

# AUSTRALIAN? RELIGIOUS? POETRY?

By KEVIN HART

AUSTRALIAN RELIGIOUS POETRY: what does this expression mean? At first glance the answer seems perfectly clear and dry. There exists a region of poetry, and we wish to limit ourselves to a part that can be called religious. Moreover, we are strictly concerned with that portion of religious poetry which comes from Australia. It is a simple answer and to some extent an inevitable one. Yet once we accept it all sorts of difficulties arise. Just how easy is it to delimit a field of poetry, if there is such a thing?

As soon as you propose a definition of poetry, even one that might meet with broad approval in the late twentieth century, there will be borderline cases that cannot be dismissed. If you frame a definition with only canonical verse in mind you may be pained to exclude the charms, jingles and riddles that in all likelihood led you to poetry in the first place. The same gesture will lead you to omit many if not all of the contemporary poems that intrigue and sustain you. Almost certainly you will put aside broadsides, folk songs and popular lyrics – only to find yourself trying to disentangle questions of value from questions of definition. The same severity would leave no room for clerihevs, double dactyls or nonsense verse, and that also would be regrettable. If you agree that poetry should not be restricted to verse (whether formal or free), then concrete poetry and prose poetry will bid for places. Having gone that far, what about ‘found poems’? I mean snatches from advertisements, catalogues or graffiti that were never intended to have literary merit but which suddenly shine with poetic effects when read in a suitable context. And if you include prose poems someone is sure to point out that there are poetic passages in autobiographies, diaries, novels and stories, almost anywhere in fact. So far we have been thinking only of English writing. But if you can be persuaded that not all poetry gets lost in translation, then poems originally composed in other languages will demand your attention, giving rise to worries about linguistic and cultural fidelity. Performance poetry presents a tricky case, especially when we are living toward the end of the print era. To be appreciated outside its contexts of performance, oral verse must be presented on tape or audio-visual cassette, and then it seems to have its

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life drained from it. There was poetry before the age of print, and there will doubtless be poetry after it. I mean poems which cannot be reproduced in two-dimensional space, computer poems written in hypertext, for instance.

These few examples show that the borders surrounding poetry are broken and shifting, not on one front but on several. Attempts to define poetry by excising all dubious or marginal cases impoverish what they set out to preserve. But what of the alternative, of not worrying much about circumscribing poetry in a Socratic manner and letting its various usages go their ways for as long as they can? Faced with this possibility people sometimes shudder as if being led to the brink of an abyss. There never has been a groundless free-for-all with poetry, though. (Or if there has, or even if there has never been anything but that, it has never upset people as much as they imagine they would be or feel they should be.) The full range of what counts as poetry changes over time and place, and conceptual difficulties emerge most forcefully when one tries to encompass all those historical and cultural differences in the one formulation. The question 'Is this a poem?' can always be asked, and there are moments when it needs to be asked. And yet there are also circumstances when it is not the most urgent or even the most useful question to pose. Sometimes recourse to definition can be a step backwards, an evasion of poetry and a fear of the unknown. In the words of Maurice Blanchot: 'To read a poem is not to read yet another poem'.<sup>1</sup>

Needless to say, 'religious' is at least as hard to pin down as 'poetry'. The word can be defined in this way or that, sociologically or theologically, while admitting that in practice these categories overlap substantially and cannot always be separated even under the glare of theory. From atheists and the pious alike, there is always pressure to restrict 'religious' to a traditional devotion; after all, in one sense the word has long come to mean 'strict'. Rebelling against this curbing of meaning (while acknowledging that religion can be most intense when most austere, long before it flares into enthusiasm or fanaticism, themselves important religious phenomena), one can readily be enticed to take the exact opposite direction. Yet once we begin to extend the scope of 'religious' it is hard to know when and how to stop. The difficulties are bad enough when dealing with one faith, let alone when attempting to keep several in play. Certainly we have to accept natural and revealed religions and certainly we have to go well past institutional borders. Many people for whom churches and temples mean little or nothing acknowledge a higher power – personal or impersonal, singular or plural, transcendent or immanent – which they take to influence or

even guide their lives. Once outside organized religion can we also pass beyond the observance of rites? Not if by 'outside' we have in mind only those individuals of a mystical or occultist tendency. But 'rites' can mean more than ceremonies and sacraments; the concept also includes the customs and habits associated with belief. That gives 'rites' a very wide extension, too wide, some are bound to say. Yet there will always be an Immanuel Kant to insist that religion is essentially a matter of morality and that works of grace, miracles, mysteries, and means of grace are mere supplements to be kept outside religion's true and proper limits. And there will always be people who will side with him.

