God Being Nothing: Toward a Theogony. Ray L. Hart. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016. Pp. xli, 282.
Reviewed by Nathan R. Strunk, *McGill University*

God Being Nothing seeks to answer the following question: "Can *nihil*—nothingness—be given its due without issuing in nihilism?" (6) Nihilism here means "the utter indifference to matters of meaning and value" (9), and the *nihil* in question is the one implicated in the doctrinal formula, *creatio ex nihilo*. A majority of western monotheistic traditions interpreted the *nihil* within an ontotheological framework that diminished the significance of nothingness as merely privative to the positive, perdurance of being implicated in the conception of God as *ipsum esse* and ascribed to creation as *ens creatum*. In contrast, Hart interprets the *nihil* constructively to refer to the nothingness of God *in se*. He explains, "[s]everely qualifying the classical formula: *creatio ex nihilo et non se Deo*, I shall elaborate and defend the hypothesis: God creates *ex nihilo, idem est, ex Deitate ipsa* (God creates from the nothing internal to godself)" (2). Attentive to other faith traditions, Hart primarily enlists "heterodox" Christian thinkers like Meister Eckhart and Jakob Böhme to explicate the divine *nihil* of *ex nihilo* and expound the nothingness shared between indeterminate Godhead (*in se*) and determinate Creator God (*extra nos*), between *creatio ab origine* and *creatio continua*, and between the *terminus a quo* and *terminus ad quem* of humans. Insofar as the emphasis falls on "between," the book offers what can be called a "meontological *metaxu*" though Hart does not call it as such. While it shares features of other metaxologies, it will be seen that Hart's meontology at times aligns with themes that its opening question suggests it wishes to avoid.

The book is structured into three main sections or, to borrow from literature, "topoi," to explain how *nihil* is ingredient in the generation of divinity (theogony), the cosmos (cosmogony), and the human subject (anthropogony). Hart begins first with "…the distinction between Godhead and God, which is argued in Topos 1 for the light it sheds on the self-generation of deity; is pointed to in Topos 2 as the condition for there being what is not-God – other than God – namely, the cosmos; and is extended in Topos 3 as the condition for there being what is both like God and unlike God in the human creature" (45). The entire book presupposes a kind of analogue between divine nothingness and created nothingness whether as interwoven into the fabric of creation or human existence as *imago Dei*. The doctrine of analogy in thinkers like Aquinas relies on a metaphysics of creation based on an understanding of effects retaining a participatory likeness to their cause. Since Hart critiques the metaphysics of being as ontotheological, his meontological metaxology must bridge divine and creaturely nothingness so that the *metaxu* is in a sense the analogue. "The being that God the Creator has vis-à-vis the creature, like the being that the creature

has vis-à-vis God the creator, is *metaxic*, is between not only being and nonbeing but between two nots or nothings" (135). It is of no fault of the reader if this is initially difficult to understand. Nothingness, after all, is not explicitly part of our everyday experience like something among other things. Thus, one of the aims of Topos 2 and Topos 3 is to have nothingness emerge from the cracks of existence like the way black holes emerge with subtle blips and bends of space and time. For our part, we will only be able to focus narrowly on Topos 1 in order to appreciate why divine nothingness is the reason why there is not only nothingness.

The question "why is there something rather than nothing?" is a question of being and becoming, of the one and the many. The question is as old as philosophy itself, and so is one of its most prevalent answers. "Only Being is," says Parmenides, "non-being is not and cannot be thought." For Hart, the Parmenidean conception of Being has characterized much of western metaphysics especially when it played handmaiden to Christianity. In such a framework, nothingness is an aberration that does not fit the top-down hierarchy of being from the One to the many. The doctrine of creation served to reinforce this framework, implicitly banishing the *nihil* so that the corresponding condition of *creatio ex nihilo* is *ex nihilo nihil fit* (from nothing can nothing come to be, be thought, or be said) (68). By interpreting *ex nihilo* as internal to the divine, Hart's meontology departs radically from this metaphysics of being, giving voice, often in the language of literature and the imagery of poetry, to that which many have quickly passed over as unthinkable and unspeakable.

