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Unfinished God: The Speculative Philosophical Theology of Ray L. Hart,

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Reviewed by Matthew Nini

The *Festschrift* (or, the essays presented to a scholar on the occasion of their retirement or an anniversary) is a tradition that never quite took root in the English-speaking world. The reader of the present volume might therefore ask why Ray L. Hart, professor emeritus of religion at Boston University, has been presented not only with a *Festschrift*, but one that is of the most illustrious kind: the book is not only dedicated to Hart; all of its essays are about his work. As this edited volume attests, whoever he is, he has gathered unto himself an eminent readership in religious studies, philosophical theology, and the philosophy of religion.

Hart made his theological debut in 1968. To read his book from that year, *Unfinished Man and the Imagination*, is an exercise in historical divination: Is Ray L. Hart a *soixante-huitard*, one of those set on upending the established order? Is he a "French theorist," intoxicated by Derrida and the like, as were his peers Paul de Man and John Caputo? Is he a "death of God" theologian, like his late friend Thomas J.J. Altizer? The young Hart remains something of a chameleon, able to speak the language of his age, yet still thinking in a register

that is entirely his own. Ultimately, *Unfinished Man and the Imagination* is an attempt at a philosophy of revelation. God is revealed through events, and one comes to grips with these events in language. To borrow a term from Gerhard Ebeling (and Hart has more in common with contemporaneous European thinkers like Ebeling than with his American peers), revelation is a *Wortgeschehen*, a word-event. More attuned to the contemporary issues of Lutheran theology than were his stateside peers, Hart recognizes that Martin Heidegger and Rudolf Bultmann had reached an impasse in trying to provide revelation with a hermeneutics, and that this impasse was the event. In *On the Way to Language* (*Unterwegs zur Sprache,* 1959), Heidegger admits that he had been working on the idea of the event (*Ereignis*) and its relationship to language for more than two decades following his *Introduction to Metaphysics* (from the winter semester of 1933–1934), but that he had not made much progress.[1]

Hart's response is a retrieval of romantic hermeneutics, beginning with Kant's Third Critique, but more poignantly—and for the first time in English——of F.W.J. Schelling's mature philosophy. To admit of a divine revelation in and through language is to open the door to the idea of a God who speaks Himself, who is both telling and told, and about whom the last word cannot be decided until the story has reached its conclusion. Both the telling and understanding of Revelation are the province of the imagination, creating a divine imaginary that has us more than we have it. Hart writes at the outset of his 1968 book: "Theology lives out of the future, understands out of the past."[2] Did Hart know that he was echoing a sentiment expressed by Schelling in the lectures on the Philosophy of Revelation almost a century earlier (SW XIII: 175–530)? He certainly meant it in an equally radical way: the event-character of existence, which must be imagined in order to be lived, understands itself as it constructs itself—life is always ongoing, the human

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[1] Martin Heidegger, *On the Way to Language*, trans. Peter D. Hertz (New York: Harper & Row, 1971), 8.

[2] Ray L. Hart, *Unfinished Man and the Imagination* (New York: Herder & Herder, 1968), 44. On this point, I would like to offer an alternative interpretation to that of some of the contributions to this volume (*Unfinished God*): It is not, on my reading, so much that Hart has decided to consciously dispense with the tradition of divine impassibility. Rather, he has—in step with post-war European thinkers like Bultmann, Ebeling, Ernst Fuchs, Gabriel Vahanian, and Stanislas Breton—realized that the language of subject and object is hermeneutically defunct as far as God is concerned. Indeed, the language of *I* and *Thou*, so central to both the mystical and moral discourse of the pre-War generation and held over by many afterwards, is abandoned by each of these thinkers on the same grounds, more or less: i.e., that it objectifies God. Hart's unique path toward this conclusion is through negative theology and Teutonic-Lutheran mysticism. Put simply, when we stop worrying about a dogmatic subject–object distinction, impassibility becomes a moot point: the God who creates us is the God who reveals Himself to us and also the God who suffers with us on the Cross—though not all at the same time, or under the same aspect, because these are different moments of the divine story.

being is unfinished, and in a certain respect, so is God. Hence, to call *Unfinished Man* an example of "death of God theology" misses the mark. Hart can agree with Altizer that God is nothing, but only some of the time: the event-character of revelation, according to which God is both telling and being told, means that God must relate to some kind of principle of negativity, which would have to be taken up into the divine essence itself.

