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Poem as Endangered Being: Lacostian Soundings in Hopkins's "Hurrahing" and Stevens's "Blackbird"

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Abstract: This essay situates the recent phenomenology of French Heideggerean-priest Jean-Yves Lacoste in *Être en Danger* (2011) in a wider discussion of the sacramentology of "things" to pursue the hypothesis that the being of a poem is endangered—crossed between the concrete and the abstract, the perceived and the imagined, the object and the thing. Whereas for Heidegger danger entails a technocratic closure of Dasein's being-toward-death, for Lacoste danger is proper to the being of life. Lacoste offers two "counter-existentials" to show, contra Heidegger, that life simply cannot be being-toward-death all the time: sabbatical experience and art experience. It is to these kinds of experience that poetry clearly belongs. To illustrate what Lacoste means by sabbatical experience, I offer a reading of G.M. Hopkins's "Hurrahing in Harvest" (1877); to illustrate what Lacoste means by art experience, I turn to Wallace Stevens's "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird" (1917). Finally, I conclude that rather than contrast the secular poem with the religious poem it is best to think of all poetry as generically sacramental, i.e., signs and things (*signum et res*), with religious poetry constituting an excessive pole that is addressed to the sacrament of God (*res tantum*). The Christian loves the poem because the poem does not make him or her choose between God and things—in light of the Incarnation, an insupportable choice.

Keywords: phenomenology; Jean-Yves-Lacoste; Martin Heidegger; sacraments; poetry; Wallace Stevens; Gerard Manley Hopkins

1. Introduction

Even if we balk at Erich Auerbach's conclusion that all Western poetic representation of the "sensory realistic" is genetically Christian, we are compelled to notice that Christianity and poetry go together in every way [1]. Christians of every time, place, and confession write poems (from the primitive hymnist of Philippians 2:5–11 to Puritan Anne Bradstreet and contemporary Tanzanian Adventist Chrisopher Mwashinga). They write religious poems of the first rank (Dante, John of the Cross, Czesław Miłosz). They write non-religious poems that they esteem higher than their religious poems (T. S. Eliot). They find devotion in poems that they consider irreligious (Paul of Tarsus is already quoting Aratus and Epimenides in Acts 17:28) as well as in poems that they consider differently religious (for example, Maronite Kahlil Gibran's use of Rumi). What is at the heart of this love affair between Christians and the poem?

This romance, obvious as it is, gets quickly submerged in endless generic difficulties as to what constitutes religious poetry vis-à-vis secular poetry. John Milbank would tell us that the attempt to configure religious poetry versus secular poetry presumes a rupture of the saeculum that is itself the product of a certain heterodox Christianity [2]. What poetics would have to be invented, however, to sustain Milbank's total rejection of modernity? Presumably, one can no longer simply re-write George Herbert. John Keats might have pointed the way. Together with other "Cockney classicists", Keats foresaw Milbank's insight about the peculiarly Christian genealogy of the secular [3]. Keats,

therefore, resisted the geopolitical power of “Christianity” by rediscovering the Hellenic paganism that he considered consonant with genuine Christianity, as in his “Ode to Psyche” [4]. Nevertheless, Milbank doubtless would say that Keats’s refurbished paganism remains caught in the secular spirit he opposed.

If Milbank tries to refurbish a peacable pre-modernity, Emmanuel Falque on the other side of La Manche expresses a hopeful resignation before the fact that the secular train has left the station. Noticing the contemporary “leaving behind” (*délaissement*) of belief rather than unbelief as such, Falque would say that we can no longer draw quick conclusions about a poet’s piety based on the use or abuse of dogmatic language as (perhaps) could be done in earlier, theologically literate periods of English verse [5]. Ever since Matthew Arnold’s modern lament that the “Sea of Faith” has been drained, exposing beach cobbles, “the naked shingles of the world”, the dominant trait of secular poetry today is non-fluency of faith rather than principled atheism [6]. So it is plausible on Falque’s account that a poet who understands himself or herself as a militant secularist these days leaves both theism and atheism untouched.

For confirmation of Falque’s surmise, we need only turn to modernist American poet Wallace Stevens. Stevens, we know, never darkened the stoop of a church and once wrote to a friend that the Archbishop of Canterbury should go “jump off the end of the dock” [7]. Stevens typically uses religious imagery in a vampirical way, to suck the blood from it, to repurpose its life for what he takes to be nonbelieving ends. In “Sunday Morning”, for example, the poet reinvents for himself a thoroughly bourgeois Sabbath, replete with “Coffee and oranges in a sunny chair” [8]; but are these enjoyments of the “Complacencies of the peignoir” really incompatible with a biblical view of Sabbath, or are they merely remonstrations against a rather shallow idea of the Sabbath, as we learn later in the poem, one that understands Sunday morning rather literally as an unearthly paradise? Stevens, in short, lacked the incendiary theological literacy of a Nietzsche [9].

Of all the attempts to grapple with the generic problem of religious poetry in English, Kevin Hart’s is the most astute and aesthetically promising [10]. Hart begins by noticing that in typing Christian poetry, literary critics often elide important distinctions in Christian poetry itself, namely, the difference between devotional poetry, where the poet responds to doctrinal themes (*locutio Dei ad homines*) and religious poetry, where the poet exposes himself or herself to the otherness of God (*coram deo*). Both devotional verse and religious verse affirm positive revelation and not just theoretical revealability. It is this latter genre, however, religious poetry *coram deo*, that interests Hart as both phenomenologist and as a poet who addresses the “Dark One/The strangest one of all/Who hides in words/And makes things stranger still” [11]. One could say that for Hart religious poetry is where God re-veils—hides but not disappears.