How, then, does Hart's divine meontology offer an alternative framework for understanding the problem of the one and the many? The beginning of an answer can be found in his crucial distinction between "the eternal self-generation of God, the determinate Creator, from the abysmal indeterminacies of Godhead." In brief, this distinction renders the problem of the One and the many unproblematic through an account of the complete, unified divine life of God *in se* and *extra nos*: "Everything is *in* Godhead-God, indeterminate and determinate" (48), precisely because "God is living" (52). Distinct from the noun "life," the present progressive "living" broadens the range of the divine life to include death – even God's death (52). Hart intimates moves made by Hegel and J.J. Altizer, but within a framework of a meontological *metaxu* in which God is between two nots of sheer indeterminacy of *creatio ab origine* and determinate coming to nothing of *creatio continua*. The dramatic (tragic?) interplay between them constitutes the whole of the divine life. For the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo* to be properly understood the *ex nihilo* must express the way God's *in se* nihility accompanies the *extra nos* nothingness of creation's becoming, making what is chaotic and tragic in the determinacy of the latter possible by the pure indeterminate potentiality of the former.

Readers may be tempted to mistakenly interpret Hart's distinction between indeterminate Godhead and determinate God the Creator as two distinct modes of

the divine or, worse yet, a kind of gnostic dualism replete with a demiurge. Nothing could be further from Hart's theological vision, which actually seeks the exact opposite of the intentions that gave rise to modalism. Whereas modalism sought to spare an immutable God the exigencies of becoming, Hart seeks to inscribe the possibility of the tragic, the dialectic tension of creation's being and becoming, into indeterminate Godhead. "For Christian theology (this one, anyway) the turbulence consequent upon the temporal contrariety of all determinate opposites is anteceded by the meontological determinateness in God the Creator of the abysmally indeterminate *turba* of Godhead, a groundless *turba* that rumbles beyond and other than being and nonbeing" (76). In Greek, the notion of *turba* conveys confusion, disorder, and chaos. It is telling, then, that Hart predicates it of Godhead: "Godhead is…the groundless indeterminate *turbic energeia* of the divine living-dying, the ebullient, effervescent *fortissimo* of formless energy in the divine depths" (77). Changing registers slightly, he appeals to the way Böhme employed *turba* "to characterize the simultaneity of creativeness and destruction in the indeterminate abyss of Godhead (the *Ungrund*)" (81). Interestingly, this description of the divine nothingness of indeterminate Godhead resembles, like Théodore Rousseau's "Mont Blanc Seen from La Faucille, Storm Effect," the chiaroscuro of the nigh mythic God of Romanticism who holds together like nature itself love and wrath, good and evil, and light and darkness, in frighteningly arbitrary and unforgiving tension.

However, Hart's theological vision incorporates a Christian doctrine indicative of the eternality of God's temporally redemptive love; namely, the doctrine of the immanent Trinity. Hart also combines his description of God as *turba* with the perichoresis of the immanent Trinity (95). The divine perichoretic choreograph to which Hart refers is also the divine between of living and dying, advent and recusal, manifestation and hiddenness, that simultaneously defines Godhead and God the Creator's manifold redemptive interaction in creation. Hart combines Böhme's meontological conception of the divine with the redemptive, dramatic life of the Trinity *in se* and *extra nos*. Holding them together metaxologically, the question remains whether these two – the meontological divine *turba energeia* and Trinitarian perichoresis – sit together comfortably.

Intriguingly, Hart's description of Godhead as abysmal *turba* resembles descriptions of God given by those credited as the tacit origins of Nietzschean nihilism. Themes ingredient in heterodox thinkers like Eckhart, Böhme, Schelling, and Hegel (and literarily in Blake, Melville, Coleridge, Goethe, Hölderlin, Rilke, and Conrad) suggestively overlap with those credited as origins of nihilism. In *Nihilism Before Nietzsche*, Michael Allen Gillespie argues that Nietzsche's nihilism originates from a conception of divine will borne from Ockham's voluntaristic *potentia absoluta* and Luther's *deus absconditus* that come to form Descartes' divine deceiver (*genius malignus*) and Romanticism's daemonic creative force. For Gillespie, nihilism issued

