

Interview: Kevin Hart, University of Virginia

BING LYU

ZaoZhuang University

Kevin Hart is an Anglo-Australian theologian, philosopher, and poet. He has taught at Monash University and the University of Notre Dame and is currently Edwin B. Kyle Professor of Christian Studies at the University of Virginia. Hart has received multiple awards for his poetry, including the Christopher Brennan Award and the Grace Leven Prize for Poetry twice. His most recent book is Poetry and Revelation: for a Phenomenology of Religious Poetry (London: Bloomsbury, 2017).

Bing Lyu: Professor, your previous scholarly book, *Kingdoms of God* (2014), is highly recommended by *Choice* and described as “a beautifully conceived and creative work, one that presses the relationship between phenomenology and theology further and outlines potential future directions for this relationship.”¹ And your new book, *Poetry and Revelation*, examines this relationship more deeply from the perspective of literature. Do these two books belong to the same set of ideas?

Kevin Hart: I intended *Kingdoms of God* and *Poetry and Revelation* to be a diptych: the one would use my inflection of phenomenology to elucidate the revelation of the Kingdom of God in and through Jesus Christ, and the other would examine a range of poems in order to show how some poetry deals phenomenologically with the Christian revelation. In each case “revelation” is used in a twofold manner: first and foremost, it is revelation in the sense of ἀποκάλυψις (*apocalypse*), a divine uncovering of what is the case beyond worldly appearances (e.g., the Lordship of God), and, second, it concerns the different ways in which phenomena reveal or manifest themselves. In the first of those two books I was interested in showing that the divine revelation of the Kingdom comes by Jesus disclosing to us, often by way of parables, that there is an anterior divine call to enter and help build up the Kingdom of God, one that has already been uttered in the Hebrew Bible and that is silently before us in Creation. And in the second book I

wanted to attend to “religious poems,” a category that, in English at any rate, is often used to consign many fine poems to the status of minor poetry. Once we examine the assumptions in play when regarding religious poetry in this manner we can discharge those assumptions, and then we can read some religious poetry more freshly. We can see that lots of religious poetry is not primarily about ideas (let alone dogma) but about individual relationships—real or imagined, desired, recollected, or whatever—with God, relationships that have inner and sometimes outer dramas. Now I think that a third book, one that follows and extends my *The Dark Gaze* (2004), which I am calling *Blanchot Encore*, will turn that diptych into a triptych. It will seek to examine the ways in which Maurice Blanchot, a consequential atheist, refigures phenomenology and revelation alike in his narrative and critical writings.

Bing Lyu: Harold Bloom quotes your words in *The Western Canon* that “Western culture takes its lexicon of intelligibility from Greek philosophy, and all our talk of life and death, of form and design, is marked by relations with that tradition.”² And you cite Maurice Merleau-Ponty in *Poetry and Revelation* that “literature has never been as ‘philosophical’ as it has in the twentieth century, never has it reflected as much upon language, truth, and the significance of the act of writing.”³ Does Merleau-Ponty’s “philosophy” mean “Greek philosophy”? Why did he emphasize the twentieth century? If we stretch the timeline from Renaissance to Postmodernism, what is the relationship between philosophy and literature?

Kevin Hart: In book Delta of the *Metaphysics* Aristotle provides a lexicon of forty or so words that do not merely enable us to grasp metaphysical questions and discussions but, in addition, allow us to make sense of the world and our place in it. Even if one does not know any philosophy, one still uses words such as “cause,” “nature,” “being,” “one,” “many,” and so on, each and every day; other words, such as “principle” and “substance,” are often in the background of our thought and talk. This means that, in the West, even if we are doing something believed to be very far from philosophy, such as reading or writing poems, painting a portrait or looking at one, it is marked to a greater or lesser extent by philosophical—indeed, metaphysical—terms. Martin Heidegger and Jacques Derrida have shown this very clearly. There is a sense, then, in which all Western philosophy is indebted to Greek philosophy, even when it heads in another direction. We never get past reading Plato and Aristotle, even though we would do well to read Plotinus and the Stoics more often and more deeply and so be exposed to other ways of thinking of philosophy.

When I say “in the West” I do not mean to designate a geographical area. That used to be possible, but for a long time now “the West” has been leaving a mark in the Middle East and Asia, and not always in the same way or to the same extent. Obviously, there would be important differences to specify with respect to China and North Korea, for example. Yet “the West” has power not only if it is welcomed, absorbed, and re-set but also if it is shunned and rejected (and, of course, covertly relied upon), and it too changes over time. In many ways much that has been excellent in “the West” has changed. Our intellectual world has weakened, especially in the humanities. One no longer looks to Germany for intellectual brilliance in philosophy and theology, France too has been fading in that regard; perhaps only in the United States are there major universities that preserve Western intellectual methods and values, and perhaps not for very long. Already one senses the grandeur of Judeo-Christian thought and writing beginning to slip from sight among undergraduate and graduate students, in part because professors (and especially administrators and, increasingly, the Boards of Foundations that fund tertiary institutions) have other hiring priorities. Needless to say, some of these new priorities are very valuable; others remain within the fashions of the day. I should add that one change in “the West” is the way it gets enriched and re-directed from “the East.” Twentieth-century American poetry, for example, wouldn’t look as it does now without Pound’s *Cathay* (1915), even though Pound didn’t know Chinese and worked from Japanese versions of classical Chinese poems.