What of men and women who do not worship a higher power but who remain devoted to a religious teaching? Consider the Taoists, followers of Lao-tzu whose doctrines are gathered in the *Tao-te-ching*. When Taoists talk of the *Tao* or Way, they do not have a supreme being in mind, perhaps not even Being as usually understood in the West. Certainly it is nothing that could be regarded as God or a god. Even at their most speculative, when claiming that *Tao* is inaudible, invisible, unchangeable and unnameable, they are using negations to indicate a transcendental principle, not a transcendent deity. Like the lines dividing religion from mythology, the borders between religion and philosophy tend to be wavy and interrupted. In both situations the limits are apparent not only at the edges, giving rise to fiddly cases; they are often found to be at the doctrinal centre of a religion. Every time a Catholic recites the Nicene creed at mass he or she assents, at least tacitly, to certain notions of Aristotelian metaphysics. (By the same token philosophy can be deeply marked by myth – Plato's fable of the cave and Nietzsche's invocation of the eternal return, for example – or, equally, philosophy can be touched by an intense religious longing: Plotinus' *Enneads* and Hegel's *Phenomenology of spirit* are prime examples.) That said, in the western world Taoism along with Confucianism is usually treated far more fully in encyclopaedias of religion than of philosophy.

Not so with Marxism; and yet in both East and West it has given rise to the most widespread and powerful eschatological movement of the century. When people talked in the 1950s and 1960s of 'the Communist Church' in the former Soviet Union, the expression may have been intended polemically, linking the bureaucratic machinations of Moscow and the Vatican, but it brought and still brings to the fore some ways in which communism reset and reworked Christian notions of community and along with them the theological virtues of faith, hope and charity. In the first decades of this century Marxism promised egalitarianism, and the glow of this promise long outlived the economic and political

performances of successive governments. In recent decades it became increasingly apparent even to deeply committed socialists that faith, hope and charity cannot be realized within the horizon of dialectical materialism. For all that, there can be no simple story of communism versus religion, not least of all because Christians, Jews and Muslims (I speak broadly and only of the West) have suffered as harshly in our time under anti-communist regimes. Besides, both ideological extremes are perpetually traversed by religious motifs, while most religious groups have keen interest in the political at large as well as in party politics. And there is another, more harrowing reason not to single out socialism. From the 1917 Revolution to the dismantling of the Berlin Wall and beyond, numerous men, women and children of all faiths have fallen victim to people of other faiths or of the same belief – and all in the name of God. Inhumanity is not restricted to the secular.

Having come this far, should we include atheism as a religious phenomenon? We have no choice but to do so, providing we distinguish atheisms that take religious questions seriously from those that do not. The view that God does not exist, that all deities are illusions, even pernicious ones, is often prosecuted with a fervour that derives its energy and sometimes its style from the faith it refuses. There are fundamentalists and evangelicals in atheism as surely as there are in theism. One of the most rhetorically effective atheists of our era is Friedrich Nietzsche. When announcing his terrible message: ‘God is dead’, he assumed the character of a madman who ‘ran to the market place, and cried incessantly: “I seek God! I seek God!” ’ before delivering his desolating sermon:

‘Whither is God?’ he cried; ‘I will tell you. *We have killed him* – you and I. All of us are his murderers. But how did we do this? How could we drink up the sea? Who gave us the sponge to wipe away the entire horizon? What were we doing when we unchained this earth from its sun? Whither is it moving now? Whither are we moving? Away from all suns? Are we not plunging continually? Backward, sideward, forward, in all directions? Is there still any up or down? Are we not straying as through an infinite nothing? Do we not feel the breath of empty space? Has it not become colder? Is not night continually closing in on us? Do we not need to light lanterns in the morning? Do we hear nothing as yet of the noise of the gravediggers who are burying God? Do we smell nothing as yet of the divine decomposition? Gods, too, decompose. God is dead. God remains dead. And we have killed him.’<sup>2</sup>