from voluntarism insofar as value could not be sustained under the prospect of a complete collapse of all meaning with the prospect of an absolutely omnipotent, "dark" God arbitrarily rewriting creation's most fundamental laws if it so willed unless, of course, humans possessed a will powerful enough to posit value and withstand the wiles of the divine. In this context, God is a transrational, passionate force – bestial like Blake's tyger burning bright in fearful symmetry – whose ways are unfathomable for being incalculable on any spectrum, especially good and evil. Although Gillespie traces this genealogy to serve altogether different ends than those pursued by Hart, his description of the God behind Nietzsche's nihilism resonates in some ways with Hart's description of Godhead as *turba* or *turbic energeia*. While Hart definitely does not offer a genealogical argument like Gillespie, the topography—to use Hart's metaphor—that structured debates concerning voluntarism like divine, indeterminate freedom, the characterization of God as *deus absconditus*, and Romanticism's dark foreboding God of nature are not entirely absent the heterodox tradition supporting Hart's meontology. Hart's conception of Godhead and God borders on the tragic, a terror in the night commensurate with a cosmological *turba* in which nature's chaotic, creative-destructive violence strangely mirrors the inner life of the Godhead. Black holes are destructively all-consuming, and, if information cannot escape, they are perfectly and terrifyingly solipsistic, utterly monstrous. *Creatio* ex nihilo, then, with the emphasis on *creatio*, proves decisive in Hart's recapturing of *ex nihilo*. Recalling the opening question of this review: *creatio* may very well be what allows one to give *nihil* its due without issuing in nihilism.

There appears to be two strands in Hart that are difficult to reconcile: between the *in se* indeterminate divinity implicated in the determinate interplay of good and evil and the *in se* indeterminate divinity integral to the surpassing, generative donation of creation and the bringing about of a new creation. Hart's *metaxu* attempts to balance between these two, but because his point of entry is the *nihil* of *ex nihilo* there appears to be a slight favoring of the former. Others who have sought to think divinity metaxologically separate from the strictures of classical theism have preferred the latter for fear that the former ultimately leads to Nietzsche's kind of *nihil* in which the transposition of all values ultimately concludes with the demise of the good. Richard Kearney reminds us that gods and monsters like Ahab's whale ("the quasi-divine, quasi-demonic whiteness of the whale") can be in some ways akin, charting experiences of uncontainable excess.[1] They differ, however, in that divine alterity is accompanied with a gift that far from leaving the divine estranged makes it strangely familiar, *interior intimo meo*. In critiquing the metaphysics of being in Parmenides and the metaphysics of creation of the Christian tradition,

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1. Richard Kearney, *Strangers, Gods, and Monsters: Ideas of Otherness* (London: Routledge, 2002).

Hart does not entirely explore why the principle of the good was often regarded as preceding being and non-being. Though in the Parmenidean framework *creatio ex nihilo* offered a corrective to emanationism for fear of panentheism and pantheism, the doctrine also traditionally coincided with the teaching that creation is an absolutely gratuitous act of divine love entirely without precedent or necessity. Here it should be remembered that no-thingness, meontology, is usually accompanied with a second, corresponding and necessary moment. The rose "without why" also "cares not for itself and asks not if it is seen." The rose's invisibility marks its irreducible givenness and unconditioned generosity – what is also called its "porosity" to appeal to William Desmond's agapeic metaxology[2] (see *God and the Between*, 2008) or its "loving togetherness" (its being-with-of-all-beings-with-all-beings) to follow Ludwig Binswanger à la Joeri Schrijvers.[3]

In sum, Hart offers a meontological metaxology that encompasses the doctrine of creation through an "ineluctable progression of three betweens: between the two nots of the human person, between the human person and God, and between God and Godhead. Simultaneous betweens that stand under the Cloud of Unknowing, the abysmal void of Nothingness, yet also the groundlessly renewing fount of Genesis" (183). We have only cursorily explored the two nots between God and Godhead. The book as a whole traces along the contours of the unthought, delving deeply into the "without why" of God, creation, and humanity. So much of Hart's book is a new fugue on themes previously sounded by luminaries past and present, masterfully brought together here in a work that is eloquently written and subtly argued, a text written in prose with the lyrical spirit of music and poetry. Some will hear in it the strange beauty that comes with thinking the divine meontologically, which sounds somewhere on the scale between the foreboding tenor of a tragic *Requiem* and the loving ecstasy of a *Gloria in Excelsis Deo*. Hart's "thought experiment" into the abyss of nothingness will undoubtedly inspire readers to follow in the unfinished work of searching the depth and riches of the Unknown God.

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2. William Desmond, *God and the Between* (Malden: Blackwell, 2008).

3. Joeri Schrijvers, *Between Faith and Belief: Toward a Contemporary Phenomenology of Religious Life* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2016).