# *Philosopher-Poets: John Koethe and Kevin Hart*

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*Wicked Heat,* by Kevin Hart, Paper Bark Press.
*The Constructor,* by John Koethe, HarperCollins.

When Wallace Stevens writes that "poetry, which we have been thinking of as at least the equal of philosophy, may be its superior," we hear behind his words an anxiety that has dogged poets ever since Plato inaugurated the "ancient quarrel" between poetry and philosophy. By now that quarrel *is* ancient, and the indictment has expanded. By the nineteenth century, poetry is not only insufficently philosophical but, in the mocking tones of Thomas Love Peacock, "The highest inspirations of poetry are resolvable into three ingredients: the rant of unregulated passion, the whining of exaggerated feeling, and the cant of factitious sentiment." For Peacock, in comparison to the serious work of historians and philosophers, "the poet is wallowing in the rubbish of departed ignorance, and raking up the ashes of dead savages to find geegaws and rattles for the grown babies of the age." Peacock's friend Shelley responded with "A Defence of Poetry," the strongest argument yet for poetry's preeminence. He recasts the opposing terms into reason and imagination and then reverses the relation: "Reason is to the imagination as the instrument to the agent, as the body to the spirit, as the shadow to the substance."

Emerson, in "The Poet," made a similar transvaluation, but thereafter poetry yielded ground with Arnold and withdrew into its own protected domain, with the occasional sortie out. In our own time *theories* of poetry have replaced defenses, but upon closer examination every theory of poetry turns out to be a defense whether intentional or not. Theory invariably throws us back upon the bulwarks of interpretation where we make our stand upon the ground of meaning. Hermeneutics, it seems, always wins out against poetics as the





stronger defense, since poetics appears too self-regarding. But, as Paul H. Fry notes in *A Defense of Poetry*, "to interpret, we have gradually come to realize, is to play out the game of reading within the boundaries that Plato devised in order to make sure that poetry would always lose." To interpret is to abandon the field at once; it is, after all, philosophy's own terrain. A common tactic in the face of such retreats has been to raise the standard of Being as the essence of poetry, but poststructuralist assaults have ripped that noble flag to shreds. The concept of Being depends upon notions of self-presence, and language can never, so it is generally understood, embody unmediated presence. And so the quarrel goes on.

None of this stops poets from writing, of course, or from turning to the enchantments of philosophy for stimulation or clarification. It simply means that, in some quarters, poetry has lost its intellectual respectability and is thought to exist now in response to a certain inchoate human need. The starkness of the situation seems to be underscored by the fact that it is rare to encounter a contemporary poet who is also a "professional" or academic philosopher working and publishing in the field. However, almost all serious poets read philosophy and many are not only deeply read but trained in it as a discipline. The gulf dividing poetry and philosophy is—indeed always has been—more illusory than real. After all, goes the standard retort, even Plato in his dialogues is as much a poet as he is a philosopher.

Many modern and contemporary poets have been referred to as philosophical—it's usually a term of approbation—but we're likely to think that there is still a difference between the adjective and the noun, between a "philosophical poet" and a "philosopher-poet." In this regard, the work of the American poet John Koethe (a professor of philosophy at the University of Wisconsin at Milwaukee) and the Australian poet Kevin Hart (who holds a prestigious personal chair, or what in the U.S. might be called an endowed chair, at Monash University in Melbourne) is instructive: both may be viewed through the lens of either philosophy or poetry and so we may wonder whether looking at them through both lenses, as with binoculars, brings them and our concerns into fuller view. One of the first things we should note is what

is not the case. The poems are not versified philosophy; few direct references to philosophers or to issues peculiar to philosophical inquiry can be found in them. Koethe is not investigating Wittgenstein; Hart is not explaining Heidegger and Derrida. What we have instead is a mode of reflection that is underwritten by each poet's philosophical training, traces of which may be found in the poems but in a way that can only be got at indirectly through their prose—and not so much the prose of their philosophical writings as of their literary criticism.