In contrast to Milbank, who conflates the phenomenological reduction with Ricœur’s hermeneutic of suspicion to conclude that focus on the noemata of religious experience constitutes yet another violent closure of modern consciousness, Hart argues that the partial reduction that the poet does is actually suited to the way God shows himself in the world, namely, in love [12]. The poet is distanced enough from the natural attitude to attend to “how” the love of God is felt but does not (cannot) go as far as the philosopher in neutralizing all doxic notes of world and psyche. Conceding that God’s transcendence falls under the knife of the phenomenological reduction as Husserl thought (God is never manifest as a supernatural fact or a thetic quality), Hart in a close read of Hopkins’s “God’s Grandeur” nevertheless contends that the religious poet discerns the strange coruscation of God within the immanence of the world. The poet in this instance does not experience God but experiences “counter-experience”, that is, a beginning-less and endless movement of divine mystery that the poet imagines, and once imagined, gets reimagined by himself.

Kevin Hart does a lot to disabuse critics who narrowly assume that religious poetry must contain second-order reflection on doctrine. In that case, religious poetry would be, as Samuel Johnson supposed, merely a moribund afterthought to prayer. Such critics are forever looking for coded dogma in poems, to prove, for example, that Shakespeare was a closet Roman Catholic. Several arguments

evinced the vanity of reducing Christian piety to doctrine, understood chiefly as propositional [13]. For one, we could extend Karl Rahner's transcendental experience, with only a little cheekiness, to argue that the Virgin Mary was an anonymous Christian, and that Jesus of Nazareth himself preferred anonymous Christians—the kind of people who work the works for the “least of these”, without any thematized knowledge of his person (Mt 25:40). For two, consider this syllogism: God is love (1 John 4:8): love is a verb that Jesus enacts: we “believe” in God, therefore, when we love the way Jesus did (not when we say, “Lord, Lord”). Lastly, following Henri de Lubac (and Peter Lombard before him, and Augustine before him) we could note that not even the Apostle's Creed is propositional in any normal syntactical sense. God is not the accusative of our belief; rather, we believe “into God”, credere in Deum, stretching our entire memory, understanding, and will into the divine mystery [14]. It was only in the 17th century that “belief” narrowed from this larger sense of existential trust to the doxastic register of cognitive certainty [15].

In this essay, notwithstanding, I want to suspend all these classification debates about religious poetry, competently adjudicated in any case by Kevin Hart, in the name of my original question: what is it about the poem as such that fascinates Christians? To that end, I offer a more deflated interrogation of the being of a poem itself—in phenomenological terms, its ontic quality. Before we decide if the adjective “religious” designates a certain kind of poem, we must first look at how a poem appears and see if its phenomenality coincides with Christian sacramentology. Only then can we evaluate the limits and reach of this ontological coincidence.

In what follows, I situate the recent phenomenology of French Heideggerean-priest Jean-Yves Lacoste in *Être en Danger* (2011) in a wider discussion of the sacramentology of “things” to pursue the hypothesis that the being of a poem is endangered—crossed between the concrete and the abstract, the perceived and the imagined, the object and the thing [16]. Whereas for Heidegger danger entails a technocratic closure of Dasein's being-toward-death, for Lacoste danger is proper to the being of life. Lacoste thus continues the trajectory he had already established in *Experience and the Absolute* (1994) to go beyond Heidegger on Heidegger's own term—insisting more and more at each step on the “Ereignis” of concern, inseparable from the “Istigkeit” of life itself. Lacoste now offers two “counter-existentials” to show, contra Heidegger, that life simply cannot be being-toward-death all the time: sabbatical experience and art experience. It is to these kinds of experience that poetry clearly belongs. To illustrate what Lacoste means by sabbatical experience, I offer a reading of G. M. Hopkins's “Hurrahing in Harvest” (1877); to illustrate what Lacoste means by art experience, I turn to Wallace Stevens's “Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird” (1917). Finally, I conclude that rather than contrast the secular poem with the religious poem, it is best to think of all poetry as generically sacramental, i.e., signs and things (signum et res), with religious poetry constituting an excessive pole addressed to the sacrament of God (res tantum). I do not mean to affirm such an experience of a sacrament of God. I assume that readers, believers or otherwise, care much more about Emily Dickinson's intriguing description of God as an “ablative estate” than they do about any credo of mine [17]. In what follows ad experimentum, I collapse categories of secular poetry and religious poetry into a unitive and sacramental logic of the phenomenality of the poem per se. I conclude that the Christian loves the poem because the poem does not make him or her choose between God and things—in light of the Incarnation, an insupportable choice.

2. The Nobility of a Thing

In *The Religious Situation* (1926), Paul Tillich grasped not only “the decisive importance [of phenomenology] for the philosophy of the twentieth century”, but also “the religious meaning of this change” ([18], p. 74)—and this well before Dominique Janicaud expressly thematized the “theological turn” in French phenomenology in 1991 [19]. The religious significance that Tillich decried “lies in the substitution of an attitude of surrender, of contemplation [*eine hingebende Haltung*] of the spiritual essence of things in their immediate givenness and meaning, for the dominating, bourgeois attitude that tears things to pieces and then seeks to reconstruct them” ([18], p. 75). Tillich's spiritual

excitement is suggestive especially for what Mary Catherine Hilkert has termed the “sacramental imagination” [20]. Hilkert draws on the catechetical distinction between small “s”, “sacramentals”, “sacred signs... [that] signify effects of a spiritual nature”, and the seven sacraments that properly sanctify, to draw the sound conclusion that anything can be sacred [21].

Phenomenology would then seem to reopen the “book of nature”, the revelatory power of things, which is always in danger of being closed by the fore-havings of modern sciences, whether the empiricist grip that handles only what it can manipulate and measure, or the residual Platonism that reduces reality to unfigurable magnitudes [22]. Phenomenology, if Tillich is right, would seem to elevate poetry to the status of Holy Writ as the special revelation of things. For no poet, of whatsoever creed, treats things lovelessly. This is not to say that all poets conform to an Imagist doctrine—where things bear the whole effect of the poem, without comment or ado—but only that even the most intellectual of poets, an Emily Dickinson say, makes poems with things.

