optimum, the beautiful is no longer limited to the domain of art, but extends to encompass all living processes. Important for Goethe is the vitalizing gesture implicit in Hemsterhuis' thought: the beautiful inasmuch as it makes visible a perpetually generative dynamic in which the viewer actively participates and then reproduces onward.

Goethe continues his review of Hemsterhuis' thought with a brief aside on Hemsterhuis' *Letter on Desires*, which complicates the presentation of the beautiful as a "lawful living force" by introducing a gap between the subject and its desired unification with objects. Here too, however, the potential rift or gap between subject and object is transformed into a reproductive drive; this gap animates the absolute operation of *striving*, itself predicated on the incapacity to achieve wholeness or completion. This figure reappears in post-Kantian speculative thought, for example, as a central dynamic of stimulation in Fichte's notion of subjectivity as perpetual self-positing activity (the notable literary analog of which can be found in the striving of Faust). In Goethe's account of Hemsterhuis' *Letter on Desires*, desire can be animated, personified, and approached as if it were itself the partner in an erotic relationship; the pulsation of desire animates the very rhetoric of desire.

⁴⁵ FA 16.546.

⁴⁶ FA 16.546.

Goethe writes: “Desire and satisfaction [have to] alternate in a pulsating life, grabbing hold of one another and letting one another go... so that one should not stop desiring.”⁴⁷

While it might seem that Goethe ends his discussion of Hemsterhuis with this brief remark on the *Letter on Desires*, in fact, the engraved gems, standing in as a proxy for Goethe’s own concept of an aesthetic or symbolic object, constitute the final step in his explication of Hemsterhuis’ thought. Goethe moves from the reproduction of “the lawful living power” to the reproduction of desire that desires itself, to the final step in the sequence, the capstone, as it were: it is only through the engraved gems that the *sociality* of the aesthetic comes to light, the aesthetic as a way of being in the world that confronts and repairs the fissures of an agonistic ontological dynamic. Goethe describes “the cut stones as a magnificent mediating member” that can fill the gaps of social interaction and conversation [*Unterhaltung*], “whenever interaction threatens to become intermittent [*lückenhaft*].”⁴⁸ However, the cut stones produce much more than conversation or entertainment; rather, they represent the sensuous culmination of the dynamics that Goethe discusses in Hemsterhuis’ theory of beauty and desire, albeit now raised to the level of sociality.

To grasp how this happens and why the gemstone constitutes a *theoretical object*, it is necessary to briefly turn to Hemsterhuis’ *Letter on an Antique Gemstone*, which hovers over this section of the *Campaign* although it is never explicitly mentioned. There is a record that Goethe read the letter and called it “significant,”⁴⁹ but his precise knowledge of the letter is not known, so what follows is partially speculative.

The particular gemstone analyzed by Hemsterhuis in his letter represents an aesthetic and an ethical ideal of feminine agency—albeit a form of agency, as is so often the case, directed to repairing unchecked masculinity. Hemsterhuis describes the gemstone in the letter as follows:

If you look carefully at the main figure, you will notice that it is that of a woman. The delicacy of her physiognomy, the part of the bosom spared by the gleam of the amethyst, and those long tresses floating in the air or running down her back, they all dispel any doubt. Her head is surrounded by a diadem, and what must be noted is that she is not in the attitude of a person who wants to ride the horse, but in [the attitude] of a person who wants to restrain it: the position of her legs proves this sufficiently. And indeed, she does not only tighten the reins, but the

⁴⁷ FA 16.547.

⁴⁸ FA 16.549.

