

Exploring the Shadow of *Your Shadow*

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As I continue to read Kevin Hart I find writing harder. His poetry reads simply. It concerns itself with silence, that strange force of no words or every word. At times it appears to be poetry “that utters nothing you can say” (“Wimmera Songs” 163) and I feel that to speak or write would be to miss something. There is a delicacy that resists our intrusions. “You never cut a loaf that’s just been baked,” writes Hart “You let it sit and teach you many things” (“Bread” unpublished poem). To disrupt this subtle poetic intimacy may seem offensive, or even sacrilegious perhaps, like yelling in a library or a cathedral. And yet if Rilke is correct, and the song, or poetry is “a breath around nothing”, then perhaps writing about poetry could be “a breath around a breath around nothing” (Rilke 7, my translation). This presupposes humility I think, the willingness to let one’s argument unravel like a ball of string, to suggest glistening threads that might be holding the poetry together. Of course one’s web may end up clutching the air, something that Karl Barth saw in the practice of theology. “Man [*sic*] always seems to presume too much, and after all his trouble seems yet to remain with empty hands” (24). However, with Hart’s poetry, despite our presumptions, this emptiness gives us a possible point of departure, and it is so often the place where we return.

This essay focuses on three ways of reading Hart’s poetry using three “shadows” that appear to hang over some of his early work. Firstly the representational shadow, secondly the shadow of death and thirdly a kind of theological shadow, which speaks some interesting things onto the other two shadows. In particular I have focused on the poems from the 1984 volume *Your Shadow*, however, my observations are applicable to a number of Hart’s poems.

When we think of representational shadows it is almost obligatory to begin with Plato’s cave. The story from the Republic is familiar; Socrates speaks to Glaucon about a strange cave in which people are chained so that they can only look at the wall. Immediately behind these people burns a fire, lighting

up the wall in front of them, so that any object or marionette passing in front of the fire casts its shadow onto the wall. Of course Socrates' point here is that the prisoners confuse the shadows or representations with the objects themselves (because they cannot see otherwise). So he says to Glaucon "In every way, then, such prisoners would recognise as reality nothing but the shadows of those artificial objects" (Plato 223). As Socrates explains, the world works like this cave; there is a problematic difference between what we apprehend and what we refer to as the "real". Immanuel Kant also takes up this distinction between representations and reality in the eighteenth century. Kant labels the representations *phenomena*, meaning our experiences or impressions of things. The realities he labels *noumena*, meaning the things "in themselves". Kant makes the large claim that we cannot get at *noumena*, or things in themselves, rather we can only have knowledge of *phenomena*, our experiences and impressions. Any assault on *noumena* is a fraught exercise because we only deal in *phenomena*, we cannot know anything else (257-75).

In Hart's poetry this representational philosophy is continually invoked, and provides fertile soil in which Hart's shadow images can take root. In "Poem to my Brother", for example, the poet writes that "all my children/ like shadows cast by a fire inside a cave" (16). Similarly in "This Day" the moon becomes "the sun's disguise", mirroring reflected light (3). In this way Hart's poetry gives us shadows that are imperfect resemblances, stand-ins for "the real". They represent the problem of representation. And yet the poetry quickly eludes this simplistic Platonic reading by cultivating a variety of complex shadows (similar to the variety of shadows described by St John of the Cross in the book's epigraph). Sometimes for example the image of the shadow inverts the Platonic framework of representation by becoming the "real" rather than the resemblance. In this sense the shadow stands for Kant's *noumena*, that land of reality that can never be mapped. In his poem "Ten Thousand Things", for example, Hart begins by listing some exquisite *phenomena*:

The lemon trees fatted with sunlight,
the terraces laced with jasmine,
the whisper of her white dress, —

these ten thousand things of the world
that cling like honey.