Nietzsche would concede that there are many for whom God remains an abiding presence (although he would also maintain that, like the

philosophers, they mistakenly infer the nature of reality from contingent grammatical catagories). His central point is that believers and non-believers alike have not yet admitted to themselves that the world is no longer turned decisively toward God, that the realm of the transcendent has lost its hold on how we live and how we die.

If the divine can fade from the world it can always return, possibly under a very different form. As modern thinkers and writers have discovered time and again, it is easier to dismiss the word and concept 'God' than to eliminate the category of the sacred. Without slighting the illuminations of teachers of all faiths, I have to say that it happens – and certainly with great force in our own era – that some of the most religiously acute observations are made by those who cannot in all conscience avow God. Doubt is not always directly opposed to faith; it can be a twisting path to a faith; and everyone who grows in belief must risk asking 'What does "God" mean?', 'How can I speak of God?' and 'Where is God?' – and not just in moments of abjection and suspicion but also in times of contentment and elation. Amongst the century's most intense religious writing I would include passages from Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*, Martin Heidegger's meditations on Hölderlin, Franz Kafka's *The castle* and Simone Weil's *Notebooks*. These texts do not converge at any one point but taken together they urge us not to use the word 'God' lightly. They teach that to pronounce the divine name too quickly, or to circumscribe it too tightly, can crush a question rather than answer it. And they suggest that God can be revealed more truly in the question than in the answer. Thinking along these lines, who can brood on Edmond Jabès' *The book of questions* without gaining a deeper understanding of the anguished attempts to fathom God after the Holocaust? If nothing else, you will be haunted by one or more of the fragments uttered by his imaginary rabbis: 'God is a questioning of God', one of them hazards, and then – almost as a long deferred reply – another ventures, 'God is always in search of God'.<sup>3</sup> Strange words, though not to a Kabbalist or a Rhineland mystic. In an interview Jabès says,

What I mean by God in my work is something we come up against, an abyss, a void, something against which we are powerless. It is a distance . . . the distance that is always between things . . . we get to where we are going, and then there is still this distance to cover. And a moment comes when you can no longer cover the distance; you get there and you say to yourself, it's finished, there are no more words. God is perhaps a word without words.<sup>4</sup>

Let us pause for a moment and take stock. When the words 'poetry' and 'religion' are allowed to overlap, like two fuzzy Venn diagrams,

there forms a rich and unruly set that includes everything and anything from carols, hymns and prayers to miracle plays and verse essays in doctrine, to stanzas that affirm what Friedrich Schleiermacher called a 'feeling of absolute dependence' or what Romain Rolland dubbed an 'oceanic feeling', to assertions of God's death and quieter confessions of a gradual fading of belief, and a great deal else besides. There is no shortage of ways to tidy up this sprawl. Some are drastic. Take Christianity for instance. You can say with Karl Barth that Christianity is not a religion because religion is a human attempt to find God while Christianity is the story of God going in search of sinful men and women. That definition eliminates the category of Christian religious verse altogether, though not religious verse as such. But to see that being done we only have to turn to Samuel Johnson's authoritative comments in his *Life of Waller* (1781):

Contemplative piety, or the intercourse between God and the human soul, cannot be poetical. Man admitted to implore the mercy of his Creator and plead the merits of his Redeemer, is already in a higher state than poetry can confer.

The essence of poetry is invention; such invention as, by producing something unexpected, surprises and delights. The topics of devotion are few, and being few are universally known; but, few as they are, they can be made no more; they can receive no grace from novelty of sentiment, and very little from novelty of expression.<sup>5</sup>

Adopting an opposite stance, you can claim, as very different writers have done over the years, that poetry is Orphic: a transfiguration of nature into song that overcomes death and the grave. And so, regardless of its explicit themes, all poetry is at heart sacred. This certainly expands the category of religious poetry, so much so, though, that in effect it abolishes it no less surely than Johnson does.

