

## BEYOND THE BONE-HARD CONFINES OF THE MIND; DENKDICHTUNG AND THE RECLAMATION OF ETHICS

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Die Religion, die bloss auf Theologie aufgebaut ist,  
kann niemals etwas Moralisches enthalten.

Kant, "uber Pedagogik", Werke, VIII.

### I

The hubris of the great Kena Upanishad - not resulting in the kind of nemesis we are accustomed to - provides the backdrop to my reflections.<sup>1</sup> Most of the fourth part of this Upanishad, providing a taxonomy, elucidates the status of the gods - an Eastern Thomism of sorts, and no less magisterial - in terms of the gods' respective distances to the Eternal. Theomachy turns into joyously ineffable theodicy.

But my departures are returns, and the Kena Upanishad serves also as a caveat for my ruminations in the following. Without 'demythologizing' (Prof Kurt Hübner, after all, has already refuted Bultmann's assault),<sup>2</sup> we hold Agni as a seer-will, kavikratu; he is the "will in the heart", kratur hrđi. Cognate constellations will, of course, be found in all major religions. Without this "will in the heart" - the equipoise of volition - nought avails, and we will hardly emerge from the morass of ontolo-literary perplexity. This is my dominant burden, which I seek to lighten. And thus when I cite in my proemial remarks Kant's exhortation, I am positioning the argument towards the miscellany of artistic activity falling in line with inspirational paradigms. This is notwithstanding its friction with contemporary discursive practices. Principally two reasons account for this subjective revival: one, to remind ourselves of a certain Indo-European etymon - for the root 'mon', 'to think', 're-member', unalterably pertains to the offices of the poet, whatever our dissension with mythical ideas; and two, because everything we are and possess in this world has been facilitated by an-other; and finally because thinking - frequently untouched by the freight of disquisitive practices - resides in a

thatched, dilapidated cabin, perhaps with head tilted to the side (putting the helm a-starboard), not thrust upward in condescending avuncular motion by the chin. The elevated angle, presenting a shortfall in humility, signifies the caput mortuum in more ways than one!

My last trope sketches the adversity of all critical and creative endeavour, for the self-styled intellectuals in our midst often carry their hauteur like frogs that gloriously swell before ignominiously bursting. To give an Oriental hue, and to cool the coat (though perhaps in some ways to inflame the hide), most so-called 'thinking' proceeds indeed from what the homo indicus might call the vital mind, a frontal formation of the vital Purusha, or Conscious-Being. On the other hand, the function of the thinking mind proper, the buddhi, is to think and reason, perceive and evaluate. So I massage snake-oil into the lobes and forehead, drop a coin down the slot, and the mind-machine goes 'puff'! Even adept and exhilarative reflexive manoeuvring, if it fails to create, remains reflexive, only rearranges the corpse of thought.<sup>3</sup> The majority of theorists today are little more than morticians; rarely are they psychopomps. Disporting airily up and down an abandoned Jacob's Ladder is not perforce to gain admittance to any of the higher echelons of the intellectual Empyrean.

Tall ladders carry commensurate risks. We need look closer to the ground for a dependable measure. Heidegger's *Was heisst Denken?* not only links Denken, thinking, to Danken, thanking, but he also speaks of "denkend dichten", which I propose to conflate to *Denkdichtung*, a cumbrous nomenclature, but implicitly sanctioning the pectinate and pensive, philosophico-poetical strain - the consilience of purposive aesthetic zeal at the core of the ostensibly singular exertions of the philosophic and poetic acts.<sup>4</sup> But we can take this a step further; Denken facilitates understanding, for the Anglo-Saxon root of understandan means literally 'to stand under or among', foiling more elevated posture. And so it is with the word 'humble', springing from the Latin root 'humi', 'on the ground', abutting on 'homage', with which we are all familiar, if rather depreciatively.

