

CHOREOGRAPHING COUNTER-EXPERIENCE

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I

If Kevin Hart dreams Blanchot,¹ his native tongue is, by his own confession, phenomenology.² It is not surprising then that the idea of *experience* should feature so predominantly in his writings on philosophy, theology and poetry. Not that Maurice Blanchot is unconcerned with *experience*: quite the contrary. As Hart has informed us, “Blanchot’s entire work... broods on *experience*.”³ But is Blanchot’s concept of experience at all comprehensible without the phenomenological notion of intentionality? The relationship between the former and the latter could indeed be described as one of counter-dependence.

II

“Everything begins with the reduction,”⁴ is the bold opening statement, not of a text on phenomenology, but of a public lecture entitled *The Experience of Poetry* presented by Kevin Hart in Melbourne 1995. As implied by this title, phenomenology and poetry both begin with the reduction to experience: something, Hart tells us, that Husserl himself identified when, in a 1907 letter to poet Hugo von Hofmannsthal, he notes that “in ‘pure art’ the aesthetic gaze is kin to the phenomenological gaze.”⁵ Perhaps one of the reasons for Kevin Hart’s phenomenological nativity can be found in the fact that he is also an artist. Between the poet and phenomenologist there is a natural fraternity.

III

Another possible reason that Hart might be counted amidst the congregation of phenomenologists is his Christian faith. Again, not to excommunicate analytical or post-structuralist Christians, but Hart has identified that between phenomenology and Christianity, there too are affinities. Does not Husserl, as Hart reminds us,

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close *Cartesian Meditations* by quoting St Augustine: “truth dwells in the inner man”⁶ And isn’t it true that the key phenomenological notion of intentionality goes back from Husserl to the priest Franz Brentano, and through him all the way to the Church Fathers. Indeed, isn’t the basis of many of the critiques of phenomenology that it sets up a transcendental subject, like a little Sun King; the divinely ordained centre around, and in the light of whom, the phenomena of the world dance?

The relationship between *Phenomenality and Christianity*, as Hart notes in his essay of that name,⁷ is complex and conflicted, but if we cannot demand that God himself appear as a phenomenon, there is no reason why various Christian modalities such as faith and prayer might not lend themselves to phenomenological study. And might we not even consider the possibility of the phenomenon of God’s absence?

IV

We thus have ample reason to believe Kevin Hart when he informs us that phenomenology is his native-tongue, and imagine too that experience might play for him the role of a proto-language, a type of pre-reflective attunement with being.

But isn’t this the very notion of experience that has been so strongly critiqued by post-structuralist thinkers? Doesn’t Derrida himself launch his critique of metaphysics with the assertion that the concept of experience belongs to the regime of presence and that “we can only use it under erasure”⁸ However this proves to be more of an opening gambit on Derrida’s part, and it isn’t long before he has re-characterized experience in terms of *arche-writing*, as involving temporalisation, mediation, rupture and above all the movement of *différance*.

The phenomenological reduction does not rule out the necessity of experiencing phenomena in the context of a particular meaning horizon, especially if we concede Merleau-Ponty’s assertion that “the most important lesson of the reduction is the impossibility of a complete reduction.”⁹ Experience certainly does draw from a dimension of pre-reflective attunement but this is always understood and described in the context of a frame of reference: “Presentation and representation,” Hart reminds us, “are always imbricated.”¹⁰ If we also consider Blanchot’s assertion that for there to be any experience at all, *something radically other* needs to be in play, then we could affirm that *all* experience is, in a limited sense at least, ‘counter-experience’.

V

Rather than casting his lot with phenomenological thinkers who continue to tease out the complexities of the phenomenological notion of experience, Kevin Hart engages himself with those who challenge or even venture beyond the very limits of experience. Rather than fishing in the rich depths of phenomenology, Hart believes there is more to be found in the turbulent side-waters. As he has so clearly articulated, both the *ex* and the *peri* of *experience* invoke connotations of *out from*, *limit*, *periphery* and *peril*, so perhaps the true inheritors of Husserl’s phenomenology are to be found amongst his wayward and rebellious offspring, rather than the dutiful stay-at-homes.

VI

With thinkers such as Emmanuel Levinas and Jean-Luc Marion, the concept of experience is radically reconfigured: both philosophers challenge the privileging of the constituting subject of intentionality and shift attention to the nature of phenomenality itself. With Levinas, the face of the Other makes an appeal and questions the subject. *I* am summoned by the *Other* in what Levinas calls “a reversal of intentionality.”¹¹ Marion, for his part, defines *counter-experience* as that which “irreducibly contradicts the conditions for the experience of objects.”¹² Rather than being given in a limited or inadequate manner, Marion theorizes phenomena that impose themselves absolutely. With the *saturated phenomenon*, intentionality, as with Levinas, is inverted: “I become

the objective of the object” he notes in *Being Given*.¹³ The *saturated phenomenon* overwhelms the subject, the ‘I’ is powerless to master the conditions under which a phenomenon may appear, and is itself called into question. This is not just a phenomenology of the *invisible*, but of the *unforeseeable*.