Thus it is not uncommon to find post-religious poets in religious opposition to Plato’s ontological subordination of thing to form. Wallace Stevens defends reality in infallible tones: he seconds Coleridge’s judgment against “Plato’s dear, gorgeous nonsense” and argues that “the loss of the figure’s vitality” happens when “imagination adheres to what is unreal” ([23], p. 3). Robert Creeley, convinced that “There is nothing/but what thinking makes/it less tangible”, views his poetic métier as placing rocks as “simple markers” along mental paths, to concretize thinking [24]. In their shared opposition to physicalism and abstraction, both of which deal too lightly with what Stevens calls the “nobility of a thing” ([23], p. 9), phenomenologists and poets, religious and otherwise, form a profound alliance.

What is a “thing” anyway? No other word so apparently trivial as “thing” has caused so much speculative confusion, and this mismatch between common language and thinking is itself troubling. Plato’s thing is a copy of the real. Aristotle’s thing gets promoted to an individual substance that instantiates universals. Duns Scotus scotches the universal, so to speak, and thinks of a thing as an entirely unique “thisness” or “haecceitas” that is an instance only of itself. Hopkins thinks of a thing as an “inscape”, a “simple and beautiful oneness” [25], and understands himself to be following Scotus in this regard (though Wordsworth’s “spots of time” are probably Hopkins’s proximate inspiration).

Phenomenology liberates the “thing” from this pat problem of universals in favor of investigating how phenomena present themselves in their particularities. If we think of Martin Buber’s famous passage in *I and Thou* that begins, “I contemplate a tree”, we can quickly appreciate that the same thing, a tree, can be contemplated in different ways, e.g., as a number, as a species, as color, or perhaps even as an *eidos* that combines all the other presentations ([26], p. 14). Phenomenologists expand Buber’s insight that even a “thing” such as a tree, for all of its apparent concreteness, is just one way that the tree presents itself. The tree can also be an object, or it may never be for us at all.

Lacoste inherits Heidegger’s threefold taxonomy in *Das Ding* of “being”, “object”, and “thing” [27]. I will illustrate these concepts by reference to William Carlos Williams’s iconic red wheelbarrow and then press a few points of telling divergence from Heidegger.

- A “being” is neither visible (object) nor visible and feelable (thing) but perennially oscillates between visibility and invisibility, between the apparent and unapparent, between the aim and the periphery of intentional consciousness. The red wheelbarrow is caught in the oblivion of beings when it sits unnoticed in the poet’s backyard (perhaps Williams is working at the hospital, or eating a plum inside the house).
- An “object” is a being present only to perception. Perhaps Williams notices the wheelbarrow through the kitchen window in the perceptive field of his backyard, vaguely noting its color contrast with the chickens. As an object, the wheelbarrow is apparent but unfelt.
- A “thing”, finally, is present both to perception and to affection ([16], p. 100). The red wheelbarrow becomes a full-bodied thing, plausibly, when the poet realizes how much depends on it and decides to memorialize it in verse. Certainly, the red wheelbarrow is a thing in the poem itself.

Lacoste puts these definitions to a different use. By stressing the constant affective flux of beings from objects to things and back again, Lacoste, as we will see, avoids the Freiburg philosopher's moralizing edge.

Apropos the object, Lacoste concedes that we live in a world of such objects and experience others and ourselves as objects. We seldom glean the "differences from the obviousness of objects", the truly *indisponible* ([16], p. 321). That's as it should be. When we lie down on the surgeon's table we want her to objectify us and to think of us as a body. If she wants to come in after the operation and salute our flesh, too, tant mieux ([16], p. 47). Likewise, if art were not at least sometimes an object, it could not be restored. If a poem were not at least sometimes an object, it could not be scanned. Thus Lacoste parts company with high-minded phenomenologists who, in order to preach against the real though limited threat of objectification, must invent the object's stability—"the dream of being able to command every aspect of an entity in one experience" ([16], p. 326). Heidegger in his way stabilizes the object by rendering it existentially discontinuous with things. Objectification, for Heidegger, holds being hostage in a "permanent presence". For him, there is really only one true "thing", i.e., pres-absence, that stands forth from the mass of indifferent objects.

In addition to Lacoste's quarrel with Heidegger, it is worthwhile briefly to illuminate Lacoste's argumentum ex silentio with his friend Jean-Luc Marion on the pseudo-threat of objectification. Both Jean-Luc Marion and Jean-Yves Lacoste, we know, develop phenomenologies for what rests outside intentional consciousness as understood by Husserl. For Marion, revelation small and capital R, overwhelms our intentional structures ([28], pp. 242–43). For Lacoste, on the contrary, intentionality is never able to arrest beings long enough to collapse them into a totalizing perception. We could put the disagreement more sharply still. If Marion pays attention to big phenomena—saturated phenomena—then Lacoste pays attention to small phenomena. The Biblical archetype for the former would be the burning bush that Moses must "turn aside in order to see" (asurah-na ve'er'eh, Exodus 3:3); for the latter, the "still, small voice" that begs Elijah's hearing (qol dmamah daqah, 1 Kings 19:12). As we come to learn, however, this scalar problem is not just a polite difference in emphasis among these French amis. In *The Visible and the Revealed* (2008), Marion shores up his position in *Being Given* by providing his own error theory: if phenomena are always so big, then why are they missed? Marion answers that big phenomena are missed precisely because they are too available (banal, in the French sense of the term) [29]. In summary, if Heidegger apprehends everything under the threat of objectification, Marion ultimately banalizes saturation to such a degree that nothing is ever really an object. Lacoste, therefore, would likely regard both Heidegger's and Marion's hyperbolic treatment of the object as inevitable consequences of their total destruction of metaphysics. Lacoste advocates instead a "fair sample"—a partial ontology that recognizes the presence of objects as a modest moment in the career of the gift.