The immediate advantage of territorial fellowship is in the obligation it imposes, of what Kant, in *The Metaphysic of Morals*, calls a Tugendverpflichtung, obligatio ethica; its freedom, to be sure, comes later; Tugendpflichten or officia ethica furnish, as Cicero's *De Amicitia* already makes plain, mutual respect, amor benevolentium. Philosophy cannot continue treading about slipshod, indisposed to affirming its foundations, while poetry's aerial longing is seen to entrust itself (at

least provisionally) to accepting ethic's tellurian injunction that issues, and whets, touchstones of human answerability. We begin, of course, with deficit and disequilibrium, which might never be satisfactorily rescinded; that is not the point; Hamann indeed has shown that the philosopher-historian produces not only *Dichtung* of a much lesser value than the poet, but *Dichtung* itself is more philosophical than any arrangement and explication of facts, however abstract and sprightly these be. But in the programmatically intuitive splicing of *Denkdichtung*, reciprocal respect and guidance governs the relations, and each province of knowledge attains to its arc of fulness.

Das Bekannte überhaupt ist darum,  
weil es bekannt ist, nicht erkannt.

Hegel, Vorrede zur *Phänomenologie des Geistes*.

### III

Yet today we are standing between a wall of rain and a scrap of sun; the rainbow we see is no longer one of promise - even its colours have dulled, like a skyline scumbled after too many strafings - and the rainwall pledges to engulf us. What is the calamitous flaw; is there a *medicina catholica* that will rehabilitate us? We will come to that in a moment.

There must be will, good-will - the seer-will - for the hybrid *Denkdichtung* to become possible, for rain to pass and for stability to return to the celestial motions, viewed from afar and fixed on the corona of the heart. But there are truculent obstacles in our way, positions that need re-defining, knowledge that demands reclaiming. Kant's categorical imperative, the autonomy of the will, and his *Gewissensbegriff* (concept of conscience) have all but disappeared. That ethics should only as recently as Kant have received its *Selbstbewusstsein* (self-consciousness), and so quickly forfeited it again, is - as Vonessen astutely remarks - unique in history.<sup>5</sup> "The loss of a fixed position", he adds, "brings with it a loss of safety, which is detectable in every question. And since this safety takes the form of thought, we have actually to register a loss of knowledge".<sup>6</sup>

How does contemporary theory deal with any of this? The empty can of the sign and its unceasing interrogations bring up only tinny sounds, never the shifting of tectonic plates, nor the grave rumblings of

thunder. For that the can would have to be placed into hands of flesh, turned in the garish sun, cracked on the asphalt, or pitched, finally (not quite a shell, but no matter), far into the sea. That none of this occurs, of course, makes the single most astounding factor of contemporary theory its unforfeitable boredom.

Allowing for my impressionistic shorthand, what then of the desire to mediate between theology and literature, given that it is unlikely to revive any spirits, living or dead. Yet Hart has managed in *The Trespass of the Sign* to engage even the most recalcitrant reader.

Even theorists need their beginnings, and Hart's prejacent position to unravelling his mottled theology is that memorable episode with the Edenic apple, retailed now by Dante, but whether it is hard rind or verjuice of extant, undifferentiated knowledge that prompts Adam's flagrant transgression, remains concealed; Hart's position is concerned with linguistic and para-linguistic operativeness, implementing a metaphysic of presence, which embargoes any suggestion of taste (elementary of aesthetic), or mythical motivity. Yet in a very acute sense, Hart unwittingly exposes the complicity of academicians in the contemporary philosophico-literary bedlam, and ends by eliminating, to his deficit, the terminal locus poenitentiu. For the concern of the arts, and of theology (if it is not to desiccate from sheer ennui) is to seek out liveliness in the action of a spiritual impetus; hence its pulpy carapace requires unremitting lubrication. Adam's hermeneutic in the eighth heaven of Paradise, Hart avers, is sovereign: the distinction between signum and res significata, between the sign and the offence it delineates, complete; the thing at issue is 'the trespass of the sign', an offence against Divine injunction. So far so good; or is it? Is that first step altogether sound? Well, not quite. For one the vagrant sentry of Barthes' primary and secondary semiological system slumbers hereabouts and has just been trodden on (we will put him back to sleep in a twinkling, after putting a question or two); for another - concerned with effects, and thus moral positions - there begins to resound a necessitas peccandi of the actions surrounding the hapless apple-tree, evolving a fraught and tenuous status from which even these observations are rather feckless attempts at extrication. For how else can I voice my individual trespass, blunderbuss my noisy knowing, without this first offence, which henceforth legitimates the variety of apostasy from the proffered Edenic ideal? We are the begetters of a knowledge that is becoming increasingly 'differentiated', no longer between good and evil (untenable contraries to many theorists) but between shades of a continuum that reject the serviceable

post-lapsarian binarism. Hart's traditional construal of the Fall situates Pascal's wager as a revived Kantian 'Sicherheitsmaxime',<sup>7</sup> now on permanent loan to infidel philosophers. That a few shekels invariably fall into his can - wherein the sign has decomposed - fatally flaws his position, removes any claim to objectivity.