⁴⁹ Goethe, “Hemsterhuis-Gallizinische Gemmen-Sammlung,” 109.

animal itself rears up and seems to struggle against the hand that restrains it. (*EE* 1.56)

Just as Freud would later uncover visible traces of invisible psychological processes of sublimation in his *Moses of Michelangelo*, so too does Hemsterhuis turn to an object whose main function intends to memorialize the mastering of instinctuality and channel this achievement into the fabric of social and political order. Via a series of philological analyses that purport to uncover the identity of this figure, Hemsterhuis argues that the gemstone was a δαμαρέτιον, a coin or medal to memorialize Damarete of Sicily from Greek antiquity. The husband of Damarete, Gelon, tyrant of Syracuse, defeated the Carthaginians and was on the verge of laying waste to the land; the Carthaginians turned to his wife, Damarate, for help, who, in the words of Hemsterhuis, “was so successful with her husband that she managed to calm [the tyrant] and persuade him to make peace with the Carthaginians with terms that were quite favourable considering the circumstances in which they found themselves.” (*EE* 1.57) The horse straining against its bridle, the tyrant straining to press on to conquer: a series of symbolic substitutions—from the horse to the tyrant to the politics of domination—makes the gemstone into a chain of sublimating operations directed against the sheer expression of destructive drive. The gemstone as aesthetic object captures the generation of ethical and political equilibrium in a material and transhistorical archive itself invested with a stabilizing symbolic power. In this chain of representations, Hemsterhuis’ gemstone thematizes and turns against a politics of force conceptualized as brute domination. Such is the power of the work of art as described in Hemsterhuis’ *Letter on an Antique Gemstone*.

This operation carries over into Goethe’s *Campaign*, for which Hemsterhuis’ gemstones function as an aesthetic model. The circle in Münster in Goethe’s account, coming at the end of a retreat from the contingencies of war into an aesthetically constituted social space, displays and discusses multiple gemstones left behind by Hemsterhuis, and here too, a process of symbolic sublimation is enacted, albeit in a smaller format. When Goethe appears in Münster, he encounters a community with its own particular tensions, a community that does not seem to admit his own heterodox personality into its circle; and here too, the gemstone repairs this potentially fractured collective body. For Goethe, the object agency of the gemstone thereby produces a counter-tendency to the disintegrative manifestations of force. If war unconditions the stabilizing conditions of life through exposure to conflict, contingency, and forces of disindividuation, the

gemstone reimposes boundaries and boundedness, cohesion, and ultimately becomes a reservoir for life operations. Such operations are preserved in an archive transcending mortality, as the entire culture of antiquity and modernity, from Damarete to Hemsterhuis himself, still “works” through these gemstones; they mediate life amidst the facticity of death. The unconditioning operation of war must itself be unconditioned, suspended *as* a condition. And such is, moreover, the trajectory of the narrative arc of the *Campaign in France* as well, whose symbolic agency channels and duplicates that of Hemsterhuis’ gemstone. The reproduction of this aesthetic form (from gemstone to text) at the same time suggests a reading of this text—over and above its autobiographical functions—not just as a repository for unconditioning symbolic objects, but itself as an example of such a reparative aesthetic object.

4. Unconditioning Force: Schiller and Günderröde

Already in Hemsterhuis’ thought, the ontology of force, when manifesting itself as desire in mental—simultaneously erotic and cognitive—operations that aim at perfect identification with an object, exhibits a tendency toward the elimination of distinctions. As both Goethe and Herder note, absolute erotic identification defeats its purported generative function—in what the Hegelian tradition would call a dialectical inversion—by becoming commensurate with a destructive, disindividuating force (Goethe’s *Werther* is, in many senses, a case study in the commensurability of erotic identification and disindividuation, eros and thanatos). Both Goethe and Herder are thus concerned to elicit a counter-force in objects and practices capable of re-establishing boundaries. When confronted with the unruly drive toward disintegration that manifests itself in war, Goethe constructs an aesthetic archive that preserves operations of sublimation in a morphological train of transmission—effectively substituting the morphologies (or anti-morphologies) of dissolution in war with the morphologies of form-maintenance and form-generation in art—whereas Herder transforms the desire for objects or subjects into the desire *for* distance; the distance between beings becomes a second-order object of desire.

