

**Reflections on Phenomenology and the Poetry of Kevin Hart.  
Foreignness and Strangeness at the Heart of Australian Identity.**

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In a deconstructive fashion, this paper analyses the Heideggerian concept of *Bodenständigkeit* ("rootedness") from the point of view of the *Boden* ("earth", "ground") in general, that is, before its diffraction as *Bodenständigkeit* and *Bodenlosigkeit* ("uprootedness"). Whereas Heidegger makes of the concepts of "description" and "expression" two species of the genre *Bodenständigkeit*, we will proceed otherwise, and derive them from the general concept of *Bodenlosigkeit* ("uprootedness"). In this way, following the threads of the poetry of Kevin Hart, we will suggest that it is possible to affirm that all poetry is about finitude, contingency and destiny, both from the point of view of its form and of its content. In the course of our analysis, we will wonder about the role of identity and alterity in the construction of Australian identity.

Keywords: *Bodenständigkeit*, deconstruction, identity, Australia.

This glass on my desk may be an object for philosophical speculation or poetic inspiration. Boldly speaking, Husserl's phenomenological method would start by detaching the contours of the glass I see from its surroundings, and set it against the horizon from which it has been extracted. The philosophical reduction would consist in voiding the object of my intuition – in this case, this glass on my desk here and now - of any scientific preconceptions I may have regarding how it was made, its use, its shape, etc. Then, the eidetic reduction would get to the idea or essence of the glass, its formal and irreducible eidetic contour. In this way, phenomenology provides the formal means of analysis for gaining the objects of any regional science; it is a pre-science or general ontology. The Heidegger philosophy of *Being and time*, on the other hand, would emphasize that the glass is only an object to the extent that it enters into

a web of relations that can be characterized in notions of existence, because it is ultimately linked to a human being (*Dasein*). As Heidegger would put it, what is at hand (*zuhanden*) precedes what I can hold in my gaze (*vorhanden*), or, as it is more commonly phrased, existence precedes essence. In the opening lines of a poem entitled “Firm Views”, Kevin Hart brings face to face both philosophies, stressing, also by means of the title, their respective positive self-determination. Kevin Hart himself marks the italics:

“Firm Views”

Back to the things themselves: this empty glass  
With no idea of water; sleeping cats  
That dream of ancient Egypt in the sun;

And ivy on the porch. Now leave the mind  
With its divisions training on the page  
And walk out through a world untouched by thought

Where things exist as things, not otherwise-  
*Impossible, the land is occupied*  
*By things as they appear to sight and touch;*

*The mind approaches with its golden frame*  
*And frames itself: a judge with balding wig*  
*Who sentences himself without appeal*

*To life and death.*<sup>1</sup>

In the years before the publication of *Being and Time*, Heidegger conceives his *Prolegomena to the History of the Concept of Time*, where he exposes what he takes from Husserl’s phenomenology. He says that the phenomenological maxim “to the things themselves” (*zu den Sachen selbst*) means, first, “to investigate showing things standing on the ground” (*bodenständig ausweisend forschen*<sup>2</sup>). Then, he goes on to add that the maxim also means, “on the first

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<sup>1</sup> Hart, Kevin. *Flame Tree*, Trowbridge, Bloodaxe Books, 2002, p. 97.

<sup>2</sup> Heidegger, Martin. *Prolegomena zur Geschichte des Zeitbegriffs*. Frankfurt am Main: Vittorio Klostermann, 1979, p. 104.

place, to obtain and to secure again that ground" (*diesen Boden erst wieder zu gewinnen un zu sichern*). Heidegger also points out that the second meaning grounds and legitimizes the first one.

The concept of *Bodenständigkeit*, on which this analysis rests, means "standing on the ground", but it also means "well-rooted", in the same sense in which we may refer to a native person as belonging to a particular place or as somebody who has been born in the same place where he lives. Therefore, as Heidegger conceives it here, phenomenology as a pre-science (*Vorwissensschaft*<sup>3</sup>) presupposes this "being-rooted", without which no being-in-the-world would be possible. From this point of view, then, whatever attitude is taken towards the world, whether scientific in its ordinary sense, theoretical, practical, poetic, or religious, it is presupposed that the subject in question is well-rooted on the soil, stands firm in the way of being of his/her community, even when it is the case that he/she wants to question it. But, while it is true that firmness and uprightness are a prerequisite for action, if we do not supersede them they may end up turning into mere rigidity and stiffness. This is also one of the possible meanings of "being well-rooted".