Lacoste's effort to "rescue things", épargner les choses, therefore, depends first on de-stabilizing objects: "what now appears to us as an object, may well, within a few instants, not appear as such... within the horizon of the world appearance without remainder is an idle dream" ([16], p. 337). Objects melt and flow because they are eventualized in a life that the self cannot get underneath: "we must concede that the 'I' comes to experience only as it eludes our grasp" ([16], p. 332). In quiet protest of Jean-Luc Marion, who distinguishes object from event, and in loud protest of Claude Romano, who thinks of an event "as the irruption of absolute newness" ([30], p. 171), Lacoste argues that objects assemble and disassemble in "an event of the self that is always and already unavailable for itself" ([16], p. 253). The self is an unfixable event, in turn, because of the primordial rhythm of affectivity. Lacoste calls affectivity "first phenomenology" ([16], p. 225). First phenomenology is at once plural (we feel beings different ways) and partial (we feel beings different ways).

Lacoste's overthrow of Heidegger's hierarchy of the ontological over the ontic—we exist as beings in fluctuating touch with other beings—permits him to register dissent with the sermonic take-away of much of *Sein und Zeit*. On the one hand, Lacoste is too assiduous a reader of Heidegger to make the common readerly mistake of hearing words such as "authenticity" as ethical in the

first place. In *Présence et Parousie* (2006), in fact, Lacoste goes out of his way to defend Heidegger from Lévinasian worries about “the ethical under-determination of facticity” in *Sein und Zeit* ([31], p. 231)]. Lacoste reminds us that being-in-the-world necessarily suffers “a certain ignorance or unclarity (inévidence) about good and evil” ([31], p. 233). On the other hand, Lacoste maintains that precisely in its primordial pre-morality Heidegger’s language of in/authenticity becomes mythical. He charges Heidegger with replacing the myth of Eden with the myth of an “existential” that underlies the “existentiell”—a concealment that unconcealment conceals ([16], p. 141). Heidegger has not so much avoided the essentialism of the object-model, on Lacoste’s account, as he has reversed it: it is the objective world of plenary appearance that is untrue. Lacoste counters that inauthenticity is not lapsarian: “it is *proper* to us to be and know ourselves only in part—and it will be partial, too, if we imagine that we can know ourselves whole!” ([16], p. 341).

At last, we are in a position to say why being is in danger, “être en danger”. For Heidegger, danger is the way technology “enframes” all nature for use, e.g., seeing the rain forest as a “standing reserve”, which is a danger even for ecologists who want to save it. Heidegger’s final nightmare is that Dasein will eventually enframe itself [32]. If Lacoste is right that life is more primordial than Dasein, then clearly Dasein can never irrevocably enframe itself. Heidegger’s danger, then, is not that dangerous [33]. Being is in danger, Lacoste parries, because of life itself. In comparison to the bewildering syntax that befogs the contemporary continental discussion of death—Derrida’s, “I am dead”, Heidegger’s “possibility of the absolute impossibility”, and Blanchot’s, “impossible possibility”—Lacoste’s frank notice that that it is life (not death) that endangers being is a most refreshing paradox. Precisely because life is so obvious, “to speak of life”, Lacoste notes, “is to speak of very little” ([16], p. 331). The fact that life proceeds even in a mute way in dreamless sleep, where there is no “consciousness of” or intentionality of any sort, is evidence that life is more primordial than Dasein. Life is that which not even death can deconstitute, except in theoretical abstraction.

Lacoste thus moves beyond his own Kierkegaardian “unhappy consciousness” that characterized *Experience and Absolute* (1994), but without a total “Destruction”. The saint of *Experience and Absolute*, we recall, could only break Dasein’s horizon kairologically, by stepping outside of normalizing “lieux”. Now Lacoste gives us a more supple, if less ultimate, figure for the peace we can have in time—not saintly “quies” or “hesychia”, to be sure—but a subtle “profanitas”, a frangible existence in-between the marketplace of the world and the temple of the earth. If before Lacoste focused on the parousial moment in light of non-experience, he now considers non-experiences that are not *merely* absences, namely, the counter-existentials of rest and art in the ebb and flow of everyday life. To give everyday life its small due itself is already a huge gesture past Heidegger, who gradually loses all interest in the ontic experience of Dasein in favor of the ontological [34], past Lévinas, for whom even reading a newspaper is ethically fraught, and past Marion, for whom divine eros incessantly unseats l’adonné. Lacoste prefers to heed Derrida’s point about Husserl’s “imperative of triviality” (“C’est dans sa banalité, toutefois, que la vie se manifest le plus exactement”) ([30], p.158, n.1), and takes to heart the Seneca epigram that Edgar Allen Poe uses at the start of *Purloined Letter*: “nil sapientiae odiosus acumine nimio” (nothing is more hateful to wisdom than excessive cleverness) [35]. The first thing we notice about everyday life is its rhythm between stress and rest.

3. Poetics of Rest and Art: “Hurrahing” & “Blackbird”

The word “danger” comes from the Latin *dominiarius* and in English first referred to the lord’s sphere of influence, which only 200 years later (c. 1489) was reduced to the power to harm [36]. To say that a poem is endangered in this pristine sense that I wager Lacoste has in mind is not to say that a poem or its reader is a black rhino under threat of extinction. Let us consider the phenomenality of the poem. Compare poetry to philosophy, which for most of its practitioners is speculative and translatable. Philosophy can even be re-written by a superior prose stylist. Not so the poem, which manifests itself entirely in its *how*. In poems, “structure becomes an element of belief, syntax/ And grammar a catechist” (Charles Wright) [37]. A poem structures language to make us feel what cannot be put dialectically,

“a spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings” (Wordsworth) ([38], p. 171). Less commented upon is Wordsworth’s insistence that these poetic feelings are “modified and directed by our thoughts” ([38], p. 172). The poem appears, then, as a finely wrought fusion of thought and feeling.