Herder formulates one of the guiding questions for ontologies of force: what are the mechanisms that hold beings at a distance? In another text around this time that takes its point of departure from an ontology of force, *Observations about the Universe* (1787), Karl Theodor von Dalberg imagines a utopia of human beings held together by attraction, a field in which all beings

participate in a perpetual “becoming similar” (*Ähnlichwerdung*).⁵⁰ Dalberg nevertheless reconciles force with distinctions: “class, sex, species, always the same, after millennia the same!”⁵¹ Dalberg (who was later to become Schiller's patron) does not want to eliminate such distinctions—on the contrary, he claims these distinctions *manifest* the force of becoming-similar: people of the same class will continue belonging to the same class, thereby investing socially contingent categories with a natural cohesion or attractive force. By regarding class as a mechanism of separation that makes groups of human beings belong to a common genus—thereby cohering with the process of “becoming similar”—Dalberg illustrates how force can be used to naturalize class, gender, and other forms of social or cultural differentiation and hierarchization.

There are, however, other possible speculative engagements with the politics of force that take the idea of “becoming similar” in more radical directions. These other thought experiments with force make disindividuation into a central operation, one that even claims primacy over individuation (against Herder and Goethe). One of the most notable aesthetic explorations of the potential of force to affirm processes of disindividuation can be found in Schiller's *Philosophical Letters* in a section entitled the “Theosophy of Julius.” Laure Cahen-Maurel argues that this text, above all its nature-philosophical concept of love and beauty, is significant for Novalis' thought.⁵² Some of the most significant operations of Romantic thought experiments can already be found in this text. In the “Theosophy of Julius,” Schiller elaborates a vision of the cosmos so metaphysical, speculative, and religiously inflected, that the dialogue partners of this letter exchange (Julius and Raphael) speak of this vision as a form of non-sense (*Unsinn*).

Rather than reject this non-sense outright, the creator of this vision (Julius) amplifies it and makes it into an aesthetic construct, into a symbolic network imbued with an ontological and conceptual status through the autonomy of its system of signification. Julius claims, “our most pure concepts are in no way *images* of things, but rather, their necessarily determined and coexisting *signs*.”⁵³ Julius imagines an ontology of attraction that manifests its truth *as* an effect of attraction itself, that is, the attraction

⁵⁰ Karl Theodor von Dalberg, *Betrachtungen über das Universum* (Erfurt: Johann Friedrich Weber, 1777), 61.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 29.

⁵² See Laure Cahen-Maurel, “Novalis's Magical Idealism: A Threefold Philosophy of the Imagination, Love and Medicine,” *Symphilosophie* 1 (2019): 129-165, 155.

⁵³ Friedrich Schiller, *Philosophische Briefe, Werke und Briefe in zwölf Bänden*, Bd. 8: *Theoretische Schriften*, ed. Rolf-Peter Janz (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1992), 208–233, 209.

of its sign character, whose form of truth operates through conceptuality detached from external reference. He describes this ontology of attraction, which in turn must subtend all signifying practices (including his own discourse), as a process of individuation that tends toward disindividuation:

The attraction of elements brought the physical form of nature into being. The attraction of minds multiplied into infinity and continued would have to eventually lead to the destruction of every separation, or (dare I speak it, Raphael?) produce God. Such an attraction is love.⁵⁴

This thought experiment is noteworthy in many respects. First, attraction has no countermovement, is not integrated into an oppositional structure; the cosmogenesis of nature is conditioned not by attraction and repulsion (as for Herder), but by pure attraction and nothing else. The semantics of this text aligns more with Hemsterhuis' conception of attraction (which also has no opposite) and desire inasmuch as desire aims at unity with all that exists. Second, in contradistinction to Hemsterhuis, there is no resistance or inertia that inhibits unification, and in principle, no structural impossibility to desire achieving its ends. Instead, attraction sets into motion a multiplication without end that culminates in the elimination of distinctions. In this ontology of attraction, every being is in principle unifiable with every other being. Third, attraction culminates in what Schelling would later describe as the logic of mythology, namely in a theogonic process; the force of attraction does not posit a God standing outside space and time, nor a pantheistic God in which God is simply all of nature, but rather, God realizes itself through the historical unfolding of the force of attraction, is itself *produced* by human activity on the pathway toward disindividuation. This vision of the cosmos is much more extreme than a mere fusional fantasy, as it is radically desubjectified. It renders subjectivity itself—because it depends on differentiation—into a contingent form.