In the second half of the poem "Firm Views", Kevin Hart puts it thus:

*The stone describes the peach,  
The noisy bird that bends the branch and eats,  
The sunlight bathing in the lazy stream,*

*And these describe the stone. The door is locked,  
The windows covered with reflecting glass,  
The landscape is a portrait of the mind.*

That big clawed hammer rusting in the shed  
Stands for the world: you grasp pure sullen weight  
Not an idea; the handle scraps your skin,

A signature of pain to make its point.  
*Just so. The hammer needs the hand that needs*

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid., p. 108.

*A world of thought: the judge's hammer strikes*

*The bench, the sentence is, as always, jail  
From which there can be no escape till death:  
The judge is silent, standing in the dock.*

In a particular place, a group of people ground their existence living there. Generation after generation, the community sets up and establishes a web of relations where everyone finds and gives meaning to existence: the shoemaker, the carpenter, the farmer, the priest, the minister, the mayor, etc. The bits and pieces of this set of relations may eventually be uprooted and be an object of description for the historian of ideas, or quantified and hierarchically organized by the scientist. For a certain period of time, some signifiers that express the way of being of these people would be uprooted and become an object of investigation. They would be uprooted from the source that gave them birth and life. In a certain sense, they would become dead signs, corps without life.

For the argument's sake, let's keep the formal distinction between simply living one's life and taking a cognitive attitude toward it. Heidegger makes this distinction in *Being and Time* (§4), in terms of a properly "existentialist" (*existenzialles*) or methodological comprehension of the world and an "existential" (*existenzielle*) or pre-theoretical one.<sup>4</sup> In the poetical work of Kevin Hart, this distinction is made in terms of a predicative and a pre-predicative world, and it is fleshed out primarily with Biblical images of a mystical type.

The question we ponder here is whether these distinctions are derived from the generic concept of *Bodenständigkeit*, as we have seen it working in the text of Heidegger or, contrary to Heidegger's stand, the act of firmly standing on the ground is ultimately accidental and contingent. What is the *Boden*, the earth, the ground, the soil, before one is able to stand on it and take root in it? How would we know if, on the contrary, it was the case that we were never rooted on any soil in the most absolute sense of the word?

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<sup>4</sup> Heidegger, M. *Sein und Zeit*. Tübingen: Max Niemeyer Verlag GmbH, 2001, pp. 12-13.

Whereas Heidegger makes of the distinction between the existential and the existentialist attitudes two species of the genre *Bodenständigkeit*, in the sense that, in order to be able to adopt a theoretical attitude towards the world it is necessary to existentially be in the world, to us this derivation is as legitimate as any other distinction derived from the general concept of *Bodenlosigkeit* (“uprootedness”). Everything we call our own – language, experience, land, etc. – is personal, not transferable and will vanish with our deaths. What is the ground for this experience? Even when we inherit the means by which we make an experience ours, and in most cases we pass it to future generations, still, in the last instance, on what soil does this legacy rest? The fact that our individual existence, as well as that of whole civilizations, is temporary makes it very plausible to think that our lives hang over an abyss.

Certainly, it will be possible to affirm that we have described our position in Heideggerian terms, but this does not exclude the fact that Heidegger still privileges the notions of presence and uprightness. And if somebody would point out that Heidegger’s definition is restricted to phenomenology, and does not apply to the whole of his work, then the question is to what extent the analysis of *Dasein* can be carried out without phenomenology.

The pre-eminence of the concept of *Bodenlosigkeit* is better perceived when we take into consideration countries and cultures relatively young, such as Australia. Even though what we are saying here provides plenty of food for thought for the topic, we will not elaborate on issues related to the question of the relation between mainstream Australian and Indigenous peoples’ identity. Instead, we will focus only on how a reading of Kevin Hart’s poetry legitimates an alternative interpretation that would prioritize the concept of *Bodenlosigkeit*.

Generally speaking, in Australia the sense of possession over things is not as strong as in the old continent. This is also true of the idea of identity they hold. To some extent, Australia is genuinely foreign, a strange place where the

ephemeral character of things is not hidden, but flows onto the surface. It is a “baby-country”.