Unfinished Man clearly had unfinished business, and that business was the role of nothing, of the *nihil*, in the divine. Hart would spend half a century thinking through this question, publishing his magnus opus, *God Being Nothing: Toward a Theogony*, in 2016.[3] The book is a difficult one. Does its dense language represent the last moment of post-structuralism before its disappearance? Again, Hart goes his own way. *God Being Nothing* (*GBN*) is a critique of ontotheology—once more, in line with other theologians of Hart's generation, but in a register closer to post-Heideggerian systematizers (like Karl Rahner or Ferdinand Ulrich). Heidegger, however, does not play a major role in *GBN*. Hart rather makes his point by leaning on an apophatic mystical tradition—in particular, Meister Eckhart, Jacob Boehme, and Schelling. And the point he is making is this: Already in *Unfinished Man*, revelation is described according to a temporal sequence—there *was* a time when what *is was not*; there *will be* a time when what *is* may *not be*. *GBN* will make explicit that this nothing—the *nihil* out of which creation comes in the dictum "*creatio ex nihilo et non sed deo*" [creation out of nothing and only by God] is internal to God. This, of course, is the move, following Boehme, that Schelling has already made: God's ground is within Him, the relative nothing (in Platonic terms, "*me on*" and not "*ouk on*") out of which he Himself emerges, His own nature of His "past," and out of which He has created the world. Hart, however, is aware that this position slips easily into pantheism. The most obvious solution (following Schelling) would be to rehearse arguments about parts and wholes, backgrounds and foregrounds, antecedents and consequents. But from the inception of his work, Hart has been a thinker of the given—the starting point in *Unfinished Man* is not the God who reveals or the Godhead out of which He came, but the revealed event, "inverbalized" as language. Hart's radical solution, then, is to de-emphasize the temporal scheme. The present is not simply what "is," the fruit of a before that it is "not." Rather, the meontic spirit of the *not* is always there with being as its shadow-companion, with both Being and Nothing emerging from the mysterious Godhead: the indeterminate, groundless *turba*, for which creation and destruction are simultaneous.

The crux of the matter, then, the hidden key that unlocks *God Being Nothing*, is not so much the *nihil* but the "*ex*" in the formulation *creatio ex nihilo*.

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[3] Ray L. Hart, *God Being Nothing: Toward a Theogony* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016).

This little word stands for what abides between immanent and economic trinities; time and eternity; God and man. It is the space from nothing to nothing, my nothing to God's, which draws me up to what is highest—this is the Hartian epectasy [*epektasis*], the antidote to nihilism that we are cautiously promised at the beginning of *GBN*; the nothing we see deep in ourselves is no reason for despair, but rather, following Eckhart (the patron saint of Hartian theology), the true way to God. *God Being Nothing* is a commanding work of speculative metaphysics, one that deserves to be likened to Whitehead's *Process and Reality*, Rahner's *Spirit in the World*, or Ulrich's *Homo Abyssus*. And while the casual reader might mistake its difficult language and occasional neologisms for a work of post-modernism, it eschews what is fashionable in favor of what is really challenging—to think what Leo Strauss, in the closing pages of *The City and Man* (1964), describes as the most unavoidable question for philosophers and theologians alike: *Quid sit Deus?*[4]

Beyond its objective contribution to questions in philosophy and theology, the present volume, edited by Sean McGrath and Alina Feld, is significant in its role in generating a body of literature on Hart's work. This significance does not mean, however, that its contributors—many of whom have had remarkable intellectual careers of their own—do not struggle to interpret and come to terms with Hart's work, especially in *GBN*. Indeed, this collection contains more interpretations of Hart's work than the number of chapters (eighteen) in which they are expressed, a testament to Hart's originality: just when one thinks one has pinned him down, he escapes again. The result is a kind of banquet of Hartian themes to which the reader is convened. Three main examples suffice to make the point.

Cyril O'Regan tries to weigh the sources that contribute to *GBN*'s argument. As a Catholic reader of the same German mystics in which Hart is interested, O'Regan reminds himself as much as he does the reader that Hart is a Protestant, steeped in the hermeneutic tradition that begins with Schleiermacher. I have already tried to situate Hart in the protestant theology of his German contemporaries. O'Regan does the same, adding Tillich to the list, apposite because of Hart and Tillich's shared interest in Schelling. The real question, however, is how to situate Eckart, Cusa, and Boehme in *GBN*. While they appear to be on equal footing, O'Regan gives Boehme the edge: "the basic grammar of negative theology adopted by Hart is that of Boehme's evolutionary ontotheology."[5]

Sean McGrath's contribution focuses on the Boehme-Hart connection. Hart "reopens the question concerning the coherence of

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[4] Leo Strauss, *The City and Man* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1964), 241.