Processes of attraction multiply and potentiate themselves in such a way that relationality itself disappears. This vision reveals much more than just the contingency of forms of social and political differentiation (class, species, gender, maybe even the political itself)—but identifies the disappearance of such categories as commensurate with the realization of God. Whereas Dalberg draws on force to naturalize such distinctions, Schiller makes a political operation out of disindividuation by construing all distinctions and sources of differentiation into impediments to the telos of divine attraction. Schiller thereby relativizes the entire field of social and political organization,

⁵⁴ Ibid., 227.

making all social symbolic codes of separation appear incompatible with the sacred. Social differentiation becomes blasphemy. Schiller, after the encounter with Kant's writings, will disavow this telos of absolute attraction in favor of a more balanced notion of aesthetic education; nevertheless, the speculative prioritization of processes of disindividuation found in the *Philosophical Letters* is taken up by romantic poets and thinkers, in turn providing a significant impetus for a concept of force as the absolute unconditioning of given social realities.

Novalis' indebtedness to the genealogy of attraction in which Hemsterhuis and Schiller play key mediating roles has been well acknowledged in the scholarship on German Romanticism.⁵⁵ In his notes on Hemsterhuis' *Alexis*, Novalis emphasizes philosophical cosmotechnical operations—coordinating “the *forces* of the individual with the *forces* of the cosmos”⁵⁶—as a model for the poetic generation of “the most intimate, wonderful community.”⁵⁷ More even than Novalis, however, Karoline von Günderrode, who had read Herder and Hemsterhuis and studied Schelling's *Naturphilosophie*, develops a politics of force that does not disavow, nor even sublimate, the violence in nature-philosophical processes of individuation and disindividuation.⁵⁸ In one of her nature-philosophical texts, *The Idea of the Earth*, she writes: “We call life the most intimate mixture of different elements with the highest degree of contact and attraction.”⁵⁹ Attraction (*Anziehungskraft*) and contact (*Berührung*): these concepts imbue the erotics of individuation with a violent potentiality. Force, even at its most erotically (or homoerotically) charged—as in her ballad “Piedro,” for example, in which male combatants become lovers who consummate their erotic union in death—implies struggles for power and a potential for violence. In her notes on Schelling, she grasps the operations of *Naturphilosophie* through the semantics of conflict. She writes: “If we think about two beings of unequal

⁵⁵ See, for example, Dalia Nassar, *The Romantic Absolute* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014).

⁵⁶ Novalis [Friedrich von Hardenberg], *Novalis' Schriften*, vol. 2, eds. Richard Samuel, Hans-Joachim Mähl, and Gerhard Schulz et al. (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1983), 372.

⁵⁷ Ibid. For a recent illustration of how Romantic poetry brings the transformation of forces into visibility, see Cornelia Zumbusch, “‘Fire Machines’: *Heinrich von Ofterdingen* and the Transformation of Forces,” *Forces of Nature. Dynamism and Agency in German Romanticism*, eds. Adrian Renner and Frederike Middelhoff (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2022), 147-168.

⁵⁸ For the important link between Günderrode and Schellingian *Naturphilosophie*, see Adrian Renner, “Dynamic Perceptions: Forces of Nature and Powers of the Senses in Schelling, Novalis, and Günderrode,” *Forces of Nature. Dynamism and Agency in German Romanticism*, eds. Adrian Renner and Frederike Middelhoff (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2022), 101-126.

⁵⁹ Karoline von Günderrode, *Samtliche Werke und ausgewählte Studien*, vol. 1, ed. Walther Morgenthaler (Basel: Stroemfeld, 2006), 446. References to Günderrode's works will be based on this edition, indicating volume and page number.

size, the larger one will attract and will, so to speak, consume the smaller one.”⁶⁰ The question is implicit: what resources do “smaller beings” have to resist the larger ones?

