

Rhetoric and Rhapsody

A response to David Bentley Hart's *The Beauty of the Infinite*

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Abstract

I offer a brief outline of *The Beauty of the Infinite*, pointing up its similarities with and differences from John Milbank's *Theology and Social Theory* (1990), and the violence of its rhetoric. I then take issue with Hart's reading of Nicholas Lash on the death and resurrection of Christ. I argue that not only is Lash closer to Hart than Hart allows, but that Lash recognizes the necessarily unfinished nature of Christian story telling. Hart is led by his rhetoric of out-narration to affirm an unsustainable completeness that elides the terrors of suffering and death, the very fault for which Hart chides Lash. Having noted Hart's misdirection I conclude with an appreciation of his aesthetics.

Keywords

David Bentley Hart, Nicholas Lash, rhetoric, resurrection, master narratives, out-narration, evil (incomprehensibility of)

At one point in *The Beauty of the Infinite* (2004), David Bentley Hart fears that his readers may think him too much given to rhapsody, to abandoning argument for song (177). And yes, in a way he is and he does. *The Beauty of the Infinite* is a series of songs on mythic and dogmatic themes which are so ordered and repeated as to essay an epic poem on the Christian doctrine of creation: the story of a world made for love of its beauty and the beauty it reflects. As Hart has it, rhapsody is the proper diction for telling the story of Father, Son and Spirit.

The second of the book's three parts is a lengthy minor dogmatics (*dogmatica minora*), which moves from Trinity to Eschaton by way of Creation and Salvation. These traditional topoi are addressed through a series of recurring themes or leitmotifs that are well known to anyone familiar with Radical Orthodoxy and the work of John Milbank, Catherine Pickstock and Graham Ward. As noted by the reviewer in *Modern Theology*, Hart's publishers present him as an Eastern

Orthodox theologian, but there is nothing, at least at first glance, overly Orthodox about his theology.¹ Apart from Gregory of Nyssa—whose thought is pervasive in Hart’s theology—his sources, the precursors for much of his music, are as much Western Catholic as Eastern. The Radical Orthodox themes which recur throughout the work—and which are not of course the preserve of Radical Orthodoxy alone—are such as the naming of God as being rather than beyond being; the necessity of analogy for thinking the difference between being (creator) and beings (creatures); the possibility of the gift; the primordially of peace and the contingency of conflict. These themes also include the silliness, if not the depravity, of those who don’t get the point. But all these themes and more are rewritten within the frame of a distinctly Hartian melody: a recurring appeal to the beauty of God’s plenitude.

One might hesitate to describe the orchestration of these themes as Wagnerian if only because—predictably enough—Hart castigates Wagner for making ‘audible a quintessentially Hegelian logic, . . . the “infinity” of its unbroken melodic flow being of the most synthetic variety, rationalized (or sublated) by an abstractable system of leit-motivs’ (283). And needless to say Hegel is a bad thing. But there is something Wagnerian about the way in which Hart’s metaphysical motifs keep returning, and in particular the thunderous tones that dominate the first part of the book, and which one might call the war of the gods. And again this theme recalls Radical Orthodoxy, and in particular John Milbank’s story—as told in *Theology and Social Theory* (1990)—of Nietzsche’s conflict with Christianity (see further Loughlin 1992). For Hart has taken Milbank’s engagement with postmodern, nihilist philosophy—the Nietzschean inheritance—and reorchestrated it so as to make it at once more mellifluous and more strident. Hart’s telling of Milbank’s tale is more mellifluous because Hart is an accomplished rhetorician who writes with great confidence and verve, producing wonderful cadenzas that match anything in Karl Barth. But at the same time the music is more strident because the denigration of those who don’t get the point—the nihilist philosophers and those theologians who are almost as silly—is more relentless, more wearing.

As with Milbank, Hart tells a story about two stories and we are told that we must choose between them (72). The choice cannot be avoided by appeal to a third, arbitrating narrative, to something more foundational, such as enlightenment rationality, for there is nothing more foundational. There are only stories. And as with Milbank, the two stories are locked in a rhetorical battle, with one seeking to out-narrate the other by telling a more coherent and so more persuasive

¹ Indeed, the one place where Hart makes explicit appeal to his tradition is when he declines to either endorse or deny universal salvation—Hart 2003: 410.

tale. One is a story of primordial violence, of difference as conflict, from out of which life and order is momentarily asserted—the will to power—against the flux by which it is always threatened and finally undone. The other is a story of fundamental and final peace which gives life as gift and joy, a harmonious ordering of difference. One is the story of Dionysius and the other the story of the crucified.