To return to your question: Merleau-Ponty reflects on a literary situation in France in which some writers—certainly not all—have persistently and variously sought to overcome the heritages of classicism, neo-classicism, and even romanticism. Dada and Surrealism might be regarded as “terrorist” groups in the field of literature, if I may cite Jean Paulhan’s *Les fleurs de Tarbes* (1941). Even here, there are appeals to philosophy: think of the uses to which André Breton put Hegel when articulating the Surrealist revolution. Practitioners of *la nouvelle roman* question linear narration and naturalist assumptions about society and psychology, even though they may have little or no formal training in philosophy; poets from Stéphane Mallarmé to Eugène Guillevic, Yves Bonnefoy, and André du Bouchet test what can be done in and by poetry. Their poems do not simply declare, “I am a poem!” by dint of theme, form, and mode, but also ask, each in its own way, loudly or quietly, “What is a poem?” or “What are poets for?” (Think of Guillevic’s *Euclidiennes* (1967), which makes us ask ourselves what place a geometrical figure, of all things, has in a lyric poem.) The first question comes to us, at least in its form, directly from Socrates,

and the second one reaches us by way of Hölderlin and his experience of the Greeks. To some extent this reflexive experience of literature is more common in French writing than in writing in English, since philosophy permeates French culture more generally than it does in Britain and the United States. The *classe de philosophie* is something we don't have in British or American secondary education.

The situation that Merleau-Ponty discerns is one that is clearest in twentieth-century literature but is not limited to it. One does not find philosophical questions associated with poems so clearly in the work of Victor Hugo or Paul Verlaine, say, which is not to say that there are no profound philosophical issues in French poetry of the nineteenth century, even if these are not asterisked for attention until the following century. One has only to recall Benjamin Fondane's *Baudelaire et l'expérience du gouffre* (1947). Sometimes one finds a strong form of negation in the poetry of the twentieth century, negativity being something far more important to modern German and French philosophers than to the Greeks. Bonnefoy and du Bouchet offer competing examples. The young Bonnefoy, author of *Du mouvement et de l'immobilité de Douve* (1953), places his poem under the sign of the life of the Spirit beginning only with death, a key theme of Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*, while du Bouchet develops, with glances towards Paul Celan, ways of using lyric poetry as a means of countering expected ways of articulating our experience of the world. Yet we should always be cautious. For example, when Bonnefoy writes about *la présence*, as he does so often, we should not be too quick to assimilate it to the philosophical categories in play in the formative years of his writing life: it is not what Heidegger calls *Anwesenheit*, for example. It is closer to what he calls *Anwesen*, coming into being and passing out of being, which returns us to a sense of Greek thought that was more familiar to Heraclitus than Plato, of more interest to Plotinus than Aristotle, and about which we have heard very little in recent decades.

Not all of this modern and even contemporary French poetry is explicitly oriented to philosophy, though: Francis Ponge, for one, has little or no taste for philosophy, even though his work as a whole has considerable philosophical interest. I am thinking of Henri Maldiney's *Le legs des choses dans l'oeuvre de Francis Ponge* (1974) and Derrida's *Signéponge* (1984). Other poets, such as Philippe Jaccottet, have no particular interest in philosophy, yet one can see his work, especially *Airs* (1967), as concerned with what I call "weak phenomena," namely those phenomena whose being is exposed to being overlooked, reduced, or bypassed in this busy world of ours. Jaccottet

broke through to the poetry of *Airs* by reading Japanese haiku in English translation, and we can come to read his poetry in terms of sustaining weak phenomena only because the work of Jean-Luc Marion and Jean-Yves Lacoste allows us to see such a thing. (Neither has written on Jaccottet, though.) If we studied the situation thoroughly, we would find layers of “philosophy,” coming from Zen Buddhism, passively entering the West by way of poetry in translation and being read by way of Western philosophical traditions, which would include philosophies of translation, both lexical and cultural.

The relation between philosophy and literature changes many times from the Renaissance to postmodernity, and it is not congruent in English, French, German, Italian, and Spanish literatures. One could write a long book on the shifting relations in each of those national literatures over the period you specify, and even within the period of modernism. Sometimes there is cross-fertilization, sometimes not. There’s not just one modernism, even in English literature; we would need to distinguish the “high modernism” of Eliot and Pound from the “low modernism” of Frost and Bishop. And we simply can’t expect “modernism” to have the same starting points and desired endpoints in French, Spanish, and Italian literature. The sort of thing that we value in Federico García Lorca in the late 1920s, for instance, is not going to be found in Giuseppe Ungaretti or Guillaume Apollinaire; sometimes it’s quite the opposite. The revival of gypsy ballads by Lorca was irruptive in Spanish literature, and one doesn’t expect to find philosophical questions to the fore there, even though Lorca was finding a new way for poetry to speak the truth about human life. Similarly, when Apollinaire spoke of *l’esprit nouveau* a decade earlier he was more concerned with μῦθος (*mythos*) rather than λόγος (*logos*), while also committing the poet (in an extended sense of the word) to speak the truth.