In an early dialogue entitled “The Manes”—manes were the spirits of the dead often revered as gods—one of the interlocutors suggests that the dead can enter into a relationship with the living “inasmuch as [one has] something homogeneous”⁶¹ with them. The human mind thereby becomes a potential archive for all individuated beings: “Death is a chemical process, a separation of forces, but not an annihilator; it does not break the bond between myself and similar souls.”⁶² Every thought homogeneous with that of another individuated being thus preserves and transmits, whether consciously or not, the forces (*Kräfte*) of this individual. The chemical interpretation of death—because it separates forces but does not destroy them—enables such forces to transcend seemingly insuperable barriers, such as time, space, gender, and class. Thus “smaller beings” can always transmit something of the energy or force of all beings that come before them, even the most monumental, and vice versa. In the “Manes” the operation that binds past, present and future in this manner is described as a prophetic gift, one that opens up a “sense for the future.”⁶³

These elements of an ethics and politics of force—one that melds the violence of actualization with the potential for novelty, in turn affirming processes of disindividuation (death) as part of a chain of cultural transmission—come to the foreground in an important but understudied poem that Günderrode wrote about the Roman statesman Brutus. Let us recall that Brutus was also important for Hemsterhuis, as he exemplified the use of the moral organ to set himself at odds with the seeming course of history, to go against the grain of the norms governing his contemporaneous moment. Günderrode’s poem “Brutus” takes place at a critical juncture in the history of political forms, a transitional moment, one in which the Republic of Rome is set on its march toward empire. Günderrode folds the tragedy of empire into lyrical form: Brutus slays Caesar for the sake of the republican ideal, but is then subsequently overwhelmed and defeated by the forces of empire. The poem thus intervenes in a seemingly teleological historical movement—from Republic to Empire—and seeks to uncover a resistance against the inexorability of political regression. This is the pretext to which one must be attuned while reading the poem. The event of the poem

⁶⁰ SW 2.388.

⁶¹ SW 1.32.

⁶² SW 1.33.

⁶³ SW 1.35.

thus describes a revolutionary context, albeit one that functions as an inversion of the French Revolution of the eighteenth century (which also, however, devolved into tyranny): the death of Brutus marks the turning of time when democracy becomes tyranny. When Brutus kills Caesar the individual, he actually and unwittingly gives birth to the stable symbolic and political form of Caesar, the *Kaiser*, emperor or king, who, as we know, has multiple bodies, one of which supposedly never dies.

Force as violence marks the entirety of Günderröde's "Brutus," which focuses specifically on two acts of violence and their relation: the death of Caesar and the death of Brutus. The process of disindividuation that takes place in this poem concerns self-extinction rather than erotic fusion. We thus return to Weil's description of the tendency of force to drift into violence: force as that which turns human beings into things. However, in this instance, Günderröde examines how two divergent concepts of force—force as violence and force as emergent potentiality—coalesce and become entangled with one another. What does she do with this troubling figure of thought? The poem reads as follows:

Brutus

Long ago Caesar was once butchered for freedom,
In the fullness of his fame, of his life.
And Brutus strides to the high goal
That he so ardently seeks to seize;

And yet, he is soon deranged by darkness,
His luck wavers in such a bold play,
And still he wrestles courageously toward his goal
Up until the death that he proudly disdained,

For more joyfully than previously in Caesar's side,
Brutus' dagger sinks into Brutus' breast
And only by dying does freedom become his prize.

Thus did a true priest, Brutus himself,
Sacrifice himself to freedom, to his god,
And yet: whoever dies for his god lives in his god.

[Der Freiheit ward einst Cäsar hingeschlachtet,
In seines Ruhmes seines Lebens Fülle.
Und Brutus schreitet zu dem hohen Ziele
Das zu erfassen er so sehnlich trachtet;

Doch bald wird es von Dunkel ihm umnachtet
 Es schwankt sein Glück in solchem kühnen Spiele,
 Doch ringt er muthig noch nach seinem Ziele
 Bis zu dem Tode, den er stolz verachtet,

Denn freudiger als einst in Cäsars Seite
 Senkt Brutus Dolch in Brutus Busen sich
 Und sterbend erst wird Freiheit seine Beute.

