

FORREST CLINGERMAN  
University of Iowa

## BOOK PROFILE: *HAND TO HAND*

A profile of: Jean-Louis Chrétien's *Hand to Hand: Listening to the Work of Art*. Translated by Stephen E. Lewis. Fordham University Press, 2003. 206 pp. \$55.00 cloth; \$24.00 paper. ISBN: 0-8232-2290-X. And Jean-Louis Chrétien's *The Ark of Speech*. Translated by Andrew Brown. Routledge, 2004. 176 pp. \$104.95 cloth. ISBN: 0-4152-7699-3.

**D**ESPITE JEAN-LOUIS CHRÉTIEN'S PLACE in the recent "theological turn" of French phenomenology, there has been a paucity of English translations of his works. Fordham University Press has started to remedy this, providing three translations since 2003, while Routledge has offered a fourth. These translations will ensure that his works, particularly those profiled here, begin to impact theological investigations on culture, hermeneutics, phenomenology and the meaning of the work of art.

Chrétien's *Hand to Hand: Listening to the Work of Art* gathers a series of essays, tied together by the call and response present in human interaction with art. This interaction is seen especially in the act of listening within working and giving bodies. Chrétien offers a contribution to a phenomenology of the work of art but also a theology of culture, and not only a theology of culture, but also a meditation on the interplay of body and spirit, sight and word, speech and silence and song. *Hand to Hand* taps into a structure that infuses other works by Chrétien: the spiritual and physical structure of response and listening to the ever-present call.

*Hand to Hand* starts with an "Address" to the one who physically holds the book, explaining that the work "at hand" is filled with bodies. "The fact that the body alone witnesses to the spirit, and endlessly sends us letter of credence, or of apostasy and repudiation, is enough to guarantee the inexhaustible character of the spirit's manifestations and to keep us awake to them" (xxv). Chrétien proposes an "antiphonic" way of approaching works of art: the body responds to art, which is itself a response to a body.

The essays of *Hand to Hand* are meditations: some are reveries, while others are more systematic, but all approach concrete manifestations—water, sex, silence,

sleep, and the like—and attempt to understand them in greater light. There are short engagements with particular ideas, motifs, or works. Chrétien engages topics as diverse as “A Polytych of Slumbers” (Chapter Three), the “strange beauty” of Charon (Chapter Four), the subtle relationship of cats as a symbolic portrayal of nudity (Chapter Five), and Paul Claudel’s poetry as “speaking water” and “liquid bond” (Chapter Seven). In these shorter chapters, Chrétien marshals a considerable poetic insight, frequently crossing the boundary between an analysis of the work of art and poetic writing. These essays offer insights that come only through close and thoughtful reflection on the work of art, its bodily nature, and the act of interaction.

Chrétien’s larger essays allow the book as a whole to take on a more profound meaning. For the purposes of review, we can turn to two of his more sustained examinations. “Silence in Painting” (Chapter Two) examines the relationship between the object of painting and our ability to hear silence. The silence in painting comes via an antiphonal pairing. We first listen to a silence within ourselves as viewers. Only then can we listen to the silence of painting. Chrétien is not speaking about silence portrayed *in* paintings, but rather the silence *of* the painting itself—something akin to silent music found in paintings. In paintings of instruments, we find the “near-grace” (“all grace is near-grace” for Chrétien) of the sound of potential melodies. Such portraits of instruments show us song, says Chrétien, and render song visible. The visible and the invisible are not rigidly separated; “There is no longer any alternative between visible and invisible, audible and inaudible” (31). So also do we see the invisible shown and silent music heard in paintings of the Christ child. The play of silence and Word is an element that recurs in both works profiled.

Is there a silence in paintings peculiar to modernity? Chrétien notes Bataille’s argument for an era of silence beginning with Manet. This new silence in painting is related to art becoming the sacred. Displaying many of the leitmotifs of *Hand to Hand*, Chrétien concludes: “Ever since there has been painting, man has translated his listening to the silence of the world into forms. Every act of listening responds, and it is with his hands that the painter responds, in turn giving something to listen to. Painting makes us inhabit silence: that of the world, a musical silence. ... If we can listen to pictorial works, it is because the painter is himself or herself as much made up of listening as of vision—otherwise he or she would not be a human being” (57).