Bing Lyu: When explaining the title of *Poetry and Revelation* you observed that it is a phenomenological study of religious poetry. Could you talk about the relationship between phenomenology and literature, especially poetry? What is the advantage for us to understand literature in terms of phenomenology?

Kevin Hart: Phenomenology is usually, and rightly, said to begin with Edmund Husserl’s *Logical Investigations* (1900–01). There we find a shift from asking the questions “What?” and “Why?” to asking the question “How?” Husserl urges that we need to ask how phenomena give themselves to us. We need to get away from pre-packaged problems and confront “the things themselves,” he

says, and the How-question helps us to do just that. Phenomena do not give themselves to us in the same way. If I think of the number three, it gives itself to me wholly by way of cognition, but if I perceive three apples on my table they give themselves to me in profiles, so that to gain a full perception of them I would have to look at them from all perspectives. I cannot gain that full perception without using my body. If I think of being in Antwerp later this year, the city of Antwerp gives itself to me both in memory (I've been there before) and in anticipation; yet come December it will give itself to me also in terms of perception. I might look at photographs or paintings of it, and find that it gives itself to me by way of representation as well. Now Husserl was concerned with the threat he felt that came to European culture from all the various forms of relativism that were prevalent in his youth, historicism and psychologism being the main ones. He worked extremely hard to show that logic and mathematics have very high levels of *Evidenz*, self-evidence, and that this gives us a firmer epistemic ground than was made available by the logic and mathematics of his day, which was, he felt, overly impressed by symbolic notation, which can be moved around by purely formal means to solve a problem without thinking it through in rigorous, philosophical fashion. Yet not all phenomena give themselves to us with such high levels of self-evidence: perception does not (often we have to look, listen, touch, smell, or taste again and again before we are even half-way sure of something), memory does not, and anticipation does not. In imagination we have extremely high levels of *Evidenz*, but a great many imagined things have no correlatives in the world. And affects come with high levels of *Evidenz*: I cannot doubt that I am joyful or sad when those states come upon me, when awake or in sleep, but also I might not be able to make them evident to you.

Husserl developed phenomenology in the intellectual climate of Neo-Kantianism, and within the discipline of philosophy, especially in logic and epistemology. Yet he was also aware that less scientific modes of phenomenology had been available since the Greeks. He recognized that, in some respects, the philosopher and the poet live in the same neighborhood, although he held that the poet is loath to reduce his or her empirical consciousness all the way to transcendental consciousness. To do so would be to eliminate poetry altogether. Similarly, he recognized that poets do not reduce language so that it is pure expression, as philosophers will try to do. To do that would drain language of all the empirical elements that make satisfying poetry, not only euphony but also ambiguity. Poets are not cornered by the questions "What?" and "Why?" They also ask the question "How?" They are not concerned to establish firm epistemic grounds for

anything, although lyric poets in particular are prized for dealing with affects that supply high levels of self-evidence to themselves and, through their art, to others.

One shouldn't think, though, that those high levels of *Evidenz* are simply transmitted in poems. Not at all: as soon as someone begins to write of erotic love, that individual feeling becomes entangled in immensely complex themes, modes, and structures that precede an individual poet at the moment of writing. There is primary passivity, in which my earlier experiences become unified with my current experience, and there is secondary passivity, in which I pick up things from the inter-subjective world in which I participate. And that world might be both immense and partial. So if I write a love poem, my feeling of love, for which I might have the highest degree of self-evidence, becomes inflected and deflected by way of poems by Catullus, anonymous poets from the Han Dynasty whom I have read in translation, sonnets by Sir Philip Sidney, and lyrics by Juan Ramón Jiménez. Phenomenology allows us to understand better the wide range of intentional relations we have with the world and the beings in it, and it allows us to see also the passive constitutions involved in encounters with those beings.

I think literary critics can learn a great deal from Husserl, although that does not mean one must become a Husserlian of strict observance. His project of grounding philosophy, of making it a science (in the sense of *Wissenschaft*), must be jettisoned, which means that affects, for instance, need not be founded on perceptions. Once one loosens up phenomenology a little, as has happened with Heidegger, Lévinas, Derrida, and Marion, among others, it becomes a very supple way of understanding literature. At its best, phenomenology offers the possibility of total reading; it is able to incorporate formalist and non-formal responses to a text in the one enterprise. Yet it is unlikely in the extreme that there will be a new "phenomenological literary criticism": the material is far too demanding for anyone without philosophical training to master in a short time.