In John Koethe's "Un Autre Monde," from his latest book, *The Constructor*, for example, the opening lines give us the characteristic feel of thought when it is pondering its own processes. The verse is sinuous and elusive but true to its ruminative ideal:

> The nervous style and faintly reassuring
> Tone of voice concealed inside the meanings
> Incompletely grasped, and constantly disappearing
> As the isolated moments burst against each other
> And subside—these are the aspects left behind
> Once the sense is over, and the confusion spent.
> They belong to the naive, perennial attempt to see
> And shift the focus of experience, fundamentally
> Revising what it means to feel, yet realizing
> Merely some minor, disappointing alternations
> In the fixed scheme of things.

Koethe's poems typically chronicle what it is *like* to be experiencing life the way he does, rather than presenting the events themselves, which remain offstage and largely unavailable to us as readers. There is an intimate distancing at work whereby we get to know the poet's experience without ever getting to know what happens to him. This makes Koethe a poet of the ambiguous antecedent; the reader often has to backtrack to discover just how one thing has imperceptibly metamorphosed into another, as if a fluid consciousness were carrying us along in its flow. Thus, in the passage above, the word "They" refers back to "the aspects," but the real concern of the poem is with the meaning of certain "isolated moments" which have given rise to a mode of feeling.



The voice of this poem—and of others (there is an unusually consistent voice throughout Koethe's poetry)—is pitched in an elegiac register, where a retrospective acuity bespeaks a Wordsworthian eye "That hath kept watch o'er man's mortality." But there is also a recognition of a desire to know "the focus of experience" and thereby to affect it so as to change the experience. As he puts it in the same poem,

> I bring to it
> Nothing but bare need, blind, continual obsession
> With the private way life passes into nothing
> And a mind as fragile as a heart.

The passion in these lines informs all the poems in *The Constructor* because it motivates the unfolding of experience within poetry. At this point in his career, Koethe looks for both self-knowledge and a compensatory understanding, even as he continues to acknowledge desire:

> It started out
> Indifferently but soon became my real way of feeling,
> Abstract tears, an anger retrospectively revealing
> Darker interpretations of the fears that filled me to
> Exploding, ill-defined desires, vague anxieties and
> Satisfactions that were once so much a part of me
> I miss them, and I want them back.

The poem ends with the transformation of those desires into successive stages of self-recognition: from resignation to regret to the inertness of dispassion:

> And yet in time
> They did come back as wishes, but the kind of wishes
> Long ago abandoned, left behind like markers on the way
> To resignation, and then as infinitely fine regrets,
> And then as aspects of some near, receding world
> Inert as yesterday, and no longer mine.

The "other world" of his title is a place where one's experience becomes other, as if "other" could be a verb when applied to oneself, like a kenosis or self-emptying. To call this poetry philosophical says

nothing about its content; it is a style of thought, a construction by a constructor.

There is in Kevin Hart a similar willingness to stage the process of thought as it passes into experience, but in a poem like "Rain" (from *Wicked Heat*) the disposition of the lines into stanzas indicates there is more containment at work in Hart than in Koethe.

> Late afternoon: rain brushes past the window
> And I feel less alone. I know that, soon,
> It will all stop; but now it breaks the day
> In a procession of days, each shining, whole,

At this point in the poem we feel we are on familiar ground: the poet detailing an event that is gathered up into an identity. But Hart, like Koethe, stands at a remove from experience that allows another dimension to enter: the next stanza completes the sentence and revises our understanding of what is occurring.

> And turns stray minutes into someone's life.
> Not mine: in forty years I've never thought
> How strange to hold a cup and watch the rain,
> The tea gone cold, my finger wandering
>
> Over the rim; and for the first time ever
> I feel thick drops of varnish, and take them
> As kindnesses, not meant for me but loved
> As though they were.

The coming into the moment of experience as experience alters the poet's relationship to himself and therefore alters him—or alternatively, as the poem goes on to suggest, it reveals another parallel identity which is both himself and not himself. "The Hassidim," he says, "will tell"

> About the life to come, how everything
> Will stay the same. That stain upon my chair,
> It must remain; my cup cannot be smooth.
> This world will be untouched, they nod and say,
>
> But just a little changed.