A poem is in danger, therefore, because its special sphere of influence, namely, a cognitively steeped feeling, is threatened, not in the first place by technology or by modern philosophy or by curricula in schools or even by humans, but by life itself. If life enforces the objectification of being a thousand times a minute, however, life also safeguards being from permanent objectification. “Thick” things inevitably irrupt into life, especially in experiences of rest and art. In Lacoste’s analysis, art experience is a subset of sabbatical experience, since creating art and enjoying art both depend on *σχολή*. So let us begin with rest, which both occasions and completes the act of creation.

To promote the kind of affectivity we associate with rest—contentment, friendship, recreation, enjoyment—Lacoste must dispute, as ever, Heidegger’s prioritization of the ontological over the ontic in *Sein und Zeit*. The myth of the “existential” underneath the “existentiell” led Heidegger to esteem only those moods that move being toward death. Darker moods such as profound boredom (Langeweile) and annihilating fear (Angst) Heidegger promotes as existentially disclosive, while lighter moods he demotes to the ontics of everyday life (abandoned in the course of the *Daseinanalytik*). In fact, Heidegger’s Teutonic preference for gloomy emotions becomes monochromatic. Even Van Gogh’s luscious and billowing blue irises for Heidegger conceal the strife of world and earth. Even Paul of Tarsus’s joy is swallowed up in the “factual life experience” of tribulation (θλιψις) [39]. Lacoste counters that *all* feelings are ontic. Even Heidegger’s arc existentials of homelessness and homeness are everyday feelings: “homelessness in the world just now will feel itself at home there shortly, and perhaps will feel an intimacy with the sacred or the divinities” ([16], p. 328). We ourselves are subject to the multiform vagaries of beings: “Not only is there nothing (more or less) which has only one aspect, but we do not either” ([16], p. 328). We must be agnostic, therefore, about our capacity for experience: “we are equipped, perhaps, for experiences no one has ever had, of which we can say nothing” ([16], p. 329). Even if we should find ourselves lacking ears to hear today, the joy of things may find some other avenue to surprise the soul tomorrow.

Consider Gerard Manley Hopkins’s “Hurrahing in Harvest”, an astonishing sonnet about sabbatical experience [40]. Hopkins tells us in a note dated 16 July 1878 that “The Hurrahing sonnet was the outcome of half an hour of extreme enthusiasm as I walked home alone one day from fishing in the Elwy” [41], that is, back to St. Beuno’s in the Vale of Clwyd. Presumably, the poet has been on an out-and-back fishing trip but only hurrahs on the return route, in the pause between activities. Rather, I should say the poets *begins* to hurrah, for he declines hurrah in the present progressive as the title of the experience, which suggests that the hurrahing is co-extensive with the poem itself. This half-hour hiatus is enough to disclose to the poet a superlative array of “things” (three loud exclamation marks in this poem, one of them used brazenly as a mark of caesura in line 3). He delights, for example, in summer hay bales (“stooks rise / Around”, where the girth of these stooks literally exceeds the limit of the line) and in clouds as puffy as sacks of silk and as wavy as mounds of milled grain (“meal-drift moulded ever”, where “ever” is an intensive adverb that adds a superfluous trochee to the sprung rhythm, as if to sound-out the spree). The poet now moves in the sestet from the actual harvest to a christo-metaphorical one as the scene suggests to him so many body parts of the Savior: “And the azurous hung hills are his world-wielding shoulder / Majestic . . .” The implicit contrast of Christ to Atlas suggests that Christ is not an explanation of natural mechanics but *is* in fact nature, the hills *are* his shoulder. For Hopkins, it would seem that panentheism is the orthodox understanding of Christian creation.

The poet’s point is at once to celebrate Christ’s ubiquity in natural “things” but also gently to chide himself for being absent to them: “These things, these things were here and but the beholder / Wánting.” The unum necessarium is not more manifestation or more saturation but more showing: what is missing is a “beholder”. Indeed, “beholder” is not the worst name for the “who” who Lacoste thinks comes after the subject, for while the prefix “be” suggests that it is the phenomena that hold us

(passive dimension of affect), the suffix “er” turns the being-held into an agent-noun (active dimension of affect). The Lacostian subject, then, is the one who lets himself or herself be held. Moreover, the incantatory repetition of “these things/these things” that “*were* here” shows that the poet must willfully remember as the same “here” that once was inevitably becomes elsewhere. The appeal of this tender wistfulness is not to try to repeat the past (Gatsby’s blunder), still less to thunder on about the degree to which everyday perception misses what is given (Marion’s big phenomenon), but to remind him and us that this present, too, is full.

Hopkins prefers to show us *within the poem* the *how* of sabbatical reduction as prompted by joy: “I wálk, I líft up, Í líft úp heart, éyes...” The insistent first person underscores both the job of the will and its limits. First, the poet walks. If as Lacoste says in *Experience and Absolute*, being there can always change its “there” for ontological effect, then such peripatetic re-locating is never trivial for our horizons. Next, one straightens up the posture, “I lift up”. Before the poet Thales-like lifts the eyes from down to up in ancient echo of homo erectus, however, he must first “raise heart”. This dispositive gesture of sursum corda is as modest as it is necessary for beholding. Finally come “eyes”. The vision opened by Sabbath is not a matter of seeing something new, lest that, too, fall into the clichés that program seeing (to take the same picture of Machu Picchu that everybody takes, for example) but of seeing with new eyes. New eyes are graced eyes.