Phenomenology can itself ask the question "What is philosophy?" or "What does philosophy do best?" and so re-orient itself. That might be good for thinking about literature, which is hardly going to be enriched by having people formalize lyric poems in propositional or predicate calculus. Perhaps it is also good for philosophy. Phenomenology is perhaps more open to reflecting on meta-philosophical questions than some contemporary analytic philosophy is, which tends to be committed almost single-mindedly to argumentation. It takes the clarity and rigor of the hard sciences and seeks to apply them to philosophical problems yet, unlike those sciences, is never

able to come up with any agreed conclusions, in fact seldom able to persuade any one of its number to change his or her mind on an issue; and so, in a surprising way, analytic philosophy becomes a contribution to contemporary nihilism. It makes us doubt the efficacy of reason.

Bing Lyu: *Choice* mentioned in the review of your last book that there is a renewed interest in God among European thinkers due to the recent “theological turn” in Continental philosophy.⁴ And some critics said it is your approach rather than Marion’s approach to the relationship between philosophy and theology corresponds to the core concerns of the second generation of the “theological turn” of French phenomenology.⁵ Could you talk about the “theological turn” of phenomenology?

Kevin Hart: I sometimes wonder if there ever was a “theological turn” in phenomenology. Even before Husserl, before the descriptive phenomenology of the *Logical Investigations*, Chantepie de la Saussaye was developing a phenomenology of religion, and of course Hegel, in his own way, was dealing with theological concerns in his *Phenomenology of Spirit* (1807). Husserl himself talks often in the *Nachlass* of God, a highly philosophical understanding of the deity, to be sure, although he recognized that Lev Chestov was onto something important when he refused the God made available by philosophy regarded as *Wissenschaft*. In the early 1920s Heidegger explored a phenomenology of religious life, and for the first and only time sought to use phenomenology to read the Scriptures. That project is being revived only in our own time, although, to be sure, not quite in the key in which Heidegger worked.

Dominique Janicaud detected what he called a “theological turn” in French phenomenology in the work of Jean-Louis Chrétien, Michel Henry, Emmanuel Lévinas, and Jean-Luc Marion in 1991, and the expression was meant to be derogatory (much as the description *la nouvelle théologie* was in an earlier generation). The debate was joined by those accused of making illegal moves with *Phénoménologie et théologie* (1992), and it lasted, at least in France, until 1998 when Janicaud published his *La phénoménologie éclatée*. Paul Ricoeur stood somewhat to the side of the debate, recognizing difficulties of putting classical phenomenology to use in religion at large; and it is worth noting that Janicaud exempted Lacoste from criticism: his early work, *Note sur les temps* (1990), did not make what Janicaud thought to be illegitimate moves in philosophy. For Husserl, although God must be the final and most difficult theme of phenomenology, there can be no phenomenological theology in his terms; for God transcends the world, he says in *Ideas I* §58, in

a way that exceeds the sort of transcendence with which phenomenology can deal. Yet he left open a possibility: that the divine transcendence is always and already in absolute consciousness. We might think of Husserl's remark as a river stone marking a phased counterpart to Descartes's ontological argument in the *Meditations*.

So when Lévinas began to speak of God and *Autrui*, and Marion to evoke revelation as saturation to the second degree, Janicaud became very nervous. Perhaps his understanding of phenomenology was too narrow to deal with the new interest in the divine. Marion and others, by contrast, asked themselves why phenomenality should be limited in the first place, whether to objects or to being. Isn't the proper philosophical procedure to grant the possibility of phenomenality across the board, and then see the different modes of manifestation in the world, no matter what they are or if they are? Not that Marion, to name the person who became the main representative of the first generation of "the theological turn," made theological claims under the guise of phenomenology. He has always been clear that he speaks of essences, not actualities, in his analyses of religious events. (Even so, his critics become enflamed when they see Scripture cited in what appear to be philosophical essays.)

The first generation of people associated with the "theological turn" is far from homogeneous. Henry and Lévinas are miles apart in their understandings of phenomenology, for example. And the second generation of that movement is similarly diverse: Emmanuel Falque is primarily a philosopher, and I am primarily a theologian, although to be sure we share many interests, not least of all the medieval tradition of *contemplatio*. Yet I am not so sure that talk of generations is all that useful. My first book on the topic, *The Trespass of the Sign*, came out with Cambridge University Press in 1989, seven years after Marion's *Dieu sans l'être* (1982) and eight years before his *Étant donné* (1997). True, my first book engaged with mystical theology, for the most part, and used Derrida as a way of attaining a better comprehension of it; and Marion has been far more intrigued by general revelation, even when it comes through the spirituality of devotion to an icon, and kept himself at a distance from Derrida once he was no longer a student of his. Especially in the United States, a version of the "theological turn" continued because of Derrida's explorations of apophatic theology, "religion without religion" and religion at the limits of reason alone. One might say that this was a "theological turn" in Derrida, although it took place at the very edge of transcendental phenomenology where Husserlian investments in pure phenomenological life

begin to fail and the border between life and death begins to become divided and equivocal. But although they debated in public, Derrida and Marion were never centrally engaged in the same issues to do with theology and phenomenology.