Nietzsche's post-Christian counternarrative... cannot be denied its power and its appeal, but it should be recognized not simply as critique but as always already another kerygma. Between Nietzsche's vision of life as an agon and the Christian vision of life as creation—as a primordial 'gift' and 'grace'—there is nothing... that makes either perspective self-evidently more correct than the other. Each sees and accounts for the violence of experience and the beauty of being, but each according to an irreducible mythos and a particular aesthetics. (103)

We are presented with a 'battle of tastes' (103), and Hart intends to do his best to win it. The difference between Hart's telling of this contest and Milbank's, is that Hart makes the distinction between beauty (the Lord's glory shining in the world) and the sublime (the thrill of the void that enlivens contingency) central to his narration; and that he faces head on the irony that many Christian rhetorics of peace, as in Milbank, are often so violent. Indeed, can rhetoric, which aims to change the other, be other than violent? But strangely, while this is set up as one of the book's fundamental questions, it is not directly addressed until the book's final pages, when Hart suggests that Christian rhetoric can only give witness to the peace it proclaims if it abjures violence and accepts martyrdom. Despite ridiculing unnamed pacifists—who retreat to 'separatist' communities that stand 'aloof' from their "'Constantinian" brethren' (341)—Hart concludes that it is '[o]nly by assuming the form of a ceaseless practice of peace' that Christians can persuade others that Christ brings the 'fire of an infinite love' (443). But in between the initial posing of the question of rhetoric and its answering comes the dogmatics, the telling of the Christian story and the denigration of its Nietzschean rivals. And it is to the rhetoric of Hart's dogmatic narration, which seems far from peaceful, that I now turn.

It is not that Hart is wrong, or entirely wrong, about what he finds wanting in the writers he castigates, or that he doesn't sometimes learn from them. Indeed, on more than one occasion he tells us that there is much for which Christian theology must thank the arch-nihilist, Nietzsche. But Hart's approach to authors such as Jacques Derrida and Emmanuel Levinas, Gilles Deleuze and Michel Foucault, as well as to several Christian theologians, reminds me of Origen's allegory for the reading of pagan texts. In Deuteronomy (21.10–13) we read that when, after a battle, you find a beautiful woman among your

captives, and you lust after her, you must take her to your house and 'shave her head and pare her nails', and then, after a month, you may take her as your wife. For Origen, the beautiful woman amongst the captives signified the good things that might be found in the writings of his opponents.

If, therefore, we read wise and knowledgeable words in one of them, we must purify them, we must remove and cut away everything in this knowledge that is deadly and vain. . . . For the women of our enemies have no purity about them, seeing that there is no wisdom in them that is not mingled with some impurity. . . . [W]e who are engaged in a spiritual war and who, to destroy the power of the enemy, use not carnal arms, but the power of God, if we find a beautiful woman in the camp of our adversary, that is to say, some rational discipline, in that case we shall purify her, as has just been recounted. (Origen quoted in de Lubac 1998: 213).

Origen's violent image for the reading of enemy texts suits Hart's own practice; except that on occasion Hart's 'women' are so shaven and pared that almost nothing is left to take. Against this I want to suggest a more hospitable approach, in which the 'woman' is not captive; our desires not lustful, possessive and destructive; our reading a searching for the glory that we have hope of finding when we believe the world to be given by God—as does Hart.