Moving now from rest to the experience of the work of art, we must extend what Lacoste says about painting to poetics, since Lacoste (like Husserl) has a rather jaundiced account of poetry as insufficiently philosophical. The poet “speaks the world better than the philosopher”, Lacoste concedes, but does not bear “the question of the world” [42]. Recall that Heidegger in his *Origin of the Artwork* (1950) reverses the valences of truth ($\alpha\lambda\acute{\eta}\theta\epsilon\iota\alpha$) and untruth [43]. Heidegger and Marion a fortiori claim that the artwork presents itself by breaking the horizon of the world and disclosing the concealment ($\lambda\acute{\eta}\theta\eta$) of earth and withdrawal of Being. The world, then, is in an existential sense untrue ($\alpha\text{-}\lambda\acute{\eta}\theta\epsilon\iota\alpha$) because it is populated by fully disclosed entities “vorhanden” [44]. In short, whenever art appears, Dasein disappears. Indeed, Heidegger typically describes a painting as if it is hanging in an empty museum with nobody there to see it (the contrary case of trying to catch sight of the *Mona Lisa* above a palisade of selfie sticks in the *Salle des États*). From within this “economy of presence”, Lacoste contends, Heidegger describes the artworks “as they come to be seen by us, but not as we let them come to presence for us” ([16], p. 319).

Focusing on this auxiliary expressive “let” (laisser), Lacoste protests that art is affective *both* passively (the work of art itself) *and* actively (openness of subject to the artwork). This double-affect of art means that, precisely in allowing ourselves to be moved, i.e., in showing up to the artwork, we have no say in the direction of the movement itself. Van Gogh’s pair of shoes hover en amont de above world and earth: they could inspire us to communion with the terroir, one moment, and repel us with their boggy smell, the next. The shoes en peinture are too unstable to broadcast the same loop forever like Voyager as it nears the Great Void. To put it more clearly, *we* destabilize the peinture since we are passive both to the artwork itself and to the effects of our active affect. Lacoste concludes that affectivity is *more* original than the work of art, “more rich than the constitutions in which it crystallizes” [45].

Though like most phenomenologists Lacoste betrays a visual and aural bias in his aesthetic exempla (to the constant lament of Merleau-Ponty), we can with a little imagination extend what Lacoste has said about the artwork to the poem. Whereas for Keats the point of a poem is to un-endanger being by making the evanescent eternal à la the Grecian urn, for Lacoste (we imagine) the poem should evince the danger of beings by enshrining their *partial* metaphysics. The Lacostian poem *par excellence* would show us the same entity partially disclosed in different affective events. We can think of no more textbook poem in this regard than Wallace Stevens’s “Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird” [46]. The poem is too long to reprint here [47].

The first point is to note that the title itself is misleading: it sets up the expectation that the poet will multiply perspectives or profiles of the same blackbird. In fact, the Roman numeralized sections reset modes so totally that one cannot track the blackbird as a single entity. Section IX dramatizes the

irrelevance of the blackbird as selfsame individuum by showing it fly out of the range of the gunman's telescope. The title, moreover, leads us to expect the poet to style himself or herself as Buber's classical and clinical contemplative—"the tree is... no aspect of mood" ([26], p. 14)—who simply proliferates and combines theoretical lines of sight. Not how many ways one can see the same blackbird, but how many kinds of blackbird are constituted by the poet, is the poet's preoccupation. Is a blackbird always the same "thing"?

Indeed, Stevens's phenomenology is much closer to Heidegger's than it is to Husserl's. The poet's thirteen "Stimmungen" dictate the blackbird that he sees (not that these moods are crudely brought to the fore—as that would violate what Heidegger calls our primordial projection (Entwurf) into the world disclosed by the mood itself). In Section I, the poet in an ominous Caspar David Friedrich winter mood likes to contrast the megalithic immobility of white mountains with the twitching black eye of a blackbird. The fact that the bird's eye is anatomically immobile alerts us to Stevens's non-naturalist bent. This contrast between mountain and bird eye is oddly unnerving; perhaps because life here belongs to the eye of the dinosaurs' evolutionary heirs, not to the human "I". In Section III, the poet, dejected by the intimation of cosmic "pantomime", sees the blackbird as a plaything in the wind. One could go on. In Section VI, the poet addresses the role of mood explicitly: "The mood/Traced in the shadow/An indecipherable cause." Mood is said to be the trace of the "shadow of the blackbird", a fleeting vestige of something totally obscure, immaterial black (shadow) underneath black (bird). Moods are prompted by an "undecipherable cause": moods are known only by their effects. The mood, to reverse these terms, is an unknowable cause.

The numbers in the poem are purposefully obfuscating—the 20 mountains, the 3 minds, the 13 ways—as if to seduce the Platonizing numerologist into an affair with the high "Evidenz" of numbers [48]. Instead, the poet wants us to focus on the affectively-keyed and therefore partial witness of the concrete blackbird, if not the same blackbird. It would be at cross-purposes with the poem, then, to try to codify the 13 grips into a lexicon of seeing. That said, Lacoste's distinctions between being, object, and thing are as good experimental lenses as any for querying how the blackbird shows up. As one would expect in Lacostian everyday life, the blackbird is largely pictured as an object present to perception. The blackbird is painted at remove (Section I); used as an example of infinite jest (Section III); parodied in a piece of anti-ontological conjugation, "A man and a woman and a blackbird/ Are one" (Section IV); objectified in a Biblical curse (Section VII); itemized in an epistemology (Section VIII); hunted (Section IX); distorted (Section XII); and finally abandoned, "The blackbird sat/In the cedar-limbs" (Section XIII). In none of these sections does the poet focus on his affective passivity before the blackbird, though in Section X he allows himself to feel some *delectatio morosa* in imagining *others*, "the bawds of euphony", "those academic wenches of high art", react to the ugly vitality of blackbirds [49].