Perhaps Marion and I differ most clearly in our understandings of reduction. For Marion, it is the “third reduction” that is the most important, the leading back to *Gegebenheit*, whereas what presses on me is what I call the “basilic reduction.” To my mind, Marion continues a thinking of reduction that begins to appear in Neo-Platonism, and is apparent in the young Augustine, and which reaches an extreme version with the third reduction. This is a history of passing from without to within, from transcendence (in one or another sense) to immanence (in one or another sense), even when, as for Heidegger and Marion, there is no transcendental consciousness but only an empty structure (*Dasein* for Heidegger, *l’adonné* for Marion). On the other hand, I propose that Jesus of Nazareth performs an original mode of reduction, especially in his telling of the parables. One is not led deep within the self or to a structure that stands in place of the “self,” but to an anterior state where the divine call to participate in the Kingdom can be heard.

Bing Lyu: When analyzing Hopkins’ work in *Poetry and Revelation* you conclude by citing Husserl’s opinion that God would be “experienced” only in the understanding, which reminds me of Augustine’s wisdom that you mentioned once: seek not to understand that you may believe, but believe that you may understand. People don’t usually associate Husserlian phenomenology with God, but he actually talked about God as “Limes,” “Pol,” “Entelechie,” “Urfaktizitat,” and so on. So could the existence of God win a place in the realm of phenomenology?

Kevin Hart: The crucial question is what Husserl means by “God” and whether this can be correlated with the God who is revealed in the Bible. Certainly Husserl was drawn to think of God early and late in his writing life, and allusions to the deity multiply in the *Nachlass*. At times he seeks to approach God as Other by way of empathy, just as he does the human other in the fifth of the *Cartesian Meditations*. Almost always, though, God for Husserl is the “all-consciousness” or “infinite telos,” and anyone approaching the question of God from the Bible, not from Aristotle or Hegel, would find this metaphysical speculation puzzling and more than a little arid. When Husserl and Chestov first met, Husserl responded to the very sharp criticisms that Chestov had made of his phenomenology in print. Husserl defended himself by pointing to the need to overcome deficiencies in our account of knowledge—to save it from relativism in all of its modern forms—

in order to avoid a complete breakdown of confidence with respect to knowledge, an overcoming that would place knowledge on a secure foundation, even if it meant putting God outside our ken, just as Kant had done over a century earlier. Chestov responded by saying that rather than shore up the rickety structures with firm scaffolding (appeals to *Evidenz*), one should kick them and make them topple, and then perhaps the biblical God could be witnessed once again. I think this is a false division. The task is not to fit the biblical God into a philosophical frame, as has been done time and again since Philo of Alexandria, or to seek to free theology entirely from philosophy, as Ritschl and Barth attempted, but to recognize that Jesus of Nazareth makes God concrete and meaningful in his parables and, more generally, in his life, suffering, death, and resurrection.

I don't think, then, that phenomenology can prove the existence of God, certainly not in any classical sense of "prove." Besides, there are no proofs for the existence of God—neither the ontological argument nor the "five ways" of Aquinas—that I find satisfying. (I recall that Anselm set his "proof" in the context of a prayer, and I don't think that Aquinas intended the five ways to be proofs but rather glosses on what "God" must mean to anyone who conscientiously uses the word.) Phenomenology, however, can remove God from the sphere of the intolerably abstract to concrete situations in our lives, from the meaningless to the meaningful. The parables and acts of Jesus show us that God can be concrete and meaningful as Father, that we are always and already in a relationship with Him, one that Jesus makes clear to us. We do not choose to be in relation with God; if one is a son or a daughter one is already in a relationship with a father. Rather, we can choose to make something of that relationship, of living *coram deo*, here and now. It is this way of thinking that, as you say, is close to Augustine's use of Isaiah 7: 9 in the *Vetus Latina*. Only if we begin by regarding God concretely, as made manifest by Jesus, can we begin to understand what God asks of us in life.

Bing Lyu: Is the phenomenological reduction the first and foremost step when analyzing religious poetry? To what extent can we differentiate theological reduction from philosophical reduction?