The little change that has just happened is a harbinger of another life almost identical to this one but nonetheless completely other. It is a trope for an experience we can only know by its effects.

> Late afternoon:
> I sit here, deep inside this April day,
> Half-thanking someone I will never meet,
> The rain outside now striking hard and fast.

The someone he will never meet is himself in that other dimension. He knows of that person by the marks left in the wake of certain moments, moments which do not last long. The rain, "striking hard and fast," returns him and us to the familiar world outside the self.

In both of these poems we find Hart and Koethe taking up the question of how we experience our lives. There is nothing unusual about this or even philosophical, but it is characteristic of their work and it points to significant concerns which are embedded in their philosophical and critical writings. It would be a mistake to look to their prose to explain their poetry, but I think we can learn a good deal about how they conceive their poetic projects by examining their respective writings on the topic of poetry and experience.

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The concept of experience is one of the points where the interests of poetry and philosophy often converge, and both Koethe and Hart have concerned themselves with it. Koethe's book on Wittgenstein represents several strands of his thinking, and there are other strands as well, found in his collection of essays, *Poetry at One Remove*. Many of these come together in his "Poetry and the Experience of Experience." He begins that essay by noting:

> The conception of experience employed by many of those who take it as dogma that poetry aims at its presentation—as well as by many who regard this as simply another version of "the naive vision of the individual creator"—is such an attenuated and impoverished one that it is hardly surprising that it tends to be either sentimentally embraced or knowingly dismissed.

Koethe seeks to recover subjective experience as a viable category for investigation, fending off unreflective romantic notions which reduce "experience to perception and feeling," as well as more sophisticated accounts which circumscribe it in other ways, as socially constructed or psychoanalytically reductive, neurophysically determined or pragmatically irrelevant. The motive behind this inquiry turns upon Koethe's understanding of its moral value. However one construes morals, it is clear that all conceptions "assume that human conduct impinges on people's experience and that it makes a difference to what life is like *for* them." This notion, which Koethe later refers to as "perspectivalism" in his study *The Continuity of Wittgenstein's Thought* (1996), raises the problem of representation as an issue, since our subjective experience can only be made manifest or "real" through representing it to ourselves and others. This is tricky ground, in part because critiques of representation are legion. But Koethe isn't mounting a systematic theory here. He states his position in a more experiential framework:

> Reading a poem (and here I use *reading* advisedly, since the dimension of poetry I am trying to characterize emerges more clearly in reading poems than in hearing them) is itself an experience; and to speak of poetry's "representation" of experience, in the broad sense I have in mind, is to speak of an experience of a certain sort that can be induced by reading a poem. The particular sort of experience I mean is a higher order one involving the thought or awareness—the experience, if you like—of the range of subjectivity as such, and of its precarious relation to the world in which it is situated, which it nevertheless manages to reflect.

In invoking this "higher order" experience Koethe is rethinking Kant's dynamical sublime as a structure or movement of oscillation whereby "the transitions from instant to instant between perspectives, from an awareness of the objects of thought to an awareness of thought itself, in an unbounded sequence of reflexive movements," constitute the power of poetic representation. This formulation is very close to Emerson's account in "Self-Reliance," where "Power ceases in the instant of repose; it resides in the moment of transition from a past to a new state, in the shooting of the gulf, in the darting to an aim." It is also, in Emerson's "Experience," the basis of a loss of power in the apprehension of the illusoriness of subjective experience "in the necessity of a succession of moods or objects."



It would appear that Koethe, like Stanley Cavell, is working philosophically (and poetically) in an Emersonian vein. But what Koethe is getting at here is a mental functioning that poetry can give rise to, namely the shifting back and forth between a subjective perspective and an "objective view of oneself as part of an impersonal natural world." Thus,

> Poetry has the resources (which it doesn't always draw on) to enact these oscillations: the imagistic and metaphoric potential to evoke perception and sensation; the discursive capacity of language to express states of propositional awareness and reflexive consciousness; the rhythmic ability to simulate the movement of thought across time; and a lyric density that can tolerate abrupt shifts in perspective and tone without losing coherence.