Nevertheless, the blackbird *does* show up as both a Lacostian being and a thing in Section XI, which is, for all of the perspectival play in Section XII, by far the most interesting section phenomenologically:

XI
He rode over Connecticut
In a glass coach.
Once, a fear pierced him,
In that he mistook
The shadow of his equipage
For blackbirds.

Some "he", while traveling through Connecticut in the dome car of a train, mistakes the shadow cast by his coach for blackbirds. The enjambed line "In a glass coach" spills over "over Connecticut" to mimic the forward motion of the train. Meanwhile, the uneven metrical trip of this inverted and Latinate "over Connecticut/In a glass coach" conjures up the clickety-clack of a 19th century

train (and the ambiance of that epoch's epistemological problems) rather than the TGV. While it is impossible to poeticize pre-perceptual beings since naming a being makes it appear, the poet is able to thematize a being here by the pre-perceptual error that it provokes at the margins of his intentional field, after the fact. On the one hand, the Biblical fear that "pierces his heart" because of a peripheral mistake (cf. Luke 2:35, a "sword will pierce your own soul, too") seems bathetic. Beginning the line, "once", moreover, seems to parody the incident as a fairy tale in the pseudo-distant past.

On the other hand, the fear is no less real because a perceptual gaffe. The poet must have been haunted by this Hitchcockian assault of birds for the misassociation to happen in the first place. The fear derails the momentum of the train with its jarring caesura after "once"—an end-stopped line. We could even say that the fear shatters the glass dome car, which serves as a figure of the impartial observer's ego in its bubble, slicing up the Kantian phenomenal object with its a priori intuitions of space and time—"Connect-I-cut"—a metaphysical conquest paralleled by the technological mastery of the landscape by the train. A possible if not plausible candidate, then, for this "he" is Freud's patient Daniel Schreber, who suffered paranoia dementia upon the realization that he was enclosed in his own subjectivity as if an object [50]. From a being at the margins to a thing that provokes an ego collapse, and skipping objectification altogether, the blackbird in Section XI exhibits the desultory flight of beings.

At last, then, I am able to conclude that the poem is an endangered being par excellence. All beings are in danger, but the poem particularly so. In contrast to math truths that cannot appear other than as they are, the poem never appears twice as the same poem. Its perceptual-affective manifestation is constantly appearing and disappearing, increasing and decreasing.

To begin with, the poem must emerge from the oblivion of being as a being, and for this task it needs its medium and its moment. Derrida used to demand that his dinner guests recite some René Char, but such command performances for verse are increasingly rare, as poetry is endangered in the common sense of the word. This is not to say that all poems are endangered in the same way. It is very difficult to imagine, for example, that Shakespeare's sonnets will suffer extinction "so long as men breathe or eyes can see", and it is very easy to understand why Longfellow, once the most popular poet of his age, is now considered "minor and derivative in every way" [51]. It is only to say that every poem is endangered by the fickle reader, Baudelaire's hypocrite lecteur.

Secondly, a poem is first read and figured as an object, and a difficult-to-handle one at that. Consider again Williams's "The Red Wheelbarrow" [52]. Perhaps we had the good fortune to read it in the handsome typeset of Darantière's original *Spring and All* (1923), where the poem is simply titled "XXII" (a wise title, too, since the red wheelbarrow is not the subject of the single sentence that makes up the poem). Or perhaps we pause to appreciate the calligraphic wheelbarrow shape of the stanzas, as the conspicuous enjambment invites the eye to do. Or perhaps we scan it to confirm our suspicion that it is vers libre—the errant beat of which seems to echo the steady drops of rain. All such tasks that manifest the "how" of a poem need an objectifying grip. To handle the poem-thing requires the discipline of handling the poem-object. Nevertheless, even if the poem attains thinghood, that, too, will be evanescent, subject to the mercury of moods. One day, everything will, indeed, seem to depend on that red wheelbarrow: the lever, the wheel, all arts and science flow from this ancient Chinese conquest of gravity. Another day, nothing will depend upon it: the poet is just painting a gratuitous still life with an entirely jokey claim to meaning. Still other days, we may have the largesse to feel the "everything and nothing" at the same time. The weird over-and-under statement of "so much depends/upon", seems to invite our ambivalence. The poem bears all manner of thing.

What happens *after* the poem has become a thing? Who knows. Perhaps the poem will penetrate our deep heart's core (Yeats) and go on hurrahing there forever (Hopkins). Perhaps it will be re-shelved in the dust. What is certain is that the poem in each of these instants is never the same poem. To this degree, we can conclude not just that the poem is an endangered phenomenon, but that the poem is an *endangering* phenomenon, for whoever takes the time to encounter it must suffer its plural and partial ontology.

4. Conclusion: Poet as Witness of the Flame

Lacoste, it should be confessed at the last, offers no theory of the sacred in *Être en Danger*. In contending that art displays “the play of world and earth *before* they take on their definite transcendental shape” ([30], p. 139), Lacoste locates the value of art neither in horizontal transcendence (from beings to Being) nor in vertical transcendence (sacrament) but in non-transcendence. Nevertheless, in insisting that there is a pre-covenantal life that is neither created by theism nor destroyed by atheism, Lacoste is scoring a deeply theological point, it seems to me. Against the Christo-monomaniacs who walk in train of Karl Barth, Lacoste seems to insist that the human cosmos has its own integrity, solidity, and prevenience. Christ vouchsafes not life but superabundant life.