Kevin Hart: Husserl distinguished six species of reduction, and his 1923–24 lectures on the theory of reduction, along with his voluminous reflections on it in his *Nachlass*, are very rewarding. But they also tend to make reduction seem like a very mysterious operation. In my view, reduction is common. As soon as one begins to write a poem, one has already made a reduction of some sort; one has allowed oneself to be led back to a state anterior to ordinary speech, especially if one

draws upon meter and figural language. When Auden writes, “Wandering lost upon the mountains of our choice”⁶ or Geoffrey Hill writes “Undesirable you may have been, untouchable / you were not,”⁷ each has already passed from the “natural attitude” to another attitude, call it the “personalistic attitude” or the “phenomenological attitude.” That is, one is allowing phenomena to give themselves without a prior framing in terms of the expectations of the positive sciences, the social sciences or even “common sense”; other logics, other possibilities, other feelings, are opened and may be explored, even if the move away from the natural attitude is really only quite modest. So many modern poems, for example, stay close in their language and logic to the natural attitude only to slip away from it at a certain point in order to disclose something that cannot be satisfactorily thought within that attitude. Think of James Wright’s short lyric “Lying in a Hammock at William Duffy’s Farm in Pine Island, Minnesota”: only with the final line do we shift from one attitude to another, and Wright accomplishes this without changing his colloquial voice. This sort of shift away from the natural attitude does not happen in all poetry these days: Language Poetry, it seems to me, solicits what Husserl calls the theoretical attitude; it goes in a direction opposite to that of the phenomenological attitude.

Much “religious verse” passes from the natural attitude, to be sure, but the most engaging poems we call religious also shift from what I call the “supernatural attitude.” The supernatural attitude is widespread in Christianity: it conceives everything to do with the divine as either similar to our world or as a contrast to it. Yet God is not other than the world; the very idea makes no sense, since “same” and “other” name a relation within the world, as Aristotle saw very clearly in his *Categories*. God would be other than anything that can be contained within the distinction between “same” and “other.” When one passes from the natural or the supernatural attitude, one enters another sphere, sometimes only very briefly, where other pressures, other logics, other delights and anxieties, come into play.

I would not wish to distinguish too sharply between philosophical and theological modes of reduction, in part because I think it is misleading overly to theorize reduction. We can find early, non-thematic modes of reduction in Augustine, for instance (“Do not go abroad. Return within yourself. In the inward man dwells truth” he writes in *De vere religione*.⁸) And we can see that same tradition figured in slightly different ways in Hugh of St Victor’s commentary on the *Celestial Hierarchy* of Pseudo-Dionysius and in Bonaventure’s *De reductione artium ad*

theologiam. These need to be kept in mind when reading Husserl on the theory of reduction, simply for us to remain aware that reduction can occur from varying directions, with different degrees of strength, and leads to different places. What I call “basilaic reduction” occurs primarily in the parables and acts of Jesus, but one can also find it in some religious poems when they make us think of an anterior state to living comfortably in “the world” when desire for “the Kingdom” was apparent. That desire never goes away; it is always present in the longing for justice and peace, but it gets clouded over by concern with and for “the world,” that stage on which we act out much of our lives. Many lyrics in George Herbert’s *The Temple* (1633) strike me as having this capacity, and it can be done in all sorts of ways. Remember too, though, that one can find it outside lyric poetry, in stories, homilies, movies and songs, even conversations.

I have been speaking of writing poetry, for the most part, but reduction occurs also when reading it and when writing about it. Here the attentive reader is quietly led by a poem outside the natural attitude cultivated in primary, secondary, and tertiary education. (A movement away from the natural attitude happens even when reading naturalist literature, as Roland Barthes showed in his *S/Z* (1970), although with other ends in view.) Of course, a poem can be read wholly within the natural attitude or even the naturalistic attitude, as happens with some semiotic and structural analyses, or these days by way of “distant reading.” Yet if one thinks that poetry helps us to live, that it offers as Geoffrey Hill says, “*a sad and angry consolation*”⁹ (or, one hopes, not always sad and not always angry), then one will allow oneself to be led by a poem beyond the natural attitude.

Bing Lyu: In *Poetry and Revelation* you choose both English poets, such as T. S. Eliot, G. M. Hopkins, and Geoffrey Hill, and non-English poets, such as Philippe Jaccottet and Eugenio Montale, as your sample, poets whose works belong to the modern and contemporary periods and cover multiple Western languages. Do you intend to indicate the universality of phenomenological method in literary criticism? What characteristic do they own that could highlight the advantage of phenomenology? Would you like to talk about your criterion of how to choose an appropriate target for phenomenological criticism?

Kevin Hart: In *Poetry and Revelation* I had two main things in mind: to overcome some common prejudices about “religious poetry” and to show how phenomenology, at least as I practice it, can be of help when reading poetry, religious or not. I’ve already said something about the first ambition, but let me add this, using a distinction that Derrida drew when writing about one of

Blanchot's *récits* in his *Parages* (1986). "Religious poetry" is not the name of a genre or sub-genre of poetry; there are poems that participate in religious exploration, which may involve doubt, anxiety, and criticism as much as belief and personal commitment, yet which do not belong to any institutional or religious formation. I think this is more apparent in some of the lyrics of Philippe Jaccottet and Eugenio Montale than in the English tradition of lyric poetry. Also, I suppose, those chapters serve to show that phenomenology is not restricted to any national literature.