So opferte der Freiheit seinem Gotte
 Ein wahrer Priester, Brutus selber sich,
 Doch wer ihm stirbt, der lebt in seinem Gotte.]⁶⁴

Some points bear mentioning before examining the ethics and politics of force as it comes to light in this poem. First, the poem is a mirror—not just in the mirroring structure of its rhyme, but in its very conceptuality. The first substantive word to appear in the poem is freedom, the last is God. But we know that this last instance of God is nothing other *than* freedom (Brutus “sacrificed to freedom, to his god”). Thus the alpha and omega, the origin and telos of the poem is freedom.

Second, the poem is a sonnet; in its very form, it is an archive of what Günderrode calls in another poem “roman force”⁶⁵ (*römische Kraft*), stretching back through Petrarch to antiquity (and although Petrarchan, this sonnet in fact fuses Petrarchan form and Shakespearean content: the Brutus of *Julius Caesar*). The sonnet structure is organized around a series of turns, above all around the *volta* between the stanza and the sextet. The stanza already contains a turn revolving around the nature-philosophical dyad of light and gravity, from Brutus’ ascent towards the high goal, with its implication of solarility, to the descent, the envelopment or insanity of darkness, with its implication of the subterranean. Something about Brutus thus unites two opposed tendencies: an elevation towards the ideal together

⁶⁴ SW 1.374.

⁶⁵ SW 1.369. The poem in question is “Buonaparte in Egypten,” which seems to turn a blind eye to the imperialistic fervor with which Napoleon invaded Egypt. Napoleon appears in this poem as the progenitor of Novalis’ *Novices of Sais*, although bringing Novalis’ Romanticism into the contemporary political world, with Napoleon as the new novice who will finally reawaken the slumbering secrets of the past. The politics of the poem is somewhat complicated by the entanglement of East and West (as Egypt is the origin of light emerging from darkness; Napoleon bringing the light of freedom to Egypt thus could make Napoleon into a product of Egypt returning to itself), as well as the ambiguity surrounding “Roman force”—as violence, but also as the potentiality of a suppressed and unfinished past that resurfaces in the present.

with the corporeal struggle and a descent into madness, enveloped by death—rise and fall.

But what rises and falls with Brutus? Let us focus on this line:

And Brutus strides to the high goal,
That he so ardently seeks to seize.

Strangely, the semantics of this line seem to fit Caesar more than Brutus: the man who seeks to seize political control. One could easily replace “Brutus” with “Caesar,” and the line would make perfect sense. However, this formal interchangeability conceals contrary political operations. The high goal that Brutus ardently seeks to seize is in fact something that has already been lost: the republican political body. The “goal” or *telos* that rises and falls with Brutus, then, is this body, which becomes a virtual body, a potential body, no longer actual. Such is the first turn of the poem that takes place in the stanza, in the movement from solarity into the night of derangement, *Umnachtung*: the loss of the republican body.

But there is a second turn, the proper *volta* of the poem. In this turn, Brutus turns his dagger on himself; he disindividuates himself. This too, however, is not mere capitulation or death. At this moment, readers witness Brutus becoming a complete being, simultaneously subject and object in a striking syntactic mirroring: *Senkt Brutus Dolch in Brutus Busen sich*. With this reflexive structure, Brutus makes his own body into the *telos* of speculative thought: he becomes the subject-object of history. Thus, while he loses his body in disindividuation, he nevertheless becomes one with the virtual body held *in potentia*, one that can remain operative long after corporeal disintegration. The political ideal that the subject-object of the poem comes to embody represents a countermovement to the course of history, producing a caesura in the trajectory according to which Empire supplants Republic. In the destruction of the physical body—an act of destruction that produces and preserves the symbolic republican body—Brutus turns against time, embodying what Hölderlin would later call in his *Pindar Fragments* the wisdom of betrayal.⁶⁶ In the betrayal of time, the violation of the norm becomes a second-order ideal. Brutus must *steal* freedom—as freedom becomes Brutus’ prize or loot (*Beute*), something taken by force—from the historical process that would seek to occlude its possibility: only in an act of transgression, by standing against history (as Hemsterhuis also understood