Accepting none of these extreme solutions, I would like to keep all I can in this mixed and ragged cluster of texts called 'religious poetry' and overlay one more set, 'Australian'. It will not solve any difficulties but will add some more, in both the fields of poetry and religion. When we put 'Australian' before either 'poetry' or 'religion' it seems as if we have grafted something very new onto something very old. We think of a country that celebrated its bicentennial as recently as 1988, two centuries after being declared *terra nullius* and claimed for the Crown by Captain James Cook. As likely as not, we think of Australian poetry working with, alongside or sometimes against a long tradition of European poetics, and we think of Australian religion as an inflection of

European Christianity. This accounts for much of our poetry and our institutional religiosity, though certainly not for the traditional songs and sacred ceremonies of the land's Aboriginal peoples. It must be remembered that the word 'Australian' derives from a seventeenth-century coinage, *terra australis*, that names an uncharted space – Australasia, Polynesia and 'Magellanica' – as viewed from a European perspective. So to call traditional Aboriginal chants Australian is not without problems, for it involves the colonizing gaze whose effects have brutalized and endangered those same traditions. And in a similar way, one should pause a while before construing the chants as poetry lest they be measured purely and simply against aesthetic norms that remain largely exterior to them. The song cycles are living performances, allowing great variation of movement, music and words. They cannot be abstracted from their living contexts without enormous losses.

One way to approach Australian poetry and religion is by asking what languages they use. English is culturally predominant. But this should not blind us to the fact that the land has a hundred and fifty or so Aboriginal tongues (and once had many more), and over a hundred others drawn from Asia and Europe. To judge from local anthologies over the last few decades, 'Australian poetry' has come to mean a canon of writing composed in English by anglophones living or born in Australia. In recent years especially that canon has been supplemented by translations from Aboriginal song cycles. We know that verse is composed here in German, Greek and Italian – and very occasionally translations from these works appear in anthologies – but at the moment it is impossible to form any impression of poetry being written locally in Arabic, Chinese, Hungarian, Polish, Spanish, Turkish, Ukrainian, Vietnamese or any of the other community languages.

Even if we were to restrict ourselves to material written in English, Australian poetry would not be all of a piece. Taken by themselves, historical markers are unreliable. 1788 may signal the start of British colonization, but it can hardly indicate the origin of the country's poetry. On the one hand there are writers whose ethnic background sets them at variance with the myth of national origin. The verse of Antigone Kefala and Dimitris Tsaloumas, for example, moves to the rhythms of quite other historical and mythological times. While on the other hand there are poets from British stock whose main influences are Asian, American or European. Robert Gray's imaginative world, for instance, has been shaped by his reading of Francis Ponge, Charles Reznikoff and Japanese Zen poets. In much the same way, when taken by themselves geographical markers are not to be trusted. Peter Porter is

thought by some to be our finest living poet. He was born in Brisbane, and returns to Australia from time to time; but for the last forty years he has lived in London and made a solid reputation there. Where does the Australia in 'Australian poetry' begin and end?

The brief list of community languages spoken in Australia is enough to suggest that Christianity, though culturally predominant, is far from being the only faith practised in this country. It also indicates that Australian Christianity is not monolithic. Catholic traditions from East and West are represented, as are the various families of Protestantism and other, less easily categorized groups like Baha'i, Christian Science, the Society of Friends and Unitarians. There are many Aboriginal religions – not, as is commonly supposed, just the one. Of the major world faiths, Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam and Judaism are all to be found, though all in relatively small numbers when set against the population as a whole; and there are tiny numbers of other sects like Rosicrucians, Swedenborgians and Zoroastrians.<sup>6</sup> The impact of these groups on Australian poetry is very uneven. Although Islam is our second largest religious community – a consequence of steady immigration from Lebanon and Turkey over the last thirty years – one would be hard-pressed to find much Muslim poetry written in or translated into English. The handful of Australian poets who have fallen under the spell of Rumi or Ghalib have done so without the mediation of Islam. Conversely, while statistics tell us that there are a few Australians who follow Chinese religions, several local poets with British forebears have been strongly drawn to Buddhism, Taoism, or a synthesis of the two, and not only use themes from those faiths but can be counted as adherents.