In terms of the work of these philosophers, Hart defuses the potential objection that, rather than critiquing the power-play between subject and object, Levinas and Marion have simply turned the tables. In contrast to the idea of reverse-intentionality, counter-experience, understood in terms of intentionality, might take on the sense of what we might call *palintentionality*, a movement of intentional relation that reaches in both directions at once. As Hart notes: “the transcendent and the transcendental are correctly positioned when arranged as an *aporia*, that is when one is pulled this way and that at the same time.”¹⁴ Hart draws attention to an image from Hegel: “A stream flowing in opposite directions,”¹⁵ but we might just as easily, if a little more colloquially, sing along with Aretha Franklin when she wonders, “Who’s Zoomin’ Who?”.

VII

Hart’s notion of counter-experience is enriched further still by his engagement with the thought of Maurice Blanchot. Here we are talking of a completely different order of experience, the experience of *non-experience*. Hart’s interest in Blanchot stems from his consideration of the possibility that “God reveals himself only at the very edge of the concepts we are obliged to use.”¹⁶ Blanchot attempts to think the sacred and faith outside dialectical constraints.

In my opening image I contrasted Hart’s phenomenological *native tongue*, with Blanchotian *dreams*; but this is not a dialectical pairing. The anthesis of the daylight world of the *native tongue* would be night or sleep, that which negates the waking I, only to return it to itself with renewed vigor, upon waking. The *dream* though is not restorative sleep; its disruptions take place not in the night, but in an *other night*, a night without stars, a night *outside* night.

What Hart names Blanchot’s *counter-spirituality* shatters the very security of the co-relation, and visits upon the subject a disequilibrium that calls its very being into question. Counter-experience, understood through Blanchot, runs tangentially, not oppositionally, to intentional experience, thus opening up the possibility of a shift into a completely different mode of experience, an oscillation, between our experience of an event in terms of the correlation, and of an event that without warning, casts us into the utter abandonment of non-relation.

VIII

Through Hart’s nuanced and multifaceted encounters with Derrida, Levinas, Marion, and Blanchot, experience in its varied modes presents itself as mobile, contestatory and destabilizing. The three dimensions of counter-experience as I have characterized them—experience as always *counter*, experience as *palintentional*, and experience as *outside* intentionality—can be understood to weave together in a peri-choretic interlacement. Experience is always exposure to otherness involving gestures and counter-gestures of give and take, advance and retreat: a flow of current and counter-current consecrated to the task of contending with the unforeseeable. If we were to attempt to identify the ungraspable nature of experience, that which, in fulfilling itself affects its own erasure, we would describe it as movement, or even as dance.

IX

One of the tropes which returns frequently in the writings of Kevin Hart is Paul’s image from Philippians 3:13 of “the self figured as *epectasis*, an endless stretching out towards the Other.”¹⁷ The image is used frequently by Gregory of Nyssa, who occasionally reads the Pauline image back into Old Testament texts. It is the same restlessness that we find almost contemporaneously in St. Augustine, “our hearts are is restless, till they rest

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in thee.”¹⁸ This image of the movement of desire, is not just a description of human being, but seems to be a characteristic of the created order itself. Do we not hear the same restlessness in the *anxious longing* of creation in Romans 8? Even certain man-made phenomena seem to transcend themselves: “Poems have a desire” Hart notes in an interview with John Kinsella, “they have a desire for us.”¹⁹

At the risk of drawing too deeply from the Heideggerian etymological well, I cannot resist drawing attention to the fact that the comparable term in a cluster of Indo-European languages, *tendare*, derives from the Sanskrit root *Tan*, meaning: to reach or to stretch. We have this root of course in our words *tension*, *contend*, and of course *tent*, a structure supported by stretching. The same root is also found not only in the verb to *intend*, and thus in the notion of *intentionality*, but also, in a form closer to its source, in the German *Tanz*, the French *danse*, and the English *dance*.

X

Thus a key concept in Hart’s philosophical anthropology, the tensional relationality of experience and the movement of our never-ending desire—a desire that is only intensified in being fulfilled—invokes the eternal reach of the dance. Dance is always a reaching towards, therefore is always engaged with alterity.²⁰ But dance is never just a matter of moving, but of also being moved. Dance is a response to the call of the world and of the Other and thus partakes of the palintentional exchange with otherness.²¹ Dance is thus the image of our very desire to seek fulfillment in the beyond.²²

XI

If you think that my invocation of choreographic motif is a little forced, I take encouragement in the fact that Hart himself has, through a spokesman, made the same association. During a discussion with Derrida concerning the frequency of the particular Pauline image of *epectasis* in the Church Fathers, Hart notes that Derrida confessed his lack of familiarity with the texts in particular, but that he saw “no reason to object to the language of *perichoresis* and *epektasis*.”²³ *No reason to object*, indeed, since both terms invoke the dance of alterity.