If this sounds like an apt description of John Ashbery's work, or of much of Wallace Stevens's, it is no accident, for those two poets are key—even virile—figures in Koethe's panoply of poets. But he also adduces Marianne Moore, Elizabeth Bishop, James Schuyler, Robert Pinsky, and Douglas Crase as enacting this oscillating movement in exemplary ways. Koethe is still left with a need, however, to account for poetry's affective dimension, and here he makes a curious turn, taking up T. S. Eliot's remark "that what is often held to be a capacity for abstract thought, in a poet, is a capacity for abstract feeling." For Koethe, an abstract feeling is akin to Kant's sublime, "which actually feels not so much like a metaphysical apprehension of the self's independence from the natural order, as like an affective transformation of the world," or better, as "*both* a metaphysical intuition and an affective transport." And it is this experience that draws us, or moves us, in the presence of powerful poetry. What Koethe has done, then, is to revivify romantic notions of poetic experience within the framework of a

more sophisticated understanding of the construction of selfhood. We can see this perspective in operation in "Un Autre Monde," where the abstraction of feeling paradoxically leads to potent emotion.

In Kevin Hart's reflections on experience, there is a similar concern with a poem's effects, but a different sense of the horizon of experience. Like Koethe, Hart took his doctoral degree in philosophy and has also achieved prominence as a poet. Unlike Koethe, though, Hart has moved professionally away from philosophy within the academy—or rather, he has taken up a position at the crossroads where philosophy, literature, and theology intersect. Apart from seven volumes of poems, Hart's first book, *The Trespass of the Sign,* is a study of "deconstruction, theology and philosophy," while his most recent is *Samuel Johnson and the Culture of Property*. His next book is to be a study of Maurice Blanchot. One might well puzzle over what it is that connects these disparate interests. I'd suggest that it is an interest in the limits of experience as encountered in language. But to make this clear, I want to look first at Hart's essay "The Experience of Poetry."

Hart takes as his starting point Husserl's phenomenological reduction or bracketing of common sense in order to "abstain from a thesis that has come to structure our assumptions about the world, namely that our lived experience is to be explained by the world." Such a reduction is really meant as "a preparation for seeing the world in all its radiance." Hart invokes Husserl not so much for his method or "science of philosophy" as for his "clarification of what is at stake in literature," by which he means especially the insight that the reduction allows for a fresh encounter with the world—what Shelley refers to when he says that "Poetry lifts the veil from the hidden beauty of the world, and makes familiar objects be as if they were not familiar." But Hart also registers several reservations about such an approach.

In the first place, he reminds us that "the lyric presents itself as pure speech: *that* is its fiction." Accordingly the poem does not transparently convey an essence, since the act of reading presupposes on the reader's part some familiarity with notions of genre and mode. Reading is not a purely subjective act. Second, "reading or writing poetry suspends naive attitudes to meaning and reference without abolishing either 'meaning' or 'reference.'" This is because poetry has the power "to lead consciousness to a state of fascination," whereby the poem "opens onto a time when nothing happens except the poem." Third, Hart rejects the idea that "the poet is privy to a special 'region of being,' as though it were a distinct metaphysical realm." Rather, for him, poetry "speaks of experience from a particular perspective and therefore charges it with a particular meaning." This leads him to the view that "poetry answers to what consciousness registers, not to what is actually lived through." The key point here is that "experience" denotes something that occurs both prior to reflection and upon reflection. This means that experience cannot be reduced merely to sense data. By the same token neither can the meaning of a poem be simply determined by a poet's "lived experience," since "poems are affairs of language." Fourth, Hart states that "poetry claims to present experience rather than to represent it, and thereby to skirt the immense inherited problem of [*mimesis*] as *imitatio*." But Hart does not believe this finesse of the old problem works. Whatever the poet may claim, for the reader a poem is always involved in representing some image or idea. Thus, "For the reader, and for the poet who reads while writing, presentation and representation are always imbricated." Nonetheless, poets continue to assert the primacy of presentation, even when "there is no question of recovering a luminous presence." Hart sees this as a recourse to a form of negative theology, since, to maintain this position, "people have looked to a disparity between language and consciousness or to a theory of the sublime." What joins the two approaches is the recognition of "a gap between different spheres of reality." Hart points to Kant's discussions of the gulf between sensibility and understanding in the *Critiques* but concludes that the real gap "does not fall between experience and something else but in experience itself." This is a crucial argument for Hart, for if he is right then "poetry would not be a transcendence in which the meaning of being is secretly disclosed. This orphic or romantic assumption would fall short. Instead, poetry would be a phased encounter of being and meaning, a mutuality without correlation."