Classical phenomenology, as practiced by Husserl, has nothing to do with reading and writing. His philosophy of language—his desire in the *Logical Investigations* to minimize indicative features of language to expressive features—is one index of that. As I have mentioned, Heidegger was the first to use phenomenology to read a text: Paul's letters to the Thessalonians. To some extent, he also drew upon phenomenology while writing those remarkable essays on German poets in the 1940s. Derrida positioned himself at the very limit of transcendental phenomenology where he found new ways of thinking about reading and writing. To my mind, he never abandoned phenomenology but questioned Husserl's uncritical commitments to full presence or self-presence and to conceptions of presence as life. So he expanded the realm of phenomenology very considerably. In the United States, however, Derrida's work, under the rubric of deconstruction, was taken to be opposed or contrary to phenomenology; and that is partly because people did not read his first books with attention, especially his incisive commentary on a book he translated from the German, Husserl's *L'origine de la géométrie* (1962), and *La voix et le phénomène* (1967), and partly because phenomenological criticism, as advocated by Georges Poulet, was all that was known of the conjunction of phenomenology and literary criticism. When Derrida came to the States, to speak at a conference at Johns Hopkins in 1966, his paper "Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences" dealt a firm blow to structuralism before it had even got to first base here and also, when people started to reflect on what he had said, it demolished the sort of phenomenological criticism that Poulet was advocating at Hopkins. Yet literary criticism learned little or nothing from Derrida: "deconstruction" was packaged, by Jonathan Culler and others, as little more than a set of tricks one could perform with literary texts.

Bing Lyu: *Poetry and Revelation* records Montale's opinion what almost all Western philosophers and theologians refuse to countenance is that the world is nothing more than an illusion generated by human subjectivity. Why do they deny this claim? You find the inspiration of some of Montale's

work comes from Tolstoy who inherited Schelling and Fichte's idea, so from Romanticism to Modernism, what kind of transformation did the term "subject" experience? Does phenomenology give it a proper harbor?

Kevin Hart: Phenomenology begins, even before Husserl articulates it, with Descartes's *Meditations* and so with the thought of the *cogito*. With Husserl we find consciousness, the very ground of "the subject," raised to a very high level: transcendental consciousness, he says, is absolute and therefore irreducible. Yet with *Sein und Zeit* (1927) this idea of the subject, as something calmly viewing the world in a theoretical manner, is pushed aside. Heidegger does not offer criticisms of Husserl so much as propose another way of thinking of the human being, that is, as *Dasein*. For Heidegger, Husserl is concerned less with a subject calmly contemplating the world about him than with being preoccupied with one mood among others, tranquility. He draws attention to other moods that come upon us, especially dread and deep boredom, and thereby has his readers look back to Kierkegaard and Pascal rather than Kant and Fichte. Now I think that Heidegger's treatment of Husserl is not quite fair. On the one hand, Husserl does revive a mode of *contemplatio*, most likely without knowing much about its tradition; but, on the other hand, he is very far from proposing phenomenology as calmly reflecting on essences. He is deeply concerned with a crisis coming upon Europe, one stemming from different forms of relativism (including species relativism), and as we know he sees its darkest moment in the rise of Nazism, and feels the deepest betrayal in Heidegger's endorsement, however temporary and with whatever *arrière pensées*, of the Nazi Party. The crisis represented by the rise of Hitler and Hitlerism was more than philosophical—it was also idolatrous, for one thing, even before we get to talk about economics and national and international politics—but Husserl was surely right that the thought of the day, from historicism to philosophy as no more than *Weltanschauung*, contributed to the possibility of unleashing its dark energies. Besides, Husserl's concept of the self is far more complex than Heidegger allowed: his phenomenology of internal time consciousness yields a more subtle understanding of the self as subject than one might think from just reading *Ideas I* (1913), and of course Heidegger tended to disregard Husserl on internal time consciousness, rather unfairly, I think.

From Heidegger to Lacoue-Labarthe and Marion, we can see a progressive weakening of the idea of the self as subject. Jean-Luc Nancy's *Who Comes after the Subject?* (1991) offers a

comprehensive idea of the range of thought in France on the topic. You might say that it is a passage from the subject as ground (by way of *cogito* (Descartes), transcendental unity of apperception (Kant) or transcendental consciousness (Husserl)) to subjectivity as effect. The emptying of the self as subject is not restricted to French philosophy, however. Think, for example, of the Oxford philosopher Derek Parfit whose concept of the self is closer to what one finds in Buddhism than anything one might find in the tradition that runs from Descartes to Husserl.

Bing Lyu: Why does Jaccottet say that the expression “negative theology” is misused when applied to his writing? You use “iconoclasm” instead of “negative theology” when analyzing his works. Is this a consequence of postmodernism?