Potentially, then, the field of Australian religious poetry is vast and chaotic. When I was editing *The Oxford book of Australian religious poetry* in 1992–93 it was often useful, if sometimes daunting, to keep in mind a sense of that possible imbroglio and of those needling fringe cases. It made me spend weeks and months studying small-press and fugitive publications, sifting through fragile collections of nineteenth-century verse, tracking down books and pamphlets by people born in Australia but now living overseas, writing to representatives of religious groups who might know of newsletters that printed poems, as well as re-reading familiar poems to see if they showed a radiance I had not noticed before. The idea of a discrete body of work abiding ideally in the space marked out by three overlapping sets was beguiling, and doubtless forced me to look in places I might otherwise have passed by. But after a while I found myself compelled to change my guiding metaphor. I started to think of 'Australia', 'religion' and 'poetry' as different threads that had been



interlaced, and I was encouraged when I recalled one of Ludwig Wittgenstein's remarks in the *Philosophical investigations* when explaining the notion of 'family resemblance'. He wrote of how when 'spinning a thread we twist fibre on fibre', and observed that 'the strength of the thread does not reside in the fact that some one fibre runs through its whole length, but in the overlapping of many fibres'.<sup>7</sup>

'Poetry', 'religion' and 'Australia' are threads made from the overlapping of various fibres, not one of which runs through a whole length. Reading and re-reading for the anthology I found there to be no single knot that ties together all three to make 'Australian religious poetry'. There are several knots and they do not always tie up the same fibres. Let me give some examples. What makes David Curzon's 'Proverbs 6:6' an Australian religious poem is very different from what allows us to describe Nigel Roberts' 'Reward/for a missing deity' and the Yirrkalla people of Arnhem Land's 'The Djanggawul song cycle' in the same three words. David Curzon was born in Melbourne but has lived in New York for most of his life. His poem is a midrash on a biblical text. Taken from the Hebrew verb *drash*, meaning 'search', midrash is a rigorous yet imaginative inquiry into the substance of scripture with a view to linking it to present concerns and questions. In writing this way Curzon joins himself to a tradition of commentary that can be traced back centuries before the common era. Nigel Roberts was born in New Zealand but has lived most of his adult life in Australia. By and large, his writing answers to American rather than Australian verse. 'Reward/for a missing deity' gains its force by twinning the genre of the advertisement for a missing person with a sense of God's absence. And the Yirrkalla people's song cycle is, as I suggested earlier, not a poem in a traditional western sense; it is abstracted from its ceremonial contexts, translated from an Aboriginal tongue and in any case is older than the word 'Australia'.

So far I have been trying to uncover some of the complexities in the simple expression 'Australian religious poetry'. Now I would like to step back a little and talk more generally about some assumptions that I have been making along the way. On the face of it, this step might look like passing from remarks based on my experience editing *The Oxford book of Australian religious poetry* to talk about philosophy and theology. I do not think there will be such a passage because one of my main assumptions is that the distinction between practice and theory is differential and not oppositional. There is no neutral zone between theory and practice, no dividing line which is neither touched by theory nor affected by practice.

That line turns out, when you look closely, to be divided: what counts as 'theory' presumes a set of past or future practices that are not always disclosed, while what serves as 'practice' embodies a range of theoretical moves, including a tacit theory of practice, that are not brought to the surface. In literary history the closest thing we have to a moment of pure practice is automatic writing, although that was always underwritten by theories that, once formulated in manifestoes, became known as dada and surrealism. And is there a 'pure theory'? It is a strange thing that what gets called 'theory' today usually takes as one of its main targets any attempt to totalize experience and knowledge. Not known for agreeing on very much, contemporary theorists tend to concur that experience and knowledge are clusters of practices that do not form an organic or dialectical whole. Their disagreements turn on the right base metaphor for those practices: 'communication', 'gender', 'the other', 'the political', 'writing', 'the unconscious' and so on.