Phenomenology, however, can never accomplish a complete or

full reduction; it fails "to lead us to a self-grounding consciousness; it is a perpetual rediscovery that we are in the world as carnal beings." Hart, deriving this point from Merleau-Ponty, goes on to say that phenomenology "does not attempt to render experience fully explicit to consciousness but to make us aware of a pre-reflective dimension of experience." Again, we can say there is a gap between experience and reflection or a gap within experience (since "experience" can name both the reflective and the pre-reflective dimensions) but in either case there is a disjunction within the self or subject whereby "the perceiving subject is unable to ground itself in a beginning or an end, unable to co-incide exactly with itself." As a result, "I am never able to say 'I perceive,' only that an other subject, an impersonal 'one,' perceives in me." Both the subject *and* the object of experience are divided.

For Hart, writing has an irreducible doubleness: "For that which offers itself to writing is both the experienced and that which is declared, after the fact, to precede and enable the experience." Moreover, "This anteriority cannot be rendered present," and because it represents "a non-cognitive dimension of experience" it prevents "a lapse into idealism." This still leaves us with "the deep romantic chasm of experience and understanding," but for Hart "Poetry does not reveal the meaning of being through the genius of a poet, but holds being and meaning together for a while in an intense and unequal relationship." We come to realize that "since consciousness is consequent on experience there will always be a delay in our thinking or speaking about experience. . . . The present can be thought only when it has passed." A similar point is made by way of Derrida's argument that writing, or the act of inscription, can never give onto an origin because what enables inscription is precisely what disables access to an origin. The delay in thinking means that the reduction is, in Derrida's words, "pure thought as that delay." As a result we never encounter a "being of poetry," only acts of inscription within a history of poetry. But, as Hart points out, while a poem "may suspend imitation as a relation to the world. . . it cannot abstain from imitating other poems." And here Hart's essay opens out to consider the fact that "poetry is an experience



of language and an encounter with other poems; it is an experience of the gap between the reflective and the pre-reflective, and it is a mourning for a rumored origin."

Hart goes on to consider these points by reference to the work of Harold Bloom and Maurice Blanchot, drawing interesting parallels and distinctions, and ending up reinforcing his assertion that a poem is not an object but an event, an event that does not disclose the "meaning of being." Hart is indebted here to Derrida's argument that "no presence can present itself to consciousness," but this does not mean (as many mistakenly believe) that Derrida is saying "there is no presence as such." "Presence," says Hart, "is a faith, not an illusion, and faith works itself out in an endless response to traces of the divine." Increasingly, those traces of the divine are being sought not in transcendence but in the transcendental—in conditions of possibility. In fact, Hart sees our own time as recoding the transcendental "with the explanatory functions, if not the religious values, of the transcedent." Whether it be Freud's primal scene or similar gestures towards the unpresentable in Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty, Levinas, Blanchot, or Derrida, "Where transcendent content was, there will have been transcendental form." Postmodernism itself can be characterized as a sense of the impossibility of authentic experience for the individual subject whereby a new horizontal sublime—it might seem—replaces the vertical sublime of romanticism because the sense of awe now extends to an "immanence without bounds—the infinite play of texts and contexts, the endlessness of detail—[which] can unsettle a mind that confronts it." The new sublime imparts a "sense of fragility," for we are made cognizant of just how independent of the human the transcendental is. This sublimity, says Hart, "has no content beyond its indeterminacy; and accordingly the signature images of postmodernity include a writing that erases its author, a self that cannot master its subjectivity, and a dying that does not end in death." And yet Hart does not quite go along with this version of historical development because there remains an intransigent perplexity: "The postmodern situation, rather, is one of being turned toward the unpresentable yet without knowing if it is an ineffable reality or a condition of possibility for

thinking such a thing." Put another way, we could say that "the transcendent and the transcendental are correctly positioned when arranged as an aporia." And it is "religious experience" which is most exemplary of such a quandary, since it is a "passing through an aporia, and what torments is that, for all its serried significance, we cannot locate such an experience in the present. The life of faith never converts to a life of assurance."