But see the wind,
how it can find no home
amongst the trees, how the stones
care nothing for the earth, their roots
curled up within themselves. (1)

Here the use of strong sensual imagery, coupled with the alliteration that enhances the whisper of the white dress presents the images as Kantian *phenomena*, sheer poetic experiences clinging to the world “like honey”. However the poem is quickly caught up by the homeless wind and tossed down into “roots/ curled up within themselves”. We get echoes of Kantian *noumena*, the “thing in itself”, veiled, under the earth, curled up. Furthermore, as we move through the poem these undisturbed roots take on the characteristics of shadows:

Calm beyond reason
 they ask us to accept the solitude
 of homeless things, to forgo
 the sunlight growing wild upon the water
 so we might see
 the pure darkness inside a stone. (1)

Interestingly when Hart revised this poem for *Flame Tree*, he replaced the last two lines of this stanza with “That we might know/ The endless dark inside a stone” (45). The movement away from the visual is telling, as is the exchange of “pure” darkness for “endless” darkness. In the revised version the shadows which evoke Kant’s *noumena* quickly turn the poet toward the infinite. In both versions, however, it is important to note that these shadows are no longer the *phenomena*, they don’t stand in for the real. Quite the opposite, “Ten Thousand Things” gives us shadows *as* the real. This, it could be argued, is part of the reason for Hart’s revision. If shadows now become the deep essence of the things in themselves, then perhaps it may be ambitious to suggest that they can be “purely” grasped through normal sensory experience (i.e. sight). What we read in this poem therefore reminds us of poetry’s facility with the image of the shadow and its ability to invert philosophy’s representational framework. The image of the *phenomena* becomes the image of the *noumena*. Poetry, read through “shadow” of representational philosophy can easily return the favour.

Thus within much of Hart’s poetry, approaching things “as they are” often means approaching the darkness, void or shadow. I think that in this sense Hart is quick to agree with Kant that any attempt to approach *noumena* is problematic and asymptotically impossible, and yet it is precisely this impossibility that Hart’s poetry embraces. For Hart, walking this asymptote, this line between the known and the unknowable is extremely important. Moreover Hart sees art as the guide to this liminal realm. We can see the way in which Hart’s poem “The Members of the Orchestra” speaks of music allowing for this momentary overlap of worlds where the land of difference is opened up:

We are taken by the hand and led
 through the old darkness that separates us
 from things in themselves, through the soft fold
 of evening that keeps two days apart. (26)

Yet here the poetry eludes us again, evoking the realm of “old darkness” which is neither the *noumena* or the *phenomena* but rather the gap between them. It is what “separates us / From things in themselves”. Thus the shadow is not “the real” but rather (echoing Maurice Blanchot) the shadow becomes that realm which allows difference and the separation between image and reality. This last realm of shadows warrants an article of its own, but for our purposes it is important to note the protean movement of shadow images in Hart’s poetry. In some ways they can be read through a certain philosophy of representation, however they quickly shift from “appearance”, to “reality”, to the “realm of difference”. Such poetry therefore, can indeed teach us many things, evading the capture of certain philosophical readings, gently suggesting and imagining alternatives.

If the representational shadow shows us some of the power of Hart’s poetry, then the shadow of death might be seen as a darker counterpart. Some of the most important poems in Hart’s 1984 book share the volume’s name, appearing at regular intervals, repeatedly calling the reader back toward the poet’s major concerns. In some ways they are difficult poems, a fact that Kevin Hart noted in a 1995 interview with John Kinsella:

I’ve never fully understood those shadow poems. When I wrote them—a fair whack of them back in the early eighties—I found that in some cases it was the shadow speaking to me, not me to the shadow. When that was happening, the shadow always referred to itself in the third person. And I’ve never fully been able to work that out . . . Even now I don’t understand those poems fully. I remember they came to me with the force of necessity, but I have no idea where they came from or what the need was. (261-62)

The first “Your Shadow” begins with the Yeatsian image of the loosed falcon invoking that spiral into the chaotic world of “The Second Coming” (187):

Fed by its eye, the falcon
 swims with the flooding wind, watching
 its shadow writhe
 like something left half-dead.

Open your hand
 and see the darkness nursed there; see how
 your shadow blossoms,
 your body’s very own black flower.

It is a gift, a birth right, your baby shawl
 now growing into a shroud;
 you are an eye, intent upon this world,
 it is your pupil, shining.

Come closer, it is a trap-door
 into the secret earth, and one day soon
 you will go there
 to meet the child you were, covered with dirt.