I do not propose to discuss either this broad convergence or these many divergences in modern critical theory. Nor do I intend to talk at any length about how the theory–practice distinction functioned when editing my anthology. To be sure, the task of gathering together some Australian religious poetry fell to me after I had written on certain themes and authors in philosophy, poetry and theology, and after I had written four collections of poetry. That earlier work must have affected my selections – more positively than negatively, I hope – and I imagine too that the experience of editing the anthology has subtly changed how I think and write. But my interest is with general assumptions rather than personal consequences, and so I would like to discuss two points, implicit in the first part of this article, that bear on thinking about literature and theology in the Christian world.

Early on, I made two claims in the one sentence: that poetry changes over time and place, and that difficulties emerge when those historical and cultural difficulties are occluded. When traced to its beginnings, this is the question of definition which, since Socrates, has been tightly linked to the question of intelligibility. For those who follow Socrates (and at a fundamental level that is everyone in the West), what is definable, and hence intelligible, is what in principle can be rendered present. This is not a present moment to be replaced by another present moment. (For Socrates, Plato and beyond that would be an image of the unintelligible.) Rather, a definition is a pure and sharp light that isolates something and makes it appear frozen in time. The intelligible can be abstracted from time and place; it can be repeated without change. This notion of intelligibility has proven to be far more durable than either Socratic

definition or the doctrine of the Forms. It is the bedrock of modern science and technology. No one has seen the consequences of this more clearly than Martin Heidegger who, in several brilliant papers of the 1950s, argues that modern science (in the sense of *Wissenschaft*) has given up thinking in order to calculate. Part of what he means is that, in taking mathematics as guide, science posits an object sphere which has the character of exactitude, and therefore the only representations that are signified are those which can be rendered in symbolically precise ways. Science has become research into nature, with the traits of a projected plan, a methodology and an ongoing activity – the inevitable result of which is that nature is understood only when objectified.<sup>8</sup> Science may question itself and set itself new goals but it never changes its metaphysical agenda, its totalizing programme of regarding the Other by way of the Same.

If the Greek notion of intelligibility is the bedrock of science and technology it is also a touchstone of all other discourse. People like to see poetry, for example, as a speaking and writing that keeps itself open to alterity and that tries not to domesticate what it encounters as strange or uncanny. We re-read certain poems and even memorize them because of a mystery that beckons and abides. And yet even the most adventurous poetry, that which in striving to tell the truth exposes itself to loss of face or meaning, eventually yields to commentary and so becomes an episode in a literary history. Emmanuel Lévinas has discussed this as an instance of a general distinction between the saying and the said. In the act of saying, I am sincere, vulnerable, exposed to the other person; it is a moment without theme which occurs within the trace of the infinite and which answers to a different kind of intelligibility. Here the question of definition is recast as the question of the other. This second intelligibility is the ethical, understood as an obligation toward the other person that touches me before he or she is presented to consciousness as *him* or *her*. This ethical saying, however, slides inevitably into another order of discourse, the said, which is the realm of the ontological, where presence reigns, and where a totalizing commentary is possible. But even here the ethical does not cease to call, for authentic poetry has an uncanny ability to unsay itself, to show its marks of the infinite, to keep itself from falling completely into a static totality.

That memorable lyric poems suggest they have been occasions of pure saying, times that have been partly lost and perhaps were never present, rings true. In modern poetry I find this effect in lyrics by (amongst others) René Char and Eugenio Montale, Wallace Stevens and Francis Webb. But the hint of a pure saying always suppresses an

impure action; and is it not true to say, as Harold Bloom does, that capable poems begin with an ironic swerve from the poems that matter most to them? In the world of authors the other may command in and through a poem from a great height, but the response will not be one of passivity. Where Bloom and Lévinas would agree, though, is that poetry is not written under the sign of presence. For the one presence is a religious illusion, for the other it is an impediment to authentic faith, while for both it is a Christian mystification with a complex root system in Greek philosophy.