Thus, for example, I would not dismiss Levinas as 'depraved' (75), and would be one of those theologians who read Foucault as an 'unwitting phenomenologist of original sin' (68, see Schuld 2003). However, this is not to disagree with Hart's contention that people like Derrida and Deleuze espouse what are ultimately nihilistic metaphysics, and that they find it immensely difficult to ground their ethical commitments in their ontologies. They do. But they also have ethical commitments, and their metaphysics do not necessarily open unto fascism, as Hart suggests they might (37). Perhaps one can read back from fascism to their philosophies, in the sense that the former—through interpretation—could find a justification in the latter. But one cannot so easily read forward from the philosophies to the politics, and not least because these thinkers declare their hostility to fascism. It is everything they would resist. Hart's contention is of course a provocation, because he cannot fail to know, for example, that Foucault, in his introduction to Deleuze and Guattari's *Anti-Oedipus* (1984), declares that 'the major enemy, the strategic adversary is fascism . . . [a]nd not only historical fascism, the fascism of Hitler and Mussolini . . . but also the fascism in us all, in our heads and in our everyday behaviour, the fascism that causes us to love power, to desire the very thing that dominates and exploits us' (Deleuze and Guattari 1984: xiii). It may be that the 'art of living counter to all forms of fascism' (xiii) which Foucault finds in *Anti-Oedipus*, and

which is repeated in the work of many postmodernists, will avail us little in resisting the desire for what destroys us. But then Christian rhetoric has proved as successful or not as the politics of difference espoused by Foucault and Deleuze in resisting the powers and dominions that rule our lives. We might as easily track Hitler's fascism back into the Bavarian Catholicism of his childhood as into, say, the supposed nihilism of a Heidegger or other thinker who refuses a theological voice (Hemming 2002). We can as easily find 'everyday fascism' in the rhetorics and practices of the Christian churches as outside of them.

Hart rightly insists that the difference which Christ makes is a difference in history; in the Church's practices of charity and forgiveness. But the Church also fails in the practice of these virtues, and while Hart notes this failure, he gives but passing mention to what I would call the tragedy of the Church (see further Loughlin 1999: 170–75). And this observation leads me to a consideration of his critique of tragedy and what I see as the problem that evil poses, not so much for the gospel, as for the gospel construed as a metanarrative or mythos (103).

But first I must set my difficulty within a more extensive admiration for one of the most impressive sections of Hart's book, in which he recuperates Anselm's theology of atonement within a Girardian reading of Christ's sacrificial death as the gift of participation by which all may learn martyrdom (Hart 2003: 346–72). I don't disagree with Hart's refusal of tragedy as an appropriate category for understanding Christ's death (see Loughlin 1999: 161–175), but I do disagree with his criticism of Donald MacKinnon and Nicholas Lash, and I think that Hart's misreading of Lash in particular points to a larger, more general problem. Lash is accused of collapsing the resurrection into the crucifixion, of making the former but the meaning of the latter, when he writes that 'in death, in dying, Jesus discovers that his whole history, and every moment in that history, far from slipping away, ephemeral, into non-existence, stands, eternally—and stands by the transfigured reality and significance which belongs to it from the standpoint of God's eternal light' (Lash 1986: 178; Hart 2003: 382). Of this Hart writes:

It obeys the logic of every cross, every judicious and prudent deployment of violence: from the holocaust of the particular, one can always pluck an ember of meaningfulness, a stabilizing 'message' that makes of the sacrifice itself a good (or necessary) thing; an interior and golden light can always be rescued from the ashes of the other in the interests of my hope. (Hart 2003: 388)

Hart wants the resurrection to be something more than the 'speculative inner fold of the crucifixion'; a moment of 'Stoic interiority' (Hart 2003: 389). Thus Hart expressly contradicts Lash and refuses

to say that the God who loves beauty allows Christ's life and death to 'stand' in eternal light as if that life and death were a 'well-wrought urn' (390). Resurrection is not a gaze that makes death and destruction beautiful; it vindicates the one who is dead by raising him to life.

But I think that Lash is closer to Hart, or Hart to Lash, than Hart allows. For firstly it is not entirely evident how Hart's insistence that the resurrection *vindicates* Christ's life (333) differs from Lash's supposition that Jesus' life—his whole life—does not fall into the void but is made to stand, as Lash puts, eternally; and that insofar as we can recognize this vindication, the resurrection teaches us to see Christ's life—and our own in Christ—from, as it were, God's point of view rather than the view of the world's powers and dominions. This way of putting the matter is not so very different from Karl Barth, when he wrote that '[e]ternal life is not another and second life, beyond the present one. It is this life, but the reverse side which God sees although it is as yet hidden from us—this life in its relation to what He has done for the whole world, and therefore for us too in Jesus Christ' (Barth 1981: 9). And it is not so very different from Hart when he tells us that the Kingdom of God is not the 'moment of metaphysical closure toward which history builds, but the truth that the good of creation is creation itself, without need of any higher justification, any "dialectical" remedy for the ungovernable profusions of difference' (401).