It will not hurt you, it simply shows
 that you are not alone,
 that what you fear is part of you,
 that you are both the killer and the kill. ("Your Shadow (I)" 2)

Hart picks up the threatening image of the falcon, the anxiety of a "blood dimmed tide" being loosed, and has his falcon swimming "with the flooding wind", tethered only by some invisible force that links it to its writhing, half dead shadow. But we can see that almost immediately the poem moves from this image of the predator to the image of a hand nursing darkness. There is a dramatic reduction in scope here, from lofty windswept heights, to the contained landscape of the hand as the shadow of the falcon contracts into a shadow resting on a palm. Here the poetic voice becomes intimate in the gentle imperative of the fourth stanza ("Come closer"). This voice speaks simply, as though to a child, and we can see this again in the reassurance at the beginning of the final stanza ("It will not hurt you"). However, this reassuring tone shares the poem with a number of menacing images. Your shadow blossoms like a black lotus, that mythic plant causing hallucination or death. It grows from a shawl into a death shroud. It is the pupil of your eye through which you view the world. It leads you into the earth "to meet the child you were" colouring this meeting with dark irony by adding that this child is "covered with dirt" like a buried corpse.

Finally the poem comes to rest in its chilling combination of intimacy and darkness: "What you fear is part of you / that you are both the killer and the kill". Of course this statement is presented as a morbid inversion of the question that completes Yeats' poem "Among Schoolchildren". Where Yeats' question concerns art ("How can we know the dancer from the dance?"), Hart's question binds identity to death. This is not merely the obvious assertion that "man is destined to die once, and after that to face judgement" (Heb 9:27). Rather, Hart's line makes the claim that human mortality is linked to the propensity for murder. Therefore humanity stands in the shadow of death as both victim and perpetrator. If the reality of death was announced as a curse on Adam, its first manifestation arrived in

the form of Cain jealously murdering Abel. Interestingly this final agency spins the poem on its axis. Up until this point the reader has been led by the poetic voice, dressed by language. But suddenly, after surrendering control, the reader is charged with being death's agent as well as death's victim. Part of the violence of the poem's final line therefore, is not just the violence of the words "killer" and "kill", but it is the violence of betrayal that occurs in the poem's combination of intimacy and accusation.

The reader has "come close" but only to find themselves cast as a murderer. There are many ways to read this conclusion. In one sense it shows us the agency of non-agency, the moral implications of inertia. In another sense it may posit that kind of murder that Blanchot argues is inherent in language (see the discussion below). However the inescapability of death also resonates with a Heideggerian conception of death and shadow.

Indeed, even though the Coleridgean "force of necessity" is evident in Hart's description of the composition of the shadow poems, this does not preclude the possibility of certain philosophical connections. Hart was reading Heidegger when he wrote *Your Shadow*, something that may have everything or nothing to do with this particular poem's composition. It is worthwhile then, to examine what a Heideggerian reading of Hart's poetry may offer.

Part of Heidegger's philosophical project was an attempt to give an account of "Being" that departs radically from earlier philosophy. To simplify considerably, for Heidegger Being is what individual beings possess. It is the thing that allows us to show up as beings on the radars of other beings. However to investigate this "Being" that undergirds everything, we need to know precisely what *we* are. Therefore Heidegger argues that we need to start with ourselves, with our kind of Being which Heidegger labels "Dasein" (he also calls us Dasein). If we can find out as much as we can about Dasein then we can give a better account of Being itself. Heidegger describes this Dasein in a number of ways. Firstly, Dasein is always in the world. Its context is very important. We can't "do a Descartes" and think of ourselves as lone minds interacting with a world that may or may not be a figment of our imagination. Rather Heidegger says, "Self and the world belong together. [They] are not two beings, like subject and object" but "the unity of Being-in-the-world" (*Basic Problems* 297). Secondly Dasein is always with others. Again we are not a lone mind but we are constituted through interaction with other beings. Thirdly, Dasein is an entity whose Being "is an *issue* for it" (*Being and Time* 32). We care about who we are, what it means to exist, and what person we will become. Fourthly Dasein has a temporal nature. So each Dasein is "ahead of" itself, directed toward its "potentiality for being", or

to what it will become. It is also alongside a present world, as well as being situated in a world with a past. This temporality is important for Heidegger's conception of Dasein, hence the "time" of *Being and Time*.