This brings me to my second assumption, that the word 'God' more properly belongs at the end of a discourse or meditation (perhaps even a life) than at its beginnings. There are few words more overdetermined than 'God'; it satisfies desires from all spheres of human activity, both conscious and unconscious. There can be no question of isolating a pure and original sense of the word 'God', of recalling it to certain strict limits and insisting that it be used in its true sense, whether we call that biblical, religious, theological, or something else again. Whenever it is said or written, the word 'God' is never pure or simple; it divides and flees, like dropped mercury. And because 'God' has so many feelings and concepts invested in it, it is never possible to tell exactly what the word will communicate, even amongst Christians. Can one ever disentangle, even within oneself, God as an introjected father image, God as the ground of being, and God as the creator of all that is? Can one draw a steady line between myth and truth in the New Testament? Can one even resolve the ambivalence that comes with regarding God as father?

Not fully, and doubtless not all to the same extent. And yet the word 'God' imposes a minimal responsibility on those who use it, a charge to say it or write it always in contradistinction to 'god'. We may have only an imperfect idea of what the word 'God' means, but we know that it does not designate an idol. It is not easy to speak of God without making him into an idol: as even that remark shows, anthropomorphisms are very difficult to avoid. Using a more abstract and austere vocabulary, like that of metaphysics, does not in itself mean that one is separating God from idols. Metaphysics has its own version of god, the *causa sui* which fulfils the philosophical desire for an ultimate ground, whether epistemological or ontological.<sup>9</sup> To disengage God from the *causa sui* is the critical task of a non-metaphysical theology, an operation that leads to a negative theology. In such a theology 'presence' must be distinguished from 'being', as must 'transcendence'. But a non-metaphysical theology has an affirmative as well as a negative task, and that is to rethink presence and transcendence in terms of divine love rather than in the categories of being and knowing.

How can this be done? In many ways, surely, but in concluding I will suggest one: a theological ethics. At first glance this seems to be at the antipodes of mysticism which always hints at immediate and unsayable experience of divine love. For a theological ethics would teach that the divine can be approached only in and through our relations with other people. But perhaps this is an illusion, and at a certain stage the mythical crosses the path of ethics. Could it be that the presence of God occurs as traces of the infinite rather than as an *afflatus* of being? And could it be that transcendence has an ethical and not an ontological structure? In posing these questions I am of course alluding to the recent work of Emmanuel Lévinas, but I am also thinking of the Gospels. In their very different ways both impress on us that the kingdom is revealed in signs and stories. So a theological ethics would be hermeneutical through and through. It would be based in Scripture though not restricted to it, for who is to say that the divine does not leave traces outside the Book? And for that matter, who is to say that other texts – religious poems, for instance – are not already interpretations of those traces?

#### NOTES

The first part of this essay is a slightly edited version of the first part of my introduction to *The Oxford book of Australian religious verse*. Thanks are given to OUP (Australia) for permission to reprint this section.

<sup>1</sup> Maurice Blanchot (trans and introd Ann Smock), *The space of literature* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1982), p 198.

<sup>2</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche (trans Walter Kaufmann), *The gay science* (New York: Vintage Books, 1974), p 181.

<sup>3</sup> Edmond Jabès (trans Rosmarie Waldrop), *The book of questions I: the book of questions* (Middletown Conn: Wesleyan University Press, 1976), p 138; *The book of questions: Yaël. Elya. Aely.* (Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 1983), p 160.

<sup>4</sup> Paul Auster, 'Book of the Dead: an interview with Edmond Jabès' in Eric Gould (ed), *The sin of the book: Edmond Jabès* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1985), p 19.

<sup>5</sup> Samuel Johnson (ed G. B. Hill), *Lives of the English poets* vol 1 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1905), pp 291–92.

<sup>6</sup> For full details, see Ian Gillman, *Many faiths one nation: a guide to the major faiths and denominations in Australia* (Sydney: William Collins, 1988).

<sup>7</sup> Ludwig Wittgenstein (trans G. E. M. Anscombe), *Philosophical investigations* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1972), §67.

<sup>8</sup> See Martin Heidegger (trans and introd William Lovitt), *The question concerning technology and other essays* (New York: Harper, 1977), Parts I and III.

<sup>9</sup> I discuss this at length in my *The trespass of the sign: deconstruction, theology and philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989).