[5] Cyril O'Regan, "A Meontological Speculative Theology: God Being Nothing," in *Unfinished God: The Speculative Philosophical Theology of Ray L. Hart*, ed. Alina N. Feld and Sean J. McGrath (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2024), 22–23.

evolutionary monotheism," the idea that God is, in Hart's words, a "determination process," the latter an idea that comes from Boehme.[6] It argues for a "primordial and dynamically developing duality in God" as the "*explanans* of the dualities manifest in living nature."[7] Boehme, ignorant of Latin theology and the importance of divine impassibility (and presumably also of Neoplatonic ideas about Being) sees in Scripture the unfolding of evolutionary monotheism, and therefore glimpses the personhood of God in a more real way than do the school theologians. Both Hart and McGrath find their way back to this position via Schelling; both can present their speculative metaphysical systems as a Schellingian answer to the tired Hegelian one overburdened by the end of history: for Boehme and Schelling, God has a future, and no prophet dare say precisely what it is. But there is something behind this shift that is much more profound, a dialogue between contemporary thinkers, each elaborating his own metaphysics. In his books on psychology, nature, and eschatology, McGrath has adopted from Schelling what he calls "the law of ground," using it as a tool to transform and renew these subjects.[8] Would Hart be able to follow McGrath in this endeavor? I suspect that he would have reservations about the law of ground's dependence on the logical ideas of antecedence and consequence, categories too close to classical metaphysics for his sensibilities. More profoundly, I am convinced that Hart bursts out of the Kantian frame in *GBN*, denying the hegemony of time (as a form of inner sense) over the self-telling tale of revelation. When God becomes, the measure of becoming has been disturbed: *time is out of joint*, as Hamlet says, and what emerges is the chaos that brings life, what Hart calls "torbic energeia." To this mixture, one must add the ambivalent relationship of both Hart and McGrath to Martin Heidegger, who is so close to yet so suspicious for both thinkers, albeit on different counts. One could—and should—write an essay on McGrath and Hart.

In a remarkable chapter that echoes Hart in both spirit and originality, Tyler Tritten reminds us that for Hart, "theology is theogony," and then argues that "Hart's theology will come into view as a radically empirical theology in which God has no a priori but only a posteriori attributes. Hart's way of thinking the nihil thus avoids modern materialism and nihilism, which is the explicit objective of his theogony."[9] Tritten argues that, for Hart, all divine events are divine contingencies that can only be narrated, not classified,

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[6] Sean J. McGrath, "Ray L. Hart and the Böhmian Tradition," in *Unfinished God*, 93.
[7] Sean J. McGrath, "Ray L. Hart and the Böhmian Tradition," in *Unfinished God*, 94.
[8] Sean McGrath, *Schelling and the Dark Ground of Spirit* (London: Routledge, 2012); Thinking Nature: *An Essay in Negative Ecology* (Edinbrugh: Edinburgh University Press, 2019); *Political Eschatology* (Eugene, Oregon: Wipf & Stock, 2023).
[9] Tyler Tritten, "Seeing From the Centrum: Theogony as Empirical Theology," in *Unfinished God,* 238–239.

understood, or explained away. The upshot is a God who, rather than being *esse ipsum subsistens* [self-subsisting being], is highest freedom, acting not out of His being, but out of this primordial freedom.

The variety and originality illustrated by these three essay samples continues through the eighteen chapters of the book. Douglas Hedley situates Hart's theology archetypically, through the biblical image of the wheel of Ezekiel. William Desmond sees in Hart an original use of what he has called "metaxology." Nicholas Genevieve-Tweed offers a necessary investigation into the similarities between Schelling's 1811 *Ages of the World* and Hart's theogony. And Nathan R. Strunk provides an introduction to the key themes in *GBN* that will be necessary reading for all students of Hart. This is only a partial and aleatory sample from a volume filled with rich contributions—one could go on. But I prefer to let the book speak for itself, recommending it to all those interested in the question of who God is, "*quid sit Deus?*" For readers, few pleasures are as great as discovering an overlooked thinker and finding that he is brilliant. It is my hope that this collection will be the occasion for many to discover Ray Hart—and to dive headlong into both of his monographs.