Perhaps the most important aspect of Dasein, however, the thing that holds Dasein together in some sort of unity, is the spectre of its own death. Piotr Hoffman begins his essay "Death, time, history: Division II of *Being and Time*" with two quotes from Heidegger's *History of the Concept of Time*: "This certainty, that 'I myself am in that I will die', is the basic certainty of Dasein itself . . . The MORIBUNDUS first gives the SUM its sense" (316-17); "Only in dying can I to some extent say absolutely, 'I am'" (318). If Dasein is preoccupied with questions of its own Being and existence then the possibility of its non-Being and non-existence is of tremendous significance. Furthermore, for Heidegger this spectre of death is not merely a one-off "life flashes before your eyes" experience, but rather it is Dasein's constant orientation toward its own end, or to put it another way Dasein's being toward non-Being. Hoffman describe this *moribundus sum* as a recalculation of Descartes' *cogito ergo sum*, "I am only in that I find myself, at every moment of my life, powerless to escape the possibility of dying at precisely that particular moment" (197-98). Interestingly when Dasein looks ahead to its own death, all the possibilities of its own existence are arranged into some sort of whole. It is here that Dasein can determine both the unity and the utter individuality of its own life. The unity of Dasein is captured when it looks ahead to that point of death where there will be no remaining possibilities, when the existential bag of experience will be forever closed. Individuality is discovered when Dasein recognises that its own set of possibilities and experiences is unique. This means that for Heidegger my death is a singularity. Consequently no one can approach my death on my behalf, my death is mine alone and non-substitutable.

Now there is much more that could be said about Heidegger's conception of Being at this point, but for our purposes this view of death (and specifically a being oriented toward death) resonates with Hart's poetry. Interestingly Heidegger's Dasein rests in somewhat of a paradox at this point. To even conceive of the unity and individuality of its own Being, Dasein must gaze toward a future where it does not exist, where all possibilities are closed. Therefore its life is made whole in death, its Being finds cohesion in non-Being.

And so if we are to return to Hart's first "Your Shadow" poem, we get that sense of a Heideggerian Dasein and its Being-toward-death. Hart's line likening the shadow to a "shining pupil" echoes Heidegger's Dasein who

only finds a unity when facing death. The pupil, of course, is an important image here, being literally a hole (and not an organ made of tissue or cells). In this sense the shadow is likened to the space, or the void of death that speaks a unity back *onto* the living.

Furthermore, if we examine Hart's fourth "Your Shadow" poem, the Heideggerian constancy of death (or at least a constant being-toward-death) can again be seen. Here the shadow cannot be shaken. It is "already obsessed" like a stalker. It tries to be a grave, that black hole of non-being that becomes the destination of the deceased. At noon the sun shadow is all but banished by the sun, but the afternoon sees it lengthen as it noses "ahead of you like a dog" ("Your Shadow (IV)" 31). Now for Heidegger "ahead of" was a term used to describe Dasein's orientation toward future possibilities (*Being and Time* 236-37) and we do get a sense here, of the shadow directing or leading the "you" of the poem. And so just as Heidegger names death as the pivotal "ahead of" event, Hart constructs the shadow as death's constant imprint and reminder. One way of reading Hart's shadow poems, therefore, is as a Heideggerian being-toward-death, where poetry becomes the means by which one can gaze at the infinite space of non-Being. In this sense Hart's poetry enacts some of the Heideggerian conceptions of what existence or being could mean.

Finally I think that it is worthwhile to suggest three areas where Hart's Catholic faith may intersect with these poetic and philosophical issues. In other words there may be a kind of theological shadow that permeates Hart's poetry.

Firstly there is a strong connection between some Christian thinking and the type of representational philosophy alluded to at the beginning of this paper. One key Biblical verse here comes from Paul's letter to the Corinthians: "For now we see through a glass, darkly; but then face to face: now I know in part; but then shall I know even as also I am known" (King James Version, 1 Cor 13:12). A particular reading of the Christian story therefore gives us a human knowledge that has similar problems to those posed by Plato and Kant. It is a knowledge that is characterised by finite "creatureliness" where God says, "for my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways" (Is 55:8). It is also a knowledge marred by the catastrophe of sin and the fall, hence Paul's indictment of humanity in his letter to the Romans: "Because that, when they knew God, they glorified him not as God, neither were thankful; but became vain in their imaginations, and their foolish heart was darkened" (Rom 1:21).