Lash is every bit as concerned as Hart to insist that death is death, and that it cannot be given some spurious nobility in and of itself. But he also wants to insist that our lives do not simply pass away into the dark. Christian faith in the resurrection of Christ teaches us to hope that even in what we find most dark, in the degradations of terrible deaths, we may yet find that we are 'at home', held in the arms of the Father, embraced by the God who—as Hart puts it—'never forsakes his beloved' (411). For Lash, Jesus does not teach us to call the *darkness* 'Father', as Hart has it (388), as if the darkness were the fundamental reality. The Church can address the darkness as Father—can call, in the dark, upon the Father, *abba*—because it has hope of finding there the one by whom Jesus was found and raised to eternal life.² Hart's criticism of Lash strangely repeats Lash's lesson:

² This seems to me to be the clear import of a passage that Hart quotes at length: 'The focal point of both memory and hope is Gethsemane and Calvary. It was there that God dies, and resurrection began. To understand all places of darkness and death to be that garden and that hilltop is, therefore, to refuse to give the last word to all that entombs the body and the mind of man. Jesus taught us to address the darkness as "Father." But we only learn appropriately to do so at the place where he did it. It is only there, at the heart of darkness, that we are enabled and entitled to pray: "All shall be well and all shall be well and all manner of thing shall be well"' (Lash 1986: 215; Hart misattributes this passage to Lash 1979).

that with Christ's resurrection death does not go away, but nor does it have the last word. Life and not death is the truth of the world that God makes, and life is the first and last word of God's uttering (Lash 1992: 117–18). And yet at the same time, Hart seems to sit light to the first part of this lesson—the recognition of the 'tragic' within the ultimately non-tragic story of Christ's death and resurrection. And the tragic is that which stops Lash from collapsing Easter Sunday into Good Friday, resurrection into crucifixion. The story that began in Gethsemane gives reason to hope that light will be found in darkness. But it is precisely a *hope*—an *entreaty*—and not a certainty. It is to trust in a story that is only really told in its undertaking. Thus to follow Lash, one does not—as Hart insists one must—have to be 'willing to identify the death camps . . . as places where, far out in the far country, the Father was found, and leave it at that' (390). Rather it is to *pray* that far out in the dark there was still a finding; that those who died were not lost but found, and found by the one who always seeks our finding. Is this mere solace, as Hart argues? Does this deny the resurrection as a vindication of Christ's life, as Hart wants resurrection to be? Perhaps it is and perhaps it does. But why then is vindication not also a kind of solace; the solace of choosing—or of being chosen by—the winning side; exulting in the victory of a life returned in the face of its destroyers?

Elsewhere in the book, Hart criticises Don Cupitt for his 'impoverished Hegelianism', and for having written that the 'God of Christianity is a God who in Christ becomes human and in spirit becomes the endless interrelatedness of everything' (Cupitt 1992: 155; cited in Hart 2003: 323). With something like dread, Hart wonders if this 'interrelatedness of all things' would include 'the relation, say, between Jews and Nazis' (Hart 2003: 324)? But can Hart doubt that in some sense it must? For it is not only that everything which exists, exists in and through a myriad of relationships with other things, but that everything which is, *is* through its participation in what Thomas Aquinas called the 'first cause'. As Hart has it, God is 'wholly present in each moment of created reality, as the very energy of its being' (295). Thus God is present in each moment of the one who persecutes as well as the one who is persecuted.³

And so when given this account of creaturely being as participation in the being of the creator, we are left with what the philosophers of religion call the problem of evil. How is it that the goodness which God makes turns bad? After Augustine, Hart tells us that evil has no substance; it is but the absence of the good. Evil is a privation, 'a nothingness given shape by a desire that gives itself shape only as the rejection of love' (140). And we can reject love because we are free,

³ For elucidation of this Thomistic point see McCabe 1987: 2–52.