Why this plaint laid at Hart's door? Is not his skotoma or blindness characteristic of legions of literary philosophers and embryonic theologians? Yes, but Hart is also in the vanguard of a licensing activity that causes the last plates of our exilic bedrock to shift, and shifting, to knock us off our feet. The fact is often undervalued that the Fall is a falling, hasn't yet consumed the fuel of its evil consequences, despite our critical pou stou having received a buffing of the floor-boards that makes our thought ever more slippery. Hart is also, by recoiling from grounded positions and first states, downgrading the logocentric function of creation, removes the rebuttal and surrebuttal, slips from the bench into the dock. The prelapsarian state, we recall, would have assured a continuance of undivided as well as unmediated knowledge, without partitioning thought and its expression:

Tu credi 'l vero; ch' i minori e' grandi  
di questa vita miran nello specchio  
in che, prima che pensi, il pensier pandi.<sup>8</sup>

Thus Dante's ancestor Cacciaguida in Canto XV of the *Paradiso*, some eleven cantos before Adam makes his entrance, which Hart escorts all the way, and beyond:

A redeemed soul, entirely consonant with God's will, Adam knows Dante's thoughts with far more certainty than Dante can know the most elementary truth; his perception of the poet's mind is immediate, unhindered by language.<sup>9</sup>

For all the level planes, Hart's suggestion reads 'language' as little more than words uttered in speech. We balk at that 'far greater certainty'; had not Cacciaguida, despite his thoughts' range "high above the mark of mortal kind" (in that respect analagous to Adam's) suggested an equality in the speechless transmission of thought? Certainly Adam seems not to know or care that Dante's aptitude (nor that of other, lesser beings sojourning in this sphere) is the transfer of thoughts; perhaps his overweening pride reaches here once more, unwittingly, to the fore. Yet the greater embarrassment comes with

Hart's notion of language as hindrance, and immediately shows his hand (sans the stigmata). It is indeed quite the reverse; Cacciaguida is overwhelmingly emphatic that though his answer is already decreed, he wants to hear *la voce tua sicura*:

Let thy voice firm, bold and glad proceed;  
 Utter the will, utter the wish whereto  
 My answer hath already been decreed.<sup>10</sup>

Speech affirms choices and identities, expresses the will, binds to consequences. Language is the carrion comfort (pace Hopkins) of linguists, speech the preserve of poets.<sup>11</sup> There is an unimpeachable creative spur alive in speech, notwithstanding all alleged defects in a defective world. Adam's alleged hermeneutic mastery is in the mirror of Cacciaguida - closer an ancestor to the poet than the prosaic Adam is to either - far removed from the ribbon of linguistic mastery that Hart covets to stick to his lapel.

Ingesting the forbidden fruit from the Tree of Knowledge, as it is dubbed, cannot be construed as subordinate to the trespass - as act it retains primacy, for it is in the act that a division of knowledge takes place, a schism between good and bad knowledge, even if we express it here for the sake of pragmatism in the form of a solecism. Perhaps we are reminded in some ways of Faust and Mephistopheles' wager with God, of the question if the Deed precedes the Word.

Here the question of 'knowledge' needs to be briefly addressed. Prelapsarian knowledge, though being undifferentiated, is nonetheless knowledge of a kind that allows Adam and Eve to make an intelligent, responsible choice. The choice of what is contrary to knowledge (knowledge in the sense of freedom from error) is consequently more than mere trespass of what reads, anthropomorphically, as little more than dogmatic intransigence. And here is the rub. We ingest that forbidden fruit every time we trespass not the moral law (as defined in terms of laws and injunctions) but the inner law, held in place by discrimination and at an angle to the Dantean mirror of the Empyrean inside the heart. The Fall is historical and extra-historical - it repeats itself, as I have already suggested - whenever we choose sophistry over philosophy.