“Silence in Painting” introduces many of the philosophical themes of his work, while “From God the Artist to Man the Creator” (Chapter Six) establishes theological ones. Chrétien focuses on two interrelated questions in this essay: Why think of God through terms of human production, e.g. as “supreme artist”?

And why think of humans via categories of divine creativity? What is at stake here is the difference between production and creation; for Chrétien, only the latter occurs solely through speech and word. Offering a history of the shift from art as craft to art as creative, Chrétien looks to Plotinus and Augustine. Augustine, who Chrétien sees as a turning point, thought human art as doubly dependent upon God's creativity: humans can only transform but not create matter, and only God can create models and forms that are used by the artist. But, interestingly, this moves us in a decisive direction, for Augustine sees the artist as greater than the work. In a description of Nicholas of Cusa and Marsilio Ficino, we come to the human artist as creator. God is made into an artist just as much as the human is made a creator. This analogy between the human and the divine allows us to see that "Creation precedes the work and renders it possible" (123). At the same time, there is a danger when the human is separated from the work and becomes a creator: "It is better to be at work. Every human work is manual: always and everywhere it is our hands that work, even when they do not labor. ... The hands think and thought handles: this is the very humanity of man" (124).

If *Hand to Hand* guides us to insights concerning the bodily nature of human work and its relationship to divine creativity, then *The Ark of Speech* concentrates our attention on speech and silence, word and Word, and the ark of language that carries us through the world. It seems that the two books form an unusual diptych, with *Hand to Hand* functioning as the simultaneous outcome and precursor of *Ark*.

In the introduction, we are greeted by many of the concepts interwoven throughout the five essays of *Ark*: the hospitality of speech; the wounding nature of the word; the priority of speech; the interplay of gaze, silence, and speech; and (of course) the idea of the ark of speech. Chrétien suggests that it was not Noah, but Adam who saved animals with the "first ark" of naming. "The animals have been gathered for human speech and brought together in this speech, which names them long before they are brought together, according to this same story, in Noah's ark to be saved from the flood and the destruction it brings. ... Their first guardian, their first safeguard, is that of speech, which shelters their being and their diversity" (2). Throughout the work, Chrétien expands and plays with this image of an ark: *l'arche de parole*.

The first essay of *Ark*, "The Unheard-of," starts with the claim that listening is the most fundamental or "first" hospitality we can offer others, a precondition for other forms of hospitality. Listening always occurs and is prior to speaking, according to Chrétien, and thus provides the common space for a community. What is important is that the listener takes on a paradoxical dialectic between

universal other and particular person. Speaking does not dominate listening, insofar as being listened to is not the goal of true speech. “When I really listen *with* the other to what he himself, as he speaks, is listening to or has listened to, then it is really *he* to whom I am listening” (10). Just as speech seeks to say the otherwise unheard-of, so also is listening a listening to silence, and for the unheard-of that infiltrates speech. “Listening is not the same as decoding, for words do not constitute a code. ... Listening is a truly palpating activity, it can happen only with this heart that beats, this air breathed in and breathed out, this patient activity of the entire body. It is with all one’s body that one listens... The always unfinished truth of listening is a heartfelt truth” (15).

“Wounded Speech,” the second essay of the volume, has appeared in translation previously in *Phenomenology and the Theological Turn*.<sup>1</sup> In order to offer a phenomenology of prayer, Chrétien limits prayer to an act of voice, a speech-act. Further, “The person praying before God is in his very being an active manifestation of himself to God” (19). Confronting the other, prayer contains a circularity: we pray in order to learn to pray, and to give thanks for the ability to pray. Prayer is its own precursor, making prayer always a response and an encounter. Because of this, we begin to see prayer in different terms: “this manifestation of self to other through speech is agonistic and transformative, as it is a dialogue and conversation with the other in an encounter in which our truth is at stake” (25). We are wounded in prayer, through a transformation in the “ordeal of transcendence.” In sum, prayer is a paradigmatic manifestation of how the visible sees the invisible, manifesting one’s body and responding to a call from that which “completely exceeds” our capacities. The speech of prayer wounds through speaking what is unknown, unlearned, and unheard.