XII

It seems to me that not only does Kevin Hart understand the movement of experience to entail a complex dance of move and counter-move that takes place within the *peri-choretic* weave of pre-reflective-, palintentional- and counter-spiritual experience, but that in order to investigate this phenomenon it is imperative that one use an appropriately contra-directional methodology. In engaging with the philosophers that he does, Hart refrains from making sweeping judgments either for or against their sometimes hyperbolic gestures. Rather, he sympathetically engages in conversation with his interlocutors, dancing with them, allowing them to contest the very assumptions, tonalities, structures that, as phenomenologist, Christian, artist, constitute his native tongue. In his rich and generous essays into the various dimensions of experience Hart employs what I would call a choreographic hermeneutic.

In a review of one of the works of Jean-Louis Chrétien, Hart notes that “there are times, many of them, when one wishes that Chrétien would pause to entertain objections that run against the current of his ideas” —note the invocation of the Hegelian *counter-current*. Hart continues, “if anything, a little counterpoint would make his discourse more genuinely polyphonic, perhaps even more choric.”²⁴ As Hart notes in another essay, there is more to be gained by pondering the choric nature of our response to the call to saintly life than in framing it in negative terms: “Our *epektasis*,” he affirms, “is neither singular nor straight forward.”²⁵

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It is precisely this polyphonic, this choric, this choreographic manner of investigation that I find so impresses in the work of Kevin Hart. His *peri-choretic* weave of poetry, theology and philosophy challenges and enriches our understanding—our experience—of experience.

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NOTES

1. Kevin Hart, *The Dark Gaze: Maurice Blanchot and the Sacred*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004, viii.
2. Kevin Hart, "Poetry and Revelation: Hopkins, counter-experience and *reduction*" *Pacifica* 18 (October 2005): 269.
3. Kevin Hart, *Postmodernism: Beginner's guide*. Oxford: Oneworld, 2004, 52.
4. Kevin Hart "The Experience of Poetry", *Boxkite: A Journal of Poetry and Poetics* #2. Ed James Taylor. Sydney: The Poetics Foundation, 1998, 285.
5. Kevin Hart, "Preface," *Phenomenology, Modernism and Beyond*. Eds Carole Bourne-Taylor, Ariana Mildenberg. Bern: Peter Lang, 2010, xi.
6. Edmund Husserl, *Cartesian Meditations*. Trans. Dorion Cairns. The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1957.
7. Kevin Hart, "Phenomenality and Christianity." *Angelaki* 12 (2007): 37-53.
8. Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*. Trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. Baltimore: John Hopkins, 1976, 60.
9. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*. Trans. Donald A. Landes. Abingdon: Routledge, 2012, lxxvii.
10. Hart, "The Experience of Poetry", 288.
11. Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise Than Being or Beyond Essence*. Trans Alphonso Lingis. Dordrecht: Kluwer, 1991, 47.
12. Jean-Luc Marion, *Being Given*. Trans. Jeffrey L. Kosky. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002, 215.
13. Marion, *Being Given*, 146.
14. Hart "The Experience of Poetry", 299.
15. Kevin Hart "The Experience of the Kingdom of God" *The Experience of God: A Postmodern Response* Eds Kevin Hart, Barbaras Eileen Wall. New York: Fordham University Press, 2005, 81.
16. Hart, "The Experience of the Kingdom of God", 72.
17. Kevin Hart, "Blanchot's 'Trial of Experience'," *Oxford Literary Review* 22:1 (July 2000): 127.
18. St Augustine, *Confessions*, Bk. I.
19. John Kinsella "John Kinsella Interviews Kevin Hart, Melbourne, 1995" <http://www.johnkinsella.org/interviews/hart.html> Accessed 1/06/13
20. We must, it seems, go beyond Valéry's notion of the dance that rests always and only in relation with itself: "the dancing body seems unaware of everything else; it seems to know nothing of its surroundings. It seems to hearken to itself and only to itself, to see nothing as though its eyes were jewels...lights that serve no useful purpose." Paul Valéry, "Philosophy of the dance" *What is Dance?* Eds. Roger Copeland and Marshall Cohen. New York: Oxford University Press, 1983, 61.
21. See Jaana Parviainen, *Bodies Moving and Being Moved: a phenomenological analysis of the dancing subject and the cognitive and ethical values of dance art*. Tampere: Tampere University Press, 1998.
22. See Roger Munier, *Si j'habite*. Saint Clément de rivièrre: Fata Morgana, 1994, 39. "He is, in his stampings, swaying hips, leaping and sudden stops, a presence called by the invisible, invoking the object of desire. He is ecstatic, certainly, in his frantic gesticulation, but in the end he is all but consumed. In becoming sign, he exceeds himself. Body of lack and desire, eternal horizon, like desire itself. He is self and beyond self. He is dancing".
23. Kevin Hart, "Encyclopaedias and Other Things: Some Recent Theology," *Journal for Cultural and Religious Theory* 6:3 (Fall 2005): 60.
24. Hart, "Encyclopaedias", 59.
25. Kevin Hart, "God and the Sublime" *God out of Place?: A Symposium on L.P. Hemming's Postmodernity's Transcending: Devaluing God?* Ed. Yves de Maeseneer. Utrecht: Ars Disputandi, 2005, 37.