⁶⁶ Friedrich Hölderlin, *Sämtliche Werke und Briefe*, ed. Michael Knaupp, vol. 2 (Munich: Hanser, 1992), 379.

the case of Brutus)—by *becoming criminal*—can freedom come into full sensuous appearance.⁶⁷

In this celebration of the betrayal of time, the poem traverses a field of nature-philosophical forces coordinated with political regimes that manifest themselves in the structure of lyric organization. While the stanza, the first eight lines, describes how light descends into darkness, corresponding to the overcoming of the Republic by Empire, the last six lines, the *volta*, restores the integrity of the wounded collective body by virtualizing it, by turning it into an ever-present potentiality: by becoming a general symbolic form in which the dissolution of the body preserves not just the individual body (Brutus) but the body for which he stands (the Republic). Such is the import of the final line of the poem, one in which the annihilated human body is retained in the divine body, still living in its god. Günderröde thereby imagines a counter-history of political bodies in the West, one in which instead of a *Kaiser*, the republican body, the *Brutus*, becomes the dominant political form. What Günderröde called “Roman force” is thus historically and symbolically inverted: from Empire to Republic.

The poem also effects a conceptual transformation in the very operation of force: namely from force as pure violence, naked power, to a different sort of force, the force of potentiality. But this form of potentiality has a violence as well: a symbolic violence, or the capacity to elevate and denigrate accretions of significance granted to specific entities (in this case: Caesar and Brutus). Günderröde’s “Brutus” begins with brute force. The word “brutal” is already current in the eighteenth century, applied typically to animals, or to that being outside the order of the human, the *brute*. And the poem does begin with the death of one who dies like an animal: Caesar, the pinnacle of the human, butchered (*hingeschlachtet*). The form of death here occurs as waste: life as a mere thing, cast aside. Caesar ends in abjection: an expulsion incapable of effecting a transformation. He dies, as Hegel would later write in reference to revolutionary violence, “with no more significance than cutting off a head of cabbage.”⁶⁸ To this form of violence, Günderröde opposes the ideal of *sacrifice* (*er opferte sich*). Sacrifice in this instance, however, has a peculiar form: Brutus the priest sacrifices *himself* as victim, thereby becoming both sacrificing and sacrificed. To draw upon Giorgio Agamben’s thought: Brutus is not just the *homo sacer*, expelled from the social body, but

⁶⁷ My gratitude goes to members of the German Department from Johns Hopkins University who heard a version of this section of the paper and whose feedback I have incorporated into this piece.

⁶⁸ Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A.V. Miller (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), 360.

the very medium of the sacred.⁶⁹ In becoming both the source of sacred power and sacrificial object, Brutus robs the power of the dominant symbolic form (*imperium*) from harvesting his sacrificial energy; he becomes the source of his own symbolic power. Caesar is thus evacuated of symbolic power inasmuch as he is merely butchered, rendered unproductive; whereas Brutus, by becoming sacrificer and sacrificed at once, is imbued with an absolute symbolic power. Günderröde thus switches the semantic and symbolic positions of Caesar and Brutus; Caesar becomes the Brute, slaughtered, while Brutus is elevated to a symbolic political and theological absolute.

There is more. This self-sacrifice is thus no mere self-sacrifice, but—as Hemsterhuis noted previously with respect to Brutus—a protest against the dominant symbolic order. Brutus channels revolutionary violence against the idea of *imperium*, albeit only by exercising violence on his own body. This act nevertheless robs *imperium* of the ability to determine what is sacred; Brutus makes not only his own singular human body, but also the vanishing political body (i.e. the Republic) into a sacred form, excluding the emergent *imperium* from the economy of sacrifice that constitutes sacred power. The final gnomic utterance of the poem personalizes the ideal of freedom in this self-sacrifice: *wer ihm stirbt, der lebt in seinem Gotte*, “whoever dies for him [i.e. for his god] lives in his god.” However, it is difficult to pinpoint precisely for whose sake one dies in this line. The most obvious reading declares that whoever dies for one’s god—for the sake of freedom—lives on in the virtualized ideal of this god, becoming a particular being inscribed in the very history of freedom. And yet, the line equally suggests an interchangeability between general and particular, between the idea of freedom and the singularity of Brutus, as if Brutus could almost take the place of him for whose sake one must die. In this displacement, we read a different possibility in the final line: whoever dies for Brutus, lives in Brutus’ God (freedom).