In the poem “Gypsophila”, entitled after the name of the plant, the words “gypsy” and “philia” resound, and they would suggest, as the poem does, love of everything that is nomad, kaleidoscopic and fluid: that’s why the image of the rain predominates. The poem also brings together the motives of childhood and foreignness, the irredeemable character of things, and the importance given to the physical character of the voice (“a child’s breath”). To our purpose in this paper, it is important to point out that Kevin Hart does not reify either the soul of the child or the world that he is describing, whence the implicit influence of Christian mysticism, especially that of Meister Eckhart and St John of the Cross.

### “Gypsophila”

Another day with nothing to say for itself –  
Gypsophila on the table, a child’s breath  
When breath is all it has to name the world

And therefore has no world. It must be made:  
Her shadow sleeping on the wall, the rain  
That pins fat clouds to earth all afternoon,

A river playing down the piano’s scales.  
This is the strangest of all possible worlds  
With foam upon the beach, the sea’s death skin,

And lighting quietly resting in each eye.  
Like gypsy camps or love, it must be made,  
Undone, then made again, like the chill rain

That falls without hope of climbing back,  
Content to leave its mark, for what it is,  
Upon the window or in the child’s mind.

Gypsophila on the table, rain outside,  
The child will tune the world to her desire  
And make another world to keep in mind:

These breaths of air in which we softly wrap  
The rain's glass stems to let them fall again  
In sunlight, or flower forever in the mind.

A world of things with nothing at all to say,  
A margin that absorbs our silences:  
The child must take the lighting from her eye

And place it in the sky, her shadow must  
Be told to fall asleep. This strangest world  
In which we say *Gypsophila, Baby's breath* -

In Australia, the expression "go west" is commonly used to refer to the western part of the continent. Even though Kevin Hart was born in London in 1954, in 1966 his family moved to Brisbane, in the Golden Coast, and in his poems Brisbane is described as the place of his childhood. The exotic landscape and the heat of Brisbane are a clear source of inspiration, and he repeatedly talks about the Monaro moon region, Mount Coottha, the paw-paw trees and the resin hanging from eucalypts.

Brisbane is situated in the north-east of Australia. This is the reason why in his poem "Facing the Pacific at Night", Kevin Hart comes across the experience of kenosis ("emptying oneself of self") that surmounts him while driving east, towards the Pacific, where Brisbane is situated. This experience occurs at night, when the weight of things lightens, and again the images of rain and the ocean play an important role in this poem. I would like to briefly elaborate on the idea of the Pacific Ocean that we commonly have.

In our collective imaginary, the Pacific is not clearly outlined in our minds. We certainly know that it is situated in the east coasts of Asia and Oceania, and on the west coast of America, and even that it is "the greatest ocean". Nevertheless, in the maps of the world that are usually displayed in western classrooms and atlases, the Pacific Ocean appears in the left and right

margins, quite apart from our focus of attention. Moreover, it does not appear as whole, but divided.

In "Facing the Pacific at Night", driving towards the Pacific means driving to that area of which we have an unclear and foreign representation, the unknown soil of all things, even the most familiar ones. Kevin Hart makes of his homeland an unfamiliar place where all worldly things vanish.

It is important to point out the ontological role that language plays in the imaginary of Kevin Hart's poetry. He distinguishes between the Noun and the Verb, the world as representation, that is the world of language, and the world as will, that is the world of change. Everything we know depends on our divine capability of naming things, but these names simply indicate a "silent place", a "darkness", a loving dimension that we cannot comprehend.

The physical journey also brings about a mental pilgrimage:

"Facing the Pacific at Night"

Driving East, in the darkness between two stars  
Or between two thoughts, you reach the greatest ocean,  
That cold expanse the rain can never net,

And driving East, you are a child again –  
The web of names is brushed aside from things.  
The ocean's name is quietly washed away

Revealing the thing itself, an energy,  
An elemental life flashing in starlight.  
No word can shrink it down to fit the mind,

It is already there, between two thoughts,  
The darkness in which you travel and arrive,  
The nameless one, the surname of all things.

