
Few scholars can claim the sort of wide-ranging expertise that we see in the work of Kevin Hart. He has made substantial contributions to Continental philosophy, Christian theology, and literary criticism, and, in addition to this academic work, he is one of today’s finest Australian poets. In his new book Poetry and Revelation, we see these many elements together in one place. The result is a volume that conveys, perhaps better than any single previous publication, the scope of his scholarly interests and the ambition of his constructive project for extending the application of phenomenology in the Husserlian style to literary and theological material.

The book consists mainly in essays that have been previously published elsewhere in some form. Each of its fifteen chapters give a close reading of poetry written by a diverse set of sources, from familiar figures such as G. M. Hopkins, T. S. Eliot, Geoffrey Hill, to lesser known poets such as Australians Judith Wright and Robert Gray. The final two chapters, newly written for this collection, treat Marian lyrics and the theme of silence. With each essay Hart examines a religious theme that emerges in the chosen poems, ranging from revelation, transcendence, and the function of theological speech, to prayer, contemplation, and atheism. Hart’s readings are characteristically patient and convincing and his use of phenomenological analysis to illuminate these texts produce original and profound results. He has few rivals in the English-speaking academy in this sort of interdisciplinary endeavour.

The readings of individual poems are put to work in service of a wider theoretical proposal, namely that the methods of phenomenology can be fruitfully brought to bear on literary and theological material. Phenomenology, especially as it is practiced by Husserl, attends closely to our experiences and asks us to suspend our pre-conceived ideas about the things we perceive. It passes over questions of ‘what?’ and ‘why?’, says Hart, and wonders about ‘how’; it analyses the way that we experience any and all phenomena without any prejudgments about what exists and what is possible. It is this radical openness that makes phenomenology suited to poetry and religion, and particularly to religious poetry. Here questions of metaphysics (does God exist? what is the Trinity?) are bracketed and we are led by the poet into a peculiar kind of experience, one that, crucially, need not depend on the doctrinal commitments of writer or reader. In such contexts, Hart explains, ‘creedal propositions are suspended, put out of play as theses, while offered to us as acts (of perception and judgment)’ (13). Phenomenology, Hart says, is his ‘native tongue’, and he certainly speaks it fluently in developing this approach to religious poetry. His treatments of Husserl, Levinas, Derrida, and others, are refreshingly clear and will be illuminating for
newcomers to their style of philosophy. The ambitious argument for phenomenology as an interpretive method would be more satisfying if it were made in a monograph written for this purpose in the first instance, rather than an edited collection of prior pieces, but the plausibility and fecundity of Hart’s method makes itself richly evident here.

Hart’s prose is a delight, displaying some of the linguistic felicity for which his poetry is celebrated. ‘I turn to Husserl,’ he says in a lovely comparison, ‘much as one touches a banister when climbing a steep set of stairs’ (25). In Christian theology, he writes, the word ‘God’ is an abstraction that ‘assumes a local habitation and a name only as it shines through Jesus’ (231). Hart’s passing comment echoes Theseus’ description of poetry in A Midsummer Night’s Dream and with the echo he makes a quiet theological suggestion: as Shakespeare’s poets give habitation and name to the airy nothings of imagination, so in the Incarnation we see a divine poetry, a making-concrete of the divine mystery in a particular flesh and sign.

Readers of Hart’s poetry will find many lines to draw between Poetry and Revelation and his own poems. A particularly fascinating connection emerges with the theme of ‘morning knowledge’, which Hart chooses as the title for the fifth part of the book, as well as discussing directly (260-262). Morning knowledge is, according to Augustine, the apprehension of created things in relation to their Creator, as opposed to the evening knowledge that comprehends things simply as they are in themselves. For Augustine morning knowledge is possessed only by the angels, not us, ‘and since we do not have angelic cognition we can speak of ourselves only in terms of morning faith’. But this possibility means, Hart suggests, that ‘the best religious poetry… would be a prime example of “morning knowledge,” as the way of knowing granted when things are seen as created, invisibly tied to God’. This proposal, which Hart presents in print for the first time here as far as I know, will be significant for the ongoing interpretation of his own poetry, not least his 2011 collection Morning Knowledge.

With Poetry and Revelation, Kevin Hart continues his pursuit of a phenomenological theology and clarifies how this is related to the pursuit of phenomenological poetics. He is perhaps best known for his early work on deconstruction, but I suspect that it is these more recent applications of Husserlian phenomenology to theological and literary domains that will be the crucial theoretical contribution that Hart’s oeuvre makes in the long run. While phenomenology has fallen on hard times in some circles of late, with worries about ‘correlationism’ leading some to abandon Husserl and company in favour of realist metaphysics, Hart demonstrates in his new book that there is still much to be learned from phenomenology and, more importantly, that there is much still to do with phenomenology, especially in conversation with literature and religion.

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