“The Hospitality of Silence,” reminds us of the connection between speech and silence. Silence is the origin point of speech, rather than its privation. Offering a phenomenological study of silence, Chrétien points out several distinctions to be made in listening to silence—between principle and act, between inner silence and outer silence, and between being “dumbstruck” and an acquired silence. The remainder of the essay develops three key dimensions of silence. The most important of all is silence as listening—the “first dimension of silence.” Second, there is silence as response, or what Chrétien calls the “colloquia of silence.” “Here, the suspension of speech is still itself speech, an eloquent silence, a place of encounter and mutual presence” (48). At the height of silence is the third dimension: silence as excess. It turns to the religious manifestation of Speech Incarnate, for the Word redeems human silence and allows us to listen for a

---

<sup>1</sup> Anne A. Davenport’s translator’s preface to Chrétien’s *The Call and the Response* (New York: Fordham UP, 2004), gives a useful description of this essay in its original context in the debate over religious phenomenology.

Eucharistic excess in the cosmic silence. Such a silence opens us, wounds us spiritually and bodily, and summons us.

Chrétien explains that the fourth and fifth essays of *Ark* are related, for both question aspects of the ark of speech. Chrétien's description of this ark at the beginning of the fourth chapter merits quoting in full, for it exemplifies how Chrétien both participates in and extends trajectories of recent French religious thought:

Human speech forms an ark: it thus sets in motion, incessantly, its potential for gathering, sheltering, and safeguarding, by taking up, translating and giving them new impetus the luminous and inchoate solicitings of the world, its murmured appeals, its silences verging on utterance, its urgent insinuations. The ark lets be what it welcomes, and without this there would be no welcome given to the world, or to what dwells in it or is found there, but an arbitrary phantasmagoria, a disorderly carnival of images (77).

Starting with this description, Chrétien addresses the question of whether it is possible for beauty to say adieu—"À Dieu," to God. Beauty has the potential to reside purely in immanence—we can partake in beauty in such a way that we forget what rests behind it. Looking at thinkers as varied as Augustine, Barth, and Pseudo-Dionysius, Chrétien argues for an image of the Word as an excess of beauty. There is a powerful connection between the love from the voice of God, the wound of our speech as it addresses the other, and the paradox of beauty. Beauty cannot speak God, and so it can only say adieu—it only speaks to God. But beauty is able to say À Dieu only through our adieu in the midst of silence.

If Chapter Four examines the way we summon things into the ark, then "The Offering of the World" (Chapter Five) explains where this ark is destined to go. In the most complex and exhilarating essay in the book, Chrétien shows how speech has the task of giving the world to God. Our words respond to beauty, creating a seeming paradox. After all, how can we offer God that which already belongs to the divine? Importantly, we see the limits of philosophy; it cannot offer the world to God, unlike religious discourse. But this difference allows another stream of thinking, for just as prayer is the response of religion, awe and wonder are responses of philosophy.

But how do we offer the world in speech? By responding to the "mute speech" already present in the world. We voice the song of the cosmos, which returns us to the bodily nature of humanity: "For our integrity does not reside in breaking away from the world, but in our community and our communion with it" (131). The place of humans, then, is to offer God the world, by offering up the hymn of

praise that echoes in the world already. The dialectic between human, God and world is based on calling forth and responding; the world must lend itself to our offering, just as God must summon us to make this speech. Chrétien sees wounded speech, silence, praise and manual work as ways of human response, as words from creation addressed to the Word of creation. Such words issue from a community of the mystical body in and of Christ.

Chrétien's works seek to create a dialogue that meanders through thinking judiciously and provocatively. For the reader, this necessitates approaching the book like a poem or a painting: One must stop often and savor rather than merely analyze. Both books profiled do more than explain. They portray and exemplify the conversation as work, the dialectic between speech and silence, and the interaction between how we think and the body through which we think. Both works listen to the words on the page and to the silences between those words. They seek to follow these words and silences from page to mind, from mind to body, and back again.

FORREST CLINGERMAN is a doctoral candidate in philosophical theology at the University of Iowa. Working at the intersection of ecological thought, hermeneutics, and the theology of culture, his dissertation focuses on how individuals understand nature through a reflexive engagement with place.

© 2005 Forrest Clingerman. All rights reserved.  
Clingerman, Forrest. "Book Profile: *Hand to Hand*." *Journal for Cultural and Religious Theory* vol. 6 no. 1 (December 2004): 133-138. PURL: <http://www.jcrt.org/archives/06.1/clingerman.pdf>