Hart arrives then at the junction of poetry and religion, as is so often the case in romanticism, and for good reason: for "both poetry and religion begin as quests for the meaning of being, and. . . a reflection on experience sends the quester on an interminable detour, a meditation on the divergence of being and meaning." Whatever might be the case for the believer, there "can be no question of the poet ever returning from the detour." The poem can never "become a window onto reality: the origin withdraws, and makes every poem an elegy at one level or another." At the same time, language, by virtue of its indeterminacy, "insists that the experience of poetry is always in part an experience of something inhuman. No poem is ever fully present to consciousness." This inhumanity of language is often figured in terms of the sacred, but Hart thinks it should be valued in itself, for in that way it really does resemble the sacred because "it beckons without appearing. It enables a poem to configure the known and the unknown, the possible and the impossible, and to become for us an exemplary experience, a worldly adventure."

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Given the positions taken by Hart and Koethe on experience, the question remains: what is the relevance of these positions to their poetry or to our encounter with it? It would be crude to apply their thought as a key to their poems and many might object that philosophy per se is an external irrelevance to the imaginative world of poetry. But I think it is a mistake to fold poetry too readily into literature. Literature is a complex historical construct which has at its root invention and the framing of contexts. Lyric poetry is to be more fully understood as an encounter with the world or with the real, however that



term is inflected. Accordingly, a poet's considered reflections on experience are going to tell us something about the orientation and disposition of the poems. I want to return then to the poems.

Koethe's *The Constructor* opens with an elaborate gesture towards Wallace Stevens, a poem entitled "Sunday Evening." Koethe alludes to Stevens's famous poem repeatedly, beginning with the first lines:

> Ideas as crystals and the logic of a violin:
> The intricate evasions warming up again
> For another raid on the inarticulate.

It is a wry poem that in its manner asserts a poetic continuum between Koethe and Stevens. If Stevens is often heard in Koethe's poems, so, as commentators have pointed out, is John Ashbery. Koethe himself has written a number of critical pieces on Ashbery. Koethe's lines seem, as do Ashbery's, to be generated by an often obscure principle of association. While the severe—at times comic—discontinuousness of Ashbery's sentences is not directly imitated by Koethe, there is nonetheless a sense as in Ashbery's that the poems could go on forever or that each poem is part of some great cyclic poem that is being placed before us. This accounts, in part, for the marked sameness of tone and voice from poem to poem (a friend compares it to a cello). Koethe, in the poem "The Waiting Game," refers to his plangent tones as "Variations on a single mode of being." The effect is to bring the poems' voice to the foreground, which results in a poetry of attenuation—in that word's electronic sense of reducing a signal without distortion. The quiet desperation may not be loud but it is clear. In his most characteristic poems, the referents are often elusive in the proliferating subordinate clauses, while the ineluctable pressure of the line flows on toward a conclusion that is always provisional. Having noted what Koethe says about experience, we are in a position to understand that the voice—and therefore the subject—of the poem is itself a construction.