But we need to probe deeper. The Adamic act of ingestion is itself an incorporation of falsehood - a fear heretofore, one supposes, wholly external to Man, and henceforth passed on to generations. To speak only of a trespass of God's injunction, though indubitably the central

issue (if we only look at the tap of the gamboge perplexity) is to abevacuate the dynamic moment of choice, and to offer no direction out of the tangle of false and true knowledge. The alternative to nominating, even if not securing, the determinative power of the logos, is Nimrod's domain, a proliferation of tongues, vociferous spruikers, and inconsolable mountebanks of every persuasion. If I seek to intervene in momentous creative acts, I need to know well the before and the after, to discriminate in my account, and to protect those things of value. We nudge the sentry of Barthes' semiology, whom we neglected earlier; he sputters, then rises to his feet. Hart's reasoning leans heavily on Barthes' supposition that the world is void of the mythos - and of mythical antecedents, he confides - which Prof H<sup>n</sup>bner has shown to be erroneous in every respect, and which needs no elaboration. That Hart cites Barthes' idea that God is never a signifier, reveals both Barthes and Hart's misapprehension that God and any ascriptive process is ever anthropomorphic, leading (one may pardon my tautology) to a sterile nominalism. A point that is clearly lost on Derrida - for 'God' in the shape of word is ironically construable in infinite ways, as Hart himself implies by positioning Nietzsche's rather moralistic spirit of "God is dead" as expressive of either the impossibility of locating a transcendent point, or as a formula of unbelief or disbelief - thereby incidentally missing the fact that he is biting again into the apple's soured rind. The point, surely, is one of common-sense; Nietzsche's declaration remains a proffering of the forbidden apple, the verjuice of anticipatory intelligence, whether we stew it or take it straight.

The triune rood of Gem<sup>nt</sup>, Gestalt and Symbol lies in pieces, seemingly unresurrectable, certainly inexpressible, of bleached utility in a specious age. The symbol as retinaculum elementorum, the rope of the elements, has become a noose to the things it would amorously bind. The forest of dead signifiers is not fortuitously 'dead', sapped of life, but in its disseminative moods seeks to make food offered to the dead palatable. The brilliance of Nietzsche, who emerges in Hart from time to time, is full of shadows, occasionally hits with his hammer a twisted nail:

I want, once and for all, not to know many things. Wisdom sets limits to knowledge too.<sup>12</sup>

He could hardly have spoken to a deeper purpose. But the shadows prevail in the final telling, grotesque in the immense hubris, long



before his drift into insanity:

This treatise ... gay and fateful in tone, a daemon rising to laughter: there is nothing more substantial, independent, iconoclastic - more evil.<sup>13</sup>

Is Nietzsche the mystagogue presented by Hart to counter Kant? It seems that way, and Hart finds considerable dissatisfaction with a little-known paper Kant penned in 1796: *Von einem neuerdings erhobenen vornehmen Ton*, where Kant proposes that the assertions of mystics generate an Afterphilosophie, occasionally spell its end. That "recently elevated tone", however, is something Kant ascribes to all thinkers who don't have to work to make a living; he is evidently reproving the lack of systematism and method in charlatans (it is doubtful, Hart recognises, if Kant has read Eckhart, et alia), who would implicitly pose the greatest risk to a recognition of his difficult oeuvre, a foreboding which the passage of time has more than vindicated. We must also understand Kant's reservations in context of his psychiatric studies, especially his *Versuch über die Krankheiten des Kopfes*, where Gem<sup>n</sup>tskrankheiten, diseases of the mind, are explored, often being the result, he says, of a neglect of the reasoning apparatus. Hence the *pruvisio sensitiva* - the prescience of extrasensory intelligence - must rightly appear suspect to a system that seeks to raise the *Selbstbestimmung*, the knowledge of selfhood, from nothing but the debris of self. G<sup>f</sup>tama the Buddha is curiously alike in this avoidance of metaphysical discussion, for similarly compelling reasons; his brief, like Kant's, was quite different; for all the idealism it was entirely practical in the beginning, the middle, and the end.

But that the sacred love I watch within  
 With constant gaze, and which doth  
 in me breed  
 Sweet longing, may the more fruition  
 win,  
 Let thy voice firm, joyous and bold proceed ....  
 Dante, *Paradiso*, Canto XV.