Kevin Hart: I think Philippe Jaccottet, much like Tomas Tranströmer (who says something similar), is far too modest a person to appeal to what must seem to him to be august theological categories or to countenance them with respect to his writing or his religious beliefs. He may well think that reading some of his poems by way of apophatic theology would risk burning them to ashes by having too powerful a lens brought to bear on them. Again, I would speak of participating rather than belonging. Jaccottet’s poems, especially in *Airs*, do not belong to the discipline of apophatic theology—they do not stand side by side with writings by Gregory of Nyssa or Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite, for example—but they participate in it. Some of Jaccottet’s poems bring us to a point where what he wishes to designate exceeds what can be said. This is not because he is speaking of the God of Judeo-Christianity but because he wishes to attend, as closely as possible, to a singular situation or state. Apophaticism comes into play when dealing with either mode of transcendence, that is, with *transascendance* or *transdescendance*. (The distinction is Jean Wahl’s.) Much modern writing is concerned with the latter and not the former, but it solicits a counterpart to apophatic theology in order to deal with it. The ineffable can be anterior to phenomena as well as beyond phenomena, and (as Jean Hyppolite points out in his *Logique et existence* (1953)) it can even be the singular. To my mind, we can speak strictly of apophatic theology only when dealing with the absolutely singular, God, but it is sometimes solicited when a poet merely glimpses something relatively singular (an ermine vanishing in snow, say), understanding that this particular event is unlikely ever to recur in his lifetime. Bonnefoy inclines to this view in many poems and essays.

Iconoclasm is more acceptable to Jaccottet because his poetics, unlike Bonnefoy's, are situated in a long tradition of unease with the image. In Byzantium there were fierce struggles over icons in the eighth and ninth centuries, long before the Reformation, though Jaccottet probably gains his distrust of images by way of Calvin.

Bing Lyu: I notice the last part of *Poetry and Revelation* is entitled "Morning Knowledge," which is identical to your last collection of poetry, *Morning Knowledge* (2011). What is the meaning of "morning knowledge"? Does the expression mean the same thing in both places?

Kevin Hart: I take the expression "morning knowledge" from Augustine's *Literal Commentary on Genesis*. A very good reader, someone who did not gloss over difficulties in Scripture, Augustine was puzzled when he read the verse "And there was evening and there was morning, one day" since, for him, day begins in the morning and ends with the close of evening. (He did not know that the Jews think of day beginning in the evening.) So he sought an explanation for the phrasing. Like other Fathers of the Church, Augustine was deeply interested in angelic cognition, and his explanation turns on how angels received knowledge of Creation. At first, he tells us, God showed the angels Creation according to what we would call the natural sciences, how everything acted perfectly with respect to the laws of physics, chemistry, and biology, and of course the angels were in awe of the order, balance, and beauty of what God had achieved. This is called "evening knowledge" because it was the first knowledge that the angels received of Creation. Then, however, so the story goes, God showed the angels how everything He had created is suffused with his love; and, on seeing this, the angels fell down in adoration of the Lord God. This second knowledge of Creation, awareness as Thomas Aquinas beautifully puts it that God loved the world into being, is known as "morning knowledge."

The final section of *Poetry and Revelation* is concerned with poems that are explicitly sacred, poems about Mary the mother of Jesus, or about silence and poetry, and so I wanted to call it "Morning Knowledge." I called my last individual collection of poems *Morning Knowledge* (2011) for two reasons. First, as the title poem indicates, my father died in the early hours of the morning: I learned that he had passed away in Brisbane about 3 am, the news coming to me a little later, about 1:30 pm (EST) in Charlottesville. Half an hour before the telephone rang, I had felt a terrible coldness blow through my bones; and so, when I took the call, I realized that event coincided with his passing. Some of the poems in *Morning Knowledge* are elegies for my father, and there are

more of them in my new book, *Barefoot* (2018); but there are also poems that affirm our sensuous engagement with life, and so I quoted as an epigraph David Henry Thoreau's question in his journal for July 16 1851, "Have you knowledge of the morning?" (That is, do you know what it is to be alive?) Also, *Morning Knowledge* has poems that are prayers, that celebrate divine love, and so the expression "morning knowledge" was appropriate in that way as well.

Notes

1. Beth Ritter-Conn, Review of *Kingdoms of God*, *Anglican Theological Review* 4 (2015), 695.
2. Harold Bloom, *The Western Canon: The Books and School of the Ages* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1994), 10.
3. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Signs* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1964), 157–158; quoted in Hart, *Poetry and Revelation* 79.
4. C. S. Seymour, Review of *Kingdoms of God*, *Choice: Current Reviews for Academic Libraries* 11 (2015), 1856.
5. Kevin Hart is the editor of *Jean-Luc Marion: The Essential Writings* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2013), which marks Marion's status as France's most influential living philosopher. See Bradley Onishi, "Between a Saint and a Phenomenologist: Hart's Theological Criticism of Marion," *Sophia* 1 (2017), 15.
6. W. H. Auden, "A Time of War: Sonnet 27," in Auden and Christopher Isherwood, *Journey to a War* (London: Faber and Faber, 1939).
7. Geoffrey Hill, "September Song," *New and Collected Poems, 1952–1992* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1994).
8. Saint Augustine, "Of True Religion," *Earlier Writings*, ed. and trans. John H. S. Burleigh (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1953), 262.
9. Geoffrey Hill, "148," in *The Triumph of Love* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1998).