More to the point of the topic of this special issue of *Religions*, to think of the poem as a sacramental is to set up a logic that can be traversed in a vertical direction to the sacraments proper. Indeed, Lacoste has recently followed up *Être en Danger* with *L’Intuition Sacramentelle et Autres Essais* (2015). In much the same way that careful phenomenological attention to the saturated phenomenon permitted Jean-Luc Marion to raise the possibility of Revelation, without confirming its positivity (the saturation of saturation), thinking of the poem as a sacramental (signum et res) cannot help but raise the possibility of an experience of *res tantum* (only the thing itself, God, as pure feeling) ([28], p. 235). Certainly, no poem will ever be the bread of angels, the *res tantum*. Nevertheless, the experience (o non-experience, as it were) of *res tantum* not only makes possible the religious poem that addresses the Dark One in the veils of words, precisely as Kevin Hart understands it, but it also entails that all poetry can be viewed, should one choose, as a propaedeutic to receiving Revelation, precisely as Karl Rahner thought [53]. The only heathen poem is the poem that is not written or read.

Poets are not the “hierophants of an unapprehended inspiration”; they are not appointed by the unmoved mover to confect the really real (Shelley) [54]. Life in no wise depends on them. The poet is not a failed mystic (Johnson) or a conspirator in a secular culture of death (Milbank). The poet may introduce the prophet of desertification, as John the Evangelist does John the Baptist, but the poet himself or herself inevitably speaks from the fragile and unassailable point of view of life, the *lux in tenebris lucet*. The poet merely witnesses the flame. Alive but in danger, endangered because alive, the Christian loves the poem because it echoes the cruciform mode of his or her own hope.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

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3. John Savarese. “Psyche’s ‘Whisp’ring Fan’ and Keat’s Genealogy of the Secular.” *Studies in Romanticism* 50 (2011): 389–411.
4. About “Ode to Psyche”, Keats writes to George and Georgina that he is “more orthodox tha[n] to let a he[a]then goddess be so neglected.” *Letters of John Keats 1814–1821*. Edited by Hyder Edward Rollins. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1958, vol. 2, p. 106.
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8. Wallace Stevens. “Sunday Morning.” In *The Collected Poems of Wallace Stevens*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1954. On the subject of Stevens’s belief, he is said to have converted to Roman Catholicism on his deathbed. Father Hanley claimed in a letter dated 1977 to have done the baptism at St. Francis hospital in 1955, but the baptism was never recorded in the Hartford Archdiocese as per canon law.

9. On the question of Stevens the eventual catechumen, Paul Mariani finds the conversion plausible in light of the elderly Stevens's softening toward Christianity as evidenced in late poems such as "St. Armourer's Church from the Outside", while Helen Vendler thinks the Hanley letter is a farce, complete with line breaks aping Stevens's versification. Critics should be able to agree, however, that Stevens was not religious in the majority of his productive years. See Paul Mariani. "Did Wallace Stevens Convert?" *The New York Review of Books*, 18 August 2016. Available online: www.nybooks.com/articles/2016/08/18/did-wallace-stevens-convert/ (accessed on 30 September 2016).
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11. Kevin Hart. "Colloquies." In *Morning Knowledge*. Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2011, p. 20.
12. Milbank, in other words, assumes that phenomenology is only equipped to describe experience as inert lived experience (*Erlebnis, vécu*) ([2], p. 268).
13. For an account of how cognitive certainty became the key doxastic note of faith in the modern age see Jean-Yves Lacoste. "De la certitude au dénuement: Descartes et Jean de la Croix." *Nouvelle Revue Théologique* 113 (1991): 516–34. Lacoste places some of the blame on Martin Luther, whose certitudo salutis wildly extended the limited certainty that the school men had reserved for logical principles.
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20. Mary Catherine Hilkert. *Naming Grace: Preaching and the Sacramental Imagination*. New York: Bloomsbury Academic Publishing, 1997. See especially p. 55ff, where Hilkert reconciles the Protestant dialectical imagination with the Catholic sacramental imagination.
21. Catholic Church. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*. New York: Random House, 1995, §1667.
22. Husserl famously criticized the positive sciences for failing to think about their pre-predicative grip on evidence. For Husserl, the "object" is not just a spatio-temporal body, which we only perceive partially, one profile at a time, but a phenomenological structure organically fused with the "subject." Lacoste, for his part, thinks that modern physics is only one cause of danger *inter alia*, but more about that later.
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30. Quoted in Joeri Schrijvers. *An Introduction to Jean-Yves Lacoste*. Burlington: Ashgate, 2012.
31. Jean-Yves Lacoste. *Présence et Parousie*. Paris: Ad Solem, 2006.
32. This nightmare may yet have its day as we consider keeping the brain-dead alive to harvest their spare parts.

33. Thus the difference between Heideggerean danger and Lacostian danger is perhaps not at total loggerheads. On the one hand, Heidegger does sometimes speak as a technophobe, afraid of getting zapped by the radio, for example. On the other hand, if we consider Heidegger's later reliance on the oracular line from Hölderlin's anthem "Patmos"—"But where danger is/grows the saving power also"—we can see that technology amplifies both the danger and the saving power of humans. We have, then, a paradox that both Lacoste and the mature Heidegger would embrace: life endangers life. For a balanced treatment of Heidegger's properly ambivalent view of technology see Thomas Carlson. *The Indiscrete Image: Infinitude and the Creation of the Human*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008, pp. 36–73. Nevertheless, allowing as I do some rapprochement on the problem of danger, Lacoste forcefully resists the realized (cramped) eschatology of Heidegger's *Geviert*.
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41. See Note #14 in "Gerard Manley Hopkins (1844–1889). Poems. 1918." Available online: <http://www.bartleby.com/122/1000.html#14> (accessed 2 December 2016).
42. See Jean-Yves Lacoste. *From Theology to Theological Thinking*. Translated by Chris Hackett. Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2014, p. 32.
43. Martin Heidegger. "Anaximander Fragment." In *Early Greek Thinking*. Translated by David Krell, and Frank Capuzzi. New York: Harper & Row, 1975.
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