#### IV

Endings recall beginnings, and we are once more propelled towards



the question of ethics. The meaning of ethos is dwelling, abode, natural domicile; it can also more specifically denote the place of a plant or an animal. Its sense of place suggests genius loci and provenance. But as Vonessen points out, it has a double-meaning, denoting 'pen of an animal', "the prison of animalistic impulses." This ambiguity makes it such a battle-ground for Sittlichkeit, morals.

Hegel's *Logic* shows how a quantitative increase of gases abruptly results in a qualitative change. Philosophy has become almost overnight an unfamiliar and estranged bedfellow of the enquiring mind. In this dilemma Hart, equitable and benevolent, befriends the strange creature, seeks conciliation. Yet the apoplectic burden of his philosophy remains: the Procrustean couch of wayward sophistry alternately sounds the cracking of ligaments and bones, and the compression of blood. The creature that is released in the end has changed beyond recognition, but at least alterity has once more been contained. Except the blood, you see; the memory of the blood, keeping the claims of feeling alive.

Hegel's *Aufhebung*, sublation, finds no sanctuary that preserves: the rather more virulent *Destruktion* of Heidegger and coterie have despoiled our culture of any certainty, and left behind the withering flower of scepticism. In this alone we see that Heidegger, like Nietzsche, clomb the asperous path between the quintessence of meaning and the chasm of the void: indeed, without sharp discrimination, the 'thanking' of thinking turns into arrogation and hubristic assumption. The flower of scepticism only grows in the shade, and needs to be watered by black night. The wizened strip of rainbow that leans woe-begone into its cup begins to falter from the skies. A still-life, to be sure, but one endowed with symbolical strength. For just at the point where its back is about to bend to the cusp of the earth and the unstrung bow of hope, it remembers; as does the sun, dispelling a monumental wall of rain.

*Victoria*

## REFERENCES

1. While the Isha Upanishad, broadly speaking, is concerned with the problem of God and the world, the Kena Upanishad (kena: by whom or what) focuses on God and the Soul.
2. Kurt Hübner, Ch. XXIV, "Das Mythische in der christlichen Religion und der klassische Versuch Rudolf Bultmanns, sie zu entmythologisieren", Die Wahrheit des Mythos (Munich, 1985), pp.324-344.
3. Franz Vonessen links purposive reflexivity to  $\alpha\lambda\eta\theta\epsilon\iota\alpha$ , which is what we stand in alarming need of. F. Vonessen, Ch. I, "Eine vergessene Tugend", Krisis der Praktischen Vernunft (Heidenheim, 1988), p.44.
4. The felicity with Denkdichtung - which to some must appear unappeasably tautological and alliteratively cumbersome - is its suggestion both of density, compaction of thought, and Denkrichtung, 'direction(ality) of thought': the poetic energy proceeding without the usual encumbrances (philosophical and other), nor stymied by (or rather released from) the "selbstverschuldete Unmündigkeit" (Kant).
5. Franz Vonessen, Ch. I, "Wissenschwund in der Ethik", Krisis der Praktischen Vernunft, Op.Cit. pp.27-46.
6. Ibid. pp.31-32 (translation by author).
7. ie "Sicherheitsmaxime" der Religion: was als Mittel oder als Bedingung der Seligkeit mir nicht durch meine eigene Vernunft, sondern nur durch Offenbarung bekannt und vermittelt eines Geschichtsglaubens alleine in meine Bekenntnisse aufgenommen werden kann, "brigens aber den reinen moralischen Grundsätzen nicht widerspricht, kann ich zwar nicht für gewiss glauben und beteuern, aber auch ebensowenig als gewiss falsch abweisen. Kant, Werke, IV, p.221.
8. "Cacciaguida esulta per la venuta di Dante", La Divina Commedia (ed) Carlo Dragone, Canto XV (Rome, 1982), p.1106.
9. Kevin Hart, Ch. 1, "Interpretation, signs and God", The Trespass of the Sign, (Melbourne, 1989), p.3.
10. (translation by author).
11. We do well to recall here that German for 'speech' is Sprache, linking to the verb sprechen, to speak. Linguistically and philosophically, the emphasis in German is on the expressive component of the linguistic act.
12. Nietzsche, "Maxims and Arrows", Twilight of the Idols, 3, in The Portable Nietzsche, (ed & trans) W. Kaufmann (Viking, 1973).
13. (translation by author). Curiously Kaufmann entirely omits this proemial and damning remark of Nietzsche's in his Portable Nietzsche.