Furthermore, this incomplete and corrupted knowledge provides a very real obstacle for the Christian who wants to know the God who is complete and uncorrupted. Consequently in the Old Testament particularly, there are depictions of a God who is hidden from humans, veiled atop Mount Sinai delivering the law, quarantined in the tabernacle inside the most holy place, always standing behind his glory in the form of fire or a cloud. Therefore for some, including the Christian mystics that Hart was reading in the early 1980s human knowledge of God is always post-Edenic. That is, humans are only left with the traces of a God who has receded into darkness. Of course this places an even greater weight on Hart's poetic shadows. In the poem "To the Spirit" for example, Hart writes "I find you as I remember the sun whenever I strike / a match" ("To the Spirit" 32). Similarly in Hart's translation of Jorge Carrera Andrade's poem "The Mirror":

You make your position quite clear.
In the darkness
I see your silence shine. (35)

The poem speaks of a moment of visitation, a figure arriving at night and releasing prayers. The type of knowing here is important. It resonates with the attempt to know God even within (or perhaps precisely within) his veiling. Thus it is within the darkness that the poet is able to "see your silence shine". Here the marriage of the visual ("see") and aural ("silence") is striking. Such a combination gives us a strange type of knowing (akin perhaps to the density of some Pauline metaphors—for example Col 2:6-7 or 1 Cor 13:12). Furthermore this kind of knowledge borders on the impossible and incoherent (how can one hear silence, let alone "see" it?). What we have here then, is that type of shadow that not only veils and conceals, but also enacts an enigmatic combination of veiling and unveiling.

Secondly for Hart, *the* example of a Heideggerian being-toward-death can be seen in the figure of Jesus Christ. In one sense the gospel writers portray Jesus as quite secretive about his mission. So he speaks in parables and in John's gospel, for example, he often says, "My time has not yet come". However there are moments where the gospel writers make it very clear that Jesus thought his mission was to die (for example Mk 10:45). In scriptural language Christ's willingness to accept his fact is depicted when he "steadfastly set His face to go to Jerusalem" (Lk 9:51). Of course this attitude for Hart is the epitome of a being-toward-death. Therefore in a very different way to the retreating, shadowy God, the Incarnate God too reveals himself in the shadow of his own death. Of course for the Catholic this moment of death is held and suspended in the icon of the crucifix. And in turn, Hart's poem

“A Silver Crucifix upon my Desk” holds this icon in suspension, showing how a divine shadow can almost impinge on the everyday:

By evening
 I no longer look your way, but watch
 your shadow
 steal towards my hand, I hear you talk
 in the clock’s dialect
 and my pen
 becomes an ancient nail. (53)

Interestingly there are two threats in these lines that move in opposite directions. First there is the shadow that ominously steals toward the poet’s hand, and this finds its counterpoint in the pen that is transformed into a crucifixion nail. Therefore just as the icon suspends the shadow of Christ’s death, so to poetry can enact the very moment of piercing.

Thirdly, Hart’s faith in the Christian story seems to provide him with an eschatology that allows him a hope for the future. This is the “then” of 1 Corinthians 13:12, “then I shall know fully”. It is the “then” of Revelation 21 when Jesus returns to a new heaven and new earth just like Eden, where God meets humans face to face no longer veiled by shadow. Interestingly, this future says something to the problem of representation and the problem of death, both of which seem to stalk *Your Shadow*. Hence in the second last poem of the volume Hart speaks of the day where shadows will cease:

When the last day comes
 a ploughman in Europe will look over his shoulder
 and see the hard furrows of the earth
 finally behind him, he will watch his shadow
 run back into his spine.

 It will be morning
 for the first time, and the long night
 will be seen for what it is,
 a black flag trembling in the sunlight. (“The Last Day” 56)

This is a kind of return to Eden. The difficulties of labour now lie behind the ploughman. The curse of death is banished along with the shadow. The problem of representation is finally overcome as the long night is “seen for what it is”. However, “The Last Day” is firmly eschatological and in the meantime one is left to wrestle with those profound experiences of mortality, representation and unbridgeable distances. Of course this is the space for poetry and these are the impossibilities that give Hart’s poetry its breath.

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