The implicit philosophy of lyric tragedy that comes to light in this poem can be productively compared with the revolutionary philosophy of history in Hölderlin’s *Empedocles* drama, one in which the future democratic body demands a collective mobilization be marshalled by a singular charismatic individual. Precisely because the charismatic individual threatens the viability of the coming community with a regression into tyranny, the revolutionary—Empedocles, in Hölderlin’s tragedy—must dissolve his body in the sacred fire of Aetna in order to become a more generalized symbolic form. Political rejuvenation thus depends upon disindividuation. In the case of Günderröde,

⁶⁹ See Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998).

however, disindividuation is accompanied by the resilience of the effective power of the individual; in her work, there is no pure dissolution of the individual, no desire for oblivion that utterly eliminates all traces of individuality. On the contrary, the dissolution of the individual maintains its particularized symbolic energy through its capacity to generate bonds with others. Through the particularity of this bond, its effective force, which continues long after disindividuation (or death), continues to stimulate the production of new collective forms.

Let us recall what G nderrode writes about Schelling’s concept of force: “If we think about two beings of unequal size, the larger one will attract and will, so to speak, consume the smaller one.”⁷⁰ Precisely this attraction and consumption seems to take place with the death of Brutus: the Empire consumes the Republic. But G nderrode switches the charges; she makes Brutus the bearer of energetic, sacred, and transformative force, a force more attractive than the all-consuming pull of Empire. What would it be like to inhabit this sort of world? The poem indicates the contours of a world whose symbolic attractions would be utterly different than those characterizing the dominant political history of the West. It is possible to intimate how this world might look or might have looked: in this alternative reality, Shakespeare’s *Julius Caesar* would have been named *Marcus Junius Brutus*.

To conclude, G nderrode invokes implicit operations of force in the lyric act—by switching polarities (light / darkness, Brutus / Caesar)—to preserve a democratic republican ideal in a virtualized body and thereby to contravene the seeming momentum of history in its movement from Republic to Empire. The goal of this act is to uncondition the forces of empire, or what Hemsterhuis would have designated as the dominant cultural tendencies at an aphelion, at the precise moment when a planet lies at the furthest point away from the sun and a culture appears in its most entrenched state of stagnation and darkness. G nderrode’s ethics and politics of force are deeply indebted to the discursive form given shape by Hemsterhuis’ thought. The features of his thought had a decisive impact on the range of conceptual and imaginative operations undertaken in the name of force: first, an ecstatic form of desire, when actualized through the moral organ’s attempt to unite the soul with the entirety of cosmic order, approaches, but never realizes, a form of identification that later thinkers such as Herder would associate with unstable processes of disindividuation; and second, this precise attempt at cosmic identification, for all of its normative universality, is invested with a power of subjective estrangement

⁷⁰ SW 2.388.

such that individuals (such as Brutus) can stand against their dominant cultural tendencies. This paper has followed two different strands of development taken in the wake of these features. Herder and Goethe respond to Hemsterhuis' ecstatic force and its potentially radical disruption of contemporary normativity by redirecting force away from processes of disindividuation and towards stabilizing social and ethical forms; whereas Schiller, writing before Kant, and Günderrode use force to uncondition the present by turning against the naturalization of social and cultural distinctions (class, gender, nation) and opening up the possibility for a counter-historical symbolic order, the imagination of a world in which the forces of empire would no longer represent the dominant attractor guiding the historical trajectory of political forms.

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