Thus, in his essay "The Subject of Extremity," Koethe notes three main philosophical concepts of the self: substantival, relational, and

perspectival. The first is the notion of a unified ego (as in Descartes); the second, the doctrine that there is no persisting self (as in Hume); and the third, the concept that, while there is no unitary self, there is "the irreducibly perspectival character of experience itself" (derived mainly from Kant and Wittgenstein). If we applied this scheme to modern poets Koethe suggests we might end up with Lowell, O'Hara, and Ashbery exemplifying each concept respectively in their poems. For Koethe, Ashbery's work "is informed by a nonpsychological conception of the self or subject," which he elsewhere calls transcendental or metaphysical. This is a useful analysis of Ashbery's procedures but it also throws light on Koethe's own work. The force of his poems tends to deflect a sense of a specific person speaking autobiographically and instead gives us a strong image of a voice or a presence that inhabits the poems. When Koethe comes to talk of his own work, in "Poetry at One Remove," we can see what stands behind his characterization of poetry "as an enactment of pure subjectivity," a moral regard for what experience is like for others:

> Central to my conception of poetry, then, is the notion of a freely assumed poetic identity as a subject of self-reflective consciousness, an authorial self that attempts to enact and portray that subjectivity in one's work.

This entails a movement outward towards others, even though the self represented is in part a fiction. Koethe's most revelatory statement comes near the end of the essay when he explains that he is "incorporating the materials of personal life when the movement of the poem tends in that direction but enveloping them in a language that is dry, abstract, and matter-of-fact, yet with an insistent lyric undertone." The voice we encounter in Koethe's poems is an intentional one, based on a conception of the self which is transcendental:

> The self of the poem is thus rendered in a way that seems factually adequate but which presents it as a partially fictitious entity, slightly off-center and out of focus, leaving the reader with a sense of a difference between the person of the poem and the authorial site from which the poem emanates, a sense of which I hope the reader is not entirely conscious.



Koethe's concern with the experience of poetry as an oscillation between subjectivity and the world leads him to adopt a poetic voice that has maximum flexibility and minimum self-involvement. As he says of his writing, in the opening lines of "Between the Lines,"

> The thoughts came, and then eventually the
> Words that made those thoughts seem weightless.
> I stepped aside to let the voice flow, barely
> Conscious of myself or my relation to its sound.

Kevin Hart's sense that in poetry the origin is never coterminous with the beginning leads to a poetry that is finely tuned to absence and withdrawal. In the final section of "Wimmera Songs" (one of Hart's few poems of the Australian countryside), he writes:

> And yet the radiance
> Slips back into the other world, leaving a frail light
> Around young redgums by the river.
>
> Stretch out upon this yellow grass
> And listen to a blue wren
> And learn its lesson:
>
> Think like a cloud
>
> Go where clouds go.

For Hart the world is filled with a radiance, much as it was for A. R. Ammons, and poems can come out of a response to that radiance when there is an attunement or inner adjustment to it. This condition of receptivity I take to be what he means by "the Calm" in the poem of that name, where instances of it are attested:

> All over the world numbers fall off the clocks
> But still there is the Calm. There is a sound
> Of a clock's hands
> And then there is the Calm.

The Calm here seems to function as a ground of being without being a ground; it is of a piece with that "other world" toward which the radiance withdraws in "Rain":

> All night I feel my old loves rotting in my heart
> But mornings bring the Calm
>
> Or else the afternoon.
>
> Some days I will say yes, and then odd days
> It seems that things say yes to me.
> And stranger still, there are those times
> When I become a yes
>
> (And they are moments of the Calm).

There is little doubt that in a poem like "The Calm" one has entered a religious dimension in Hart's work. His study of negative theology, *The Trespass of the Sign*, shows him to be as sophisticated a theologian as he is a philosopher and poet. While the poetry is never in the service of either philosophy or theology, the concerns frequently overlap since, as he says, "both poetry and religion begin as quests for the meaning of being" (and that quest may be philosophical as well). In "Dark Angel" the trace of the sacred is sensed by the poet as a young boy even as it remains mysterious and unapprehended, calling him towards it:

> It was the sound of darkness, mother said,
> But still I heard you calling in the night.
> It was our old ponsettia, straight from hell,
> Its full-moon perfume wafting through the house . . .
>
> Or fine mosquitoes, rising from the river
> Just coiling in the dark there, down the road;
> It was that sound, of water and the trees,
> That somehow found a way into my sleep.