The ocean slowly rocks from side to side,  
A child itself, asleep in its bed of rocks,

No parent there to wake it from a dream,

To draw the ancient gods between the stars.  
You stand upon the cliff, no longer cold,  
And you are weightless, back before the thrust

And rush of birth when beards of blood are grown;  
Or outside time, as though you had just died  
To birth and death, no name to hide behind,

No name to splay the world or burn it whole.  
The ocean quietly moves within your ear  
And flashes in your eyes: the silent place

Outside the world we know is here and now,  
Between two thoughts, a child that does not grow,  
A silence undressing words, a nameless love.

As we can see, in Hart's poetry the elements of air and water prevail over the element of earth, on which the existential analysis of *Dasein* is grounded. Finally, I would like to comment on the poem entitled "The River", because it stands in sharp contrast with some texts published during the ontological period of what has been labelled as "the second Heidegger".

In 1947, Heidegger published *Brief über den Humanismus*, where being is not conceived anymore as mere presence, but as "event" (*Ereignis*). In *Unterwegs zur Sprache*, in the chapter "Das Wort", Heidegger comments on a poem by Stefan George that bears the same title, *Das Wort*. In the poem, Stefan George describes how the poet obtains the names of things for his people to use from the depths of a forest that hides a mythical spring kept by the goddess Norna, until one day Norna tells him that there is no word for the jewel that he offers her on that occasion. I am not going to comment on the multiple meanings and vicissitudes of the poem that Heidegger highlights. Instead, I would like to simply point out that the poem moves between a dialectics of presence and absence: either the word is offered by Norna, or it is unavailable for the poet.

Kevin Hart, on the other hand, stresses the shades and tones of words, focuses our attention on the blanks and silences that separate them, and reminds us that the breath in which they travel and that liberates the transcendental ether is embodied through and through in the physical world. I would like to emphasize as well that the narrative voice in the poem does not bespeak identity in the strong sense of the word, in the same way that the voice that responds to him, the other, is not as unrecognizable as to the extent of being absolutely foreign to the subject. On the basis of this “foreign” ground, no land or idea of subject can be said to properly belong to one man more than another. The ‘I’ and the ‘other’ hold each other. In an existential sense, this distinction does not hold water.

“The River”

There is a radiance inside the winter woods  
That calls each soul by name  
Wind in young boughs, trees shaking off thick coats of snow,

That rattle of frozen rain on a barn roof: all these  
Will help you lose your way  
And find a silence older than the sky

That makes our being here a murmur only,  
That makes me walk along the river  
Beyond where it has flooded itself

While freezing over, past these dead firs,  
The great assembly of cedars,  
So that I must say, *I do not know why I am here,*

And move around in those few words  
And feel their many needles  
Upon my lips and warm them on my tongue

Though I say nothing, for it is a calm I know  
Beyond the calm I know  
That wants to talk now, after all these years

Of hearing me say *spruce, wind, cloud and face,*  
Not knowing the first thing about them all,  
Not knowing the simplest thing,

That every word said well is praise:  
And someone deep inside me wants to say  
*I am not lost but there are many paths!*

While someone else will whisper back,  
*So you are on the longest quest of all,*  
*The quest for home, and not appear*

Though I have walked along the river now  
These good five miles  
While letting wind push me a little way

And letting thoughts grow slow and weak  
Before I feed them words, for what  
Is told to me this afternoon

Is simply *river*, with each *I* and *it* dissolved,  
A cold truth but a truth indeed  
Held tight on the way back

Past curves and forks, as evening takes hold,  
A strange light all the way  
That falls between the words that I would use

When talking of this strangeness or this light  
So that I speak in small, slow breaths  
Of evening, cedar, cone and ice

In words that stick to skin -

In conclusion, we have seen that in certain social contexts as well as in particular attitudes towards life, it is possible to ascertain that the concept of *Bodenlosigkeit* is more original than its counterpart, the phenomenological concept of *Bodenständigkeit*. Nevertheless, we still have to concede that we have carried out our analysis with the feet well-grounded, because we have appealed

to experience and facts to make our point. But there is no contradiction in this, since the question we have been seeking to highlight, this reversal and this originality are linked to the *Boden*, the ground, the soil and the earth in general. At the level of this generality, there is an elemental unity of essence between the concepts of “being well-rooted” and “being uprooted”.

## References

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