though Hart largely assumes rather than discusses the freedom of the creature (see also Hart 2005). But with all that said, why should the creature turn from its creator, who gives only good? My concern is not that Hart should give us an answer but that he so persistently avoids the question.⁴ Earlier I quoted Hart when he writes that each story—the Nietzschean and the Christian—‘sees and accounts for the violence of experience and the beauty of being’ (103). But it is not evident that Hart’s story does or could ‘account for’ the world’s violence. For in the Christian story, evil—as the falling away of the good—is incomprehensible; the darkness that shadows the mystery of given being. And in acknowledging the deep unknowing that must attend all Christian knowledge we have to give up on any Christian rhetoric that would seek to out-narrate alternative stories. For we simply do not know how to narrate such a complete, totalizing tale as this would require. Instead, all the Church can do is to better narrate the story it has been given to tell as prayer and hope. We do not have to treat others as Origen treated the ‘captive woman’. Instead we can open our story to them as a place in which they might dwell, since finally, as Hart acknowledges, the telling of Christian hope is a practice; and if that practice is met with disdain and even violence, it will still be told in the way its refusal is received: in the testimony of the martyr.

With that said I want to close with noting what I found so heartening and, at times, moving in what is such an amazing if provoking book. The reviewer in *Modern Theology*, who found little that was characteristically Orthodox in *The Beauty of the Infinite*, also wished that Hart’s account of beauty were less conventional and more interesting. ‘Beauty is understood . . . as a sort of perceptual quality or appearance that has some degree of organization or complexity, such as sequences, differences, distinctions, variety, relations’ (Bychkov 2005: 663). Indeed it is, in places; but that is something to be welcomed. It is refreshing to find a theological aesthetics that doesn’t, at the first, want us to abandon what is normally meant by beauty, that doesn’t want us to forget the beauty of faces and bodies, of sunsets and the artifices of human hands: the erotic attraction of the well-formed and graceful, in life and in art. Hart wants us to recognize and celebrate beauty, because what God makes is both good and beautiful. And the beautiful that God makes shines because it is as if it were a mirror of God’s own beauty; the creation being a participated difference from and in the being of God: God’s plenitude given as gift. ‘The face is a beauty that opens to an infinite that is beautiful; it reveals the desirability and inviolability and aesthetic necessity of the other; it is the beauty that humbles the one who looks on by showing

⁴ Herbert McCabe notes that the actuality of ‘Sin’ is an ‘unfathomable mystery’ (McCabe 1987:38)

that the other is the delight of God, and the music of his rejoicing' (288).

In this way, Hart's account of beauty is deeply interesting and far from conventional, and it is—I hazard—the most Orthodox aspect of his theology; that which makes all his theology Orthodox. For *The Beauty of the Infinite* generalizes the Orthodox theology of the icon, which is the theology of the incarnation, by reminding us that when we are taught by Christ, creation becomes the countenance in which we can see the glory of its maker. Moreover, Hart offers us a wonderful series of metaphysical metaphors for saying how seeing the glory of the Lord is neither to collapse the transcendent into the immanent, becoming a kind of pantheism or panentheism; nor a separation of the transcendent from the world, so that it becomes an utterly alien distance. It is rather the transcendent in the immanent, which gives the immanent to be and to shine in a distance opened within the transcendent—the triune life—by the gift of being to beings. This is a theology of the mediate and the surface; of a God found in and not beyond the world; a God who does not draw us from the world but into its life, in all its historical particularity.

But then I remember that the world does not shine for all, nor all the time for those who have been given to glimpse its light; and that about this darkening of a world made by love, Hart's lengthy book is strangely silent—perhaps properly but also perplexingly for a story that would out-narrate all others. It seems to me that the hesitancy enjoined by our ethical disfigurement, is incompatible with the kind of counter-narrative which Hart wants to tell. The Christian story can never be such a tale because it is the telling of a life in the fractured lives of those who fall away and are yet gathered again, and again, by the life which they tell. Thus—as the only diction proper for disfigured but refigured beings—we must speak, as Lash puts it, only 'tentatively, indirectly, metaphorically, in a language drawn from our present experience, which is that of a history that has *not* yet ended, not yet been given its final "resolution", "shape" and identity' (Lash 1984: 184). For at the last, the proper diction for Christian story telling is prayer; music that is always bitter-sweet.

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