We might call this a radiant darkness, a groundswell of the Calm, as the boy walks near the river at night at the poem's end:



> And you were there as well, a touch away,
> Always about to pull the darkness back,
> And there were always branches rustling hard
> And tall reeds bending. Never any wind.

Hart has an uncanny ability to invite silence into his poetry, not necessarily thematically but as a sort of epiphenomenon of the verse. We come away with a sense that something unutterably quiet has just occurred, bringing us into a relation with the poem that we recognize as central to the experience of poetry. *Wicked Heat* has many other qualities as a book (by turns witty and knowing; passionate and erotic; poignant and elegiac), but the meditative lyrics are the ones that stand out as distinctive and different. We might want to contrast that aspect of Hart with Koethe, who appears far more skeptical and distant from the claims of faith. But when we look at the two poets in the light of their engagement with notions of experience, we might call to mind what Eliot said of Tennyson's *In Memoriam*, that it "is not religious because of the quality of its faith, but because of the quality of its doubt." I would turn the phrase and say that both Hart and Koethe come to us as religious poets, one because of the quality of his faith, the other for the quality of his doubt. In Hart's case the matter is easily settled. His poems engage faith in a way that makes clear that "religious experience" (a term he elsewhere deplores) requires "passing through an aporia," and that therefore "The life of faith never converts to a life of assurance." Faith, then, turns out to share a kinship with doubt.

In the case of Koethe, the poems provide us with indications of something that has withdrawn, which we might align with the sacred. Thus, in "Fleeting Forms of Life," he speaks of "these brief, extraordinary/States that settle over me," which can "convey a mood I/Realize can seem at times almost/Unreal, almost inhuman, almost/Willfully despondent." As Hart points out, "poetry is always in part an experience of something inhuman," and Koethe's insistence on the illusory element of experience, his rueful recognition of the nostalgia involved doesn't keep him from either wishing for such experience or positing

it. It might well be seen as a process of negation, whereby what is wished for (and the verb "to wish" is nearly the most common in Koethe's work) is denied in order to call it forth. Section three of "Mistral" opens with a dark religious meditation:

> Deep inner dark
> Where the violence gleams and the indifferent
> Face that only God sees looks up from the water
> With its relentless smile, while its features shatter
> And float away and its lineaments start to disintegrate
> Into shimmering light and dark passages, which one day
> Were going to come to seem like elements of happiness.

The negativity at work here seems to draw to itself a religious vocabulary that suggests an appreciation of the sacred as a potentially destructive encounter. The question of whether to attribute these concerns directly to Koethe the person is moot; what is important is that they have emerged within the poetry. At the end of this section of "Mistral" he writes,

> But he was an idea, and only an idea can dissolve this way,
> Like God, into the mystery of someone else. And only in
> The guise of a reflection can the soul's intense immediacy be
> apprehended,
> Freed from its prison of personality and the contingencies of
> character
> Into a condition beyond certainty, in which nothing changes
> And it remains alone, in an oblique kind of happiness,
> Bathed in the furious transparency that separates it from
> Another person's dense, unimaginable interior reality.

Koethe's concern with the experience of poetry is partly a concern with a quality of awareness that comes about through poetry. In "What the Stars Meant" he speaks of "those sacred absences/That make the spirit soar," but in "The Constructor" he bears witness to being "Unequal to the numinous desires" he wishes for. Throughout *The Constructor* one comes across these aporias and they begin to look like



part of the generative structure of the poetry. We might accordingly wish to figure Koethe's work as gnostic in its severe negativity and doubt and in its reflexive desire for transcendent experience. Hart's work, on the other hand, looks to the world as a place of immanence where the sacred is inextricably bound up in the everyday. As he puts it at the end of "Soul Says":

> *And all our day the—the impossible*
> *Is sizing up the possible, just trying it this way and that*
> *And then engaging, hard*
>
> One day, soul says,
>
> One day, I say,
>
> One day
> The eye and mind will listen, and abide.

In both cases, for Hart and Koethe, poetry turns out to be not a matter of religion or philosophy, or even of literature, but of experience—in its root sense of "a trial"—whereby the possible and the impossible are encountered. Poetry of such caliber requires no defense.