

HARDLY CENTRED:
PETER KENNA'S *A HARD GOD*

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One of the most noticed features of Peter Kenna's *A Hard God*¹ is its use of two playing spaces: a larger stage identified with and by the adult Cassidys and a smaller stage reserved for the adolescent Joe Cassidy and his friend Jack Shannon. The adults engage in richly textured Irish-Catholic talk to remember the Depression, resist Communism, commit married love, confront death and face a God whose purposes are hard to understand. It is easy to assume that their space is centre stage, though the directions do not indicate this, describing it simply as a 'larger stage'. The smaller area is where Joe and Jack are moving from homosocial to homosexual intimacy. Critics usually relate the two stages in terms of separation, difference, or even opposition.² In doing so, they invariably ignore the space between the two stages (arguably the play's performance 'centre') and favour the adult space. This re-centering reads Joe back towards the Catholic dogmatic system, thus neutralising the play's deconstructive and atheologising gesture.

A very well known and very explicit example of the re-centering (and, in effect, re-theologising) of Kenna's play is an early review by Harry Kippax. Kippax maintained that *A Hard God* was really two separate plays and thought

¹ Kenna, Peter, *A Hard God*, Sydney, Currency Press, 1974. References are to this edition and are given below.

² Elizabeth Webby is an exception. Describing the relationship between the two playing areas as 'counterpointing', she attends evenly to both, making connections between the two supposedly separate stories. See *Modern Australian Plays* (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1990), pp.24-33.

the scenes with the boys, which he dismissed as ‘drawn-out agonisings’, should be cut.³ Although other critics are less inclined to cut, they are inclined to re-centre. Despite his affirmation of Joe as the ‘pivotal character’, John McCallum believes the play’s power derives from its study of the intimacy experienced by the adults.⁴ Barry Oakely prefers the Cassidy living room and its memories; these are the scenes that elevate *A Hard God* to the company of *Summer of the Seventeenth Doll* and *The One Day of the Year*. Katharine Brisbane, concerned with themes of time and loss, privileges a mature and retrospective perspective, identifying in the boys ‘the sin of immaturity’. Positioning the boys in relation to their inheritance, which is their past, she describes them as ‘separated from the central characters’.⁵ This itself is to separate them from their own space and confirm the adult centre. Veronica Brady⁶, appreciating the play’s complex Catholicism, emphasises the adults’ struggle to integrate faith and experience, but this makes her underestimate Joe as someone who has not yet integrated faith and experience.⁷ Peter Fitzpatrick finds that the adults have a much richer language with which to deal with life:

³ Kippax, H. G., ‘The Cassidy Family’. *Sydney Morning Herald*, 20 August 1973. Kenna added the initial encounter between Joe and his father as a way of addressing Kippax’s concern about connectedness. In subsequent reviews of subsequent productions Kippax revised his opinion, though he continued to prefer the world of the parents.

⁴ McCallum, John, ‘Peter Kenna and the Search for Intimacy’ (in Holloway, Peter, ed. *Contemporary Australian Drama*), Sydney: Currency Press, 1987, 431-439. McCallum is discussing the trilogy of which *A Hard God* became the first play, and regretting that the later plays abandon the tension between God and sex.

⁵ Brisbane, Katharine, ‘Preface’, *A Hard God*, pp.5-10.

⁶ Brady, Veronica, *Playing Catholic*, Sydney, Currency Press, 1991.

⁷ Both Bruce Parr and Michael Hurley suggest Brady’s reading is homophobic. They read her as endorsing Catholic moral teaching, whereas I think she is simply evoking its impact on one she sees as a lonely teenager. See Parr, Bruce, ‘Peter Kenna’s *The Cassidy Album*: a case for re-viewing’, *Australasian Drama Studies*, 24, 1994, 77-98, and Hurley, Michael, *A Guide to Gay and Lesbian Writing in Australia*, Sydney, Allen & Unwin, 1996, p.122.

A Hard God does rely heavily, though, on the rhythms and mannerisms of a language which has established literary models, and great reserves of metaphor and charm. It is juxtaposed with the neutral accent of the new generation in the conversations through which young Joe Cassidy and Jack Shannon become (in some degree) lovers. The contrast works well, in reinforcing the cultural disjunction suggested by the separation of acting areas; but it anticipates some problems for the following plays of the trilogy, in which Joe confronts his Catholicism and his sexuality without that range of verbal resourcefulness.⁸

Frank Bladwell⁹ only briefly considers the boys to demonstrate how they are in conflict with their religion and seems to think Joe would be a better man if he had experienced some of the paradox and suffering that his parents have endured. Furthermore, Bladwell subtly trivialises Joe, claiming that he treats his relationship with Jack as if it were a game. Jack, on the other hand, is admired. This is how Bladwell describes the final meeting of Joe and Jack:

In their final meeting, which takes place on Jack's initiative, Jack is calm and serene, clearly absolved of the guilt which he has formally revealed both physically and emotionally. Joe's desperate pleas for Jack to stay amount to more than mere moral blackmail. They constitute a deep rejection of the demands of the faith which has ultimately proven to be an inadequate refuge for the lonely, alienated boy.¹⁰

I cannot myself see that Jack is 'calm and serene', though I can see that the move to make Jack at once masculine and

⁸ Fitzpatrick, Peter, *After 'The Doll': Australian Drama since 1955*, Melbourne, Edward Arnold, 1979, p.75.

⁹ Bladwell, Frank, 'Peter Kenna's *A Hard God*', *Southerly* 39.ii.1979.155-171.

¹⁰ p.169.

absolved deserves a little suspicion. Leslie Rees bottles all the characters, without exception, in what he describes as ‘a Catholic preserving jar’; they become ‘submissively and habitually Catholic in all their guilt feelings, their sin feelings, the texture of their thought and speech’.¹¹ This obscures the differences within the adult Catholics, as well as the differences between Joe and the older generation. Rees then decides that the two stages represent ‘the gulf between the older and younger people’, and concludes, I think seriously:

It is no wonder that Joe has fallen into a homosexual relationship, which moves to its brief, yearning involvement rather from his spiritual isolation than from any sexual hunger, and which, when it is suddenly cut off, leaves him full of intensified misery.¹²

Anyone who contemplates the identification of homosexuality with alienation, the suggestion of judgment in ‘fallen’, the decent relief of finding the ‘yearning’ also ‘brief’, and the punitive twitch in ‘cut off’, might well conclude that Rees has said more than he knows. Given that he thinks the play shows the failure of religion, it is ironic that Rees has ventriloquised Jack Shannon’s confessor and reinforced the very theopolitical structures that the play is questioning.

Not surprisingly, Bruce Parr¹³ finds a homophobic agenda in critical accounts of *The Cassidy Album*, the trilogy to which *A Hard God* now belongs.¹⁴ In Parr’s reading, Joe

¹¹ Rees, Leslie, *A History of Australian Drama Volume 2: Australian Drama in the 1970s*, Sydney, Angus & Robertson, 1978, p.193.

¹² p.194.

¹³ Parr, Bruce, ‘Peter Kenna’s *The Cassidy Album*: a call for re-viewing’, *Australasian Drama Studies*, 24, 1994, 77-98.

¹⁴ *The Cassidy Album* consists of *A Hard God*, *Furtive Love*, and *An Eager Hope*. The trilogy was first performed at the Adelaide Festival of

becomes not simply a different centre, but the centre of difference, freed of any anguish over religion and sexuality. He may be overstating the ease with which Joe, at least in *A Hard God*, prefers happiness to Catholicism, but I think that Parr is right to emphasise what Joe has of spirituality and sexuality rather than what he does not have.¹⁵

Perhaps I should at this point say that I do not think Joe is fallen or confused. He may be emotionally confused, but he is not morally confused. He may be experiencing his first broken heart, but he is remarkably clear that there is nothing wrong with his feelings. Nor is he unable to reconcile Catholicism and homosexual love: he simply has no intention of reconciling or integrating them in the terms offered him by the Catholic centre. He is not so much displaced as disengaged. To continue to evaluate him by whether or not he belongs to his family and church is to continue to imagine the play in terms of two different centres and to overlook the space between them. It is also to confuse how the characters see God with how the play sees, and does not see, (Him). The play's movement between its two stages generates its deconstructive theopolitical gesture, its critique of the heterotextual manoeuvres that keep the one God at the Catholic centre.

Catholic sexual morality might be seen as an effect of the heterotextual and monotheistic world the Church constructs. 'Monotheistic unity,' as Kristeva observes, 'is

Arts in 1978. *Furtive Love* was published by Currency Press in 1980. *An Eager Hope* has not been published.

¹⁵ In his introduction to *Australian Gay and Lesbian Plays* (Sydney: Currency Press, 1996), where he includes Kenna's *Mates*, Parr curiously remarks: 'Unlike Kenna's *A Hard God* which premiered two years earlier and controversially for its time examined young Joe Cassidy's discovery of his homosexuality, *Mates* unapologetically thrusts a lively queen who also happens to be a drag performer into the spotlight.' (p.11) I say 'curiously' because I wonder if that word 'unapologetically' means he sees *A Hard God* as apologetic. *A Hard God*, it seems to me, is a much stronger play because it involves a more profound critique of the ways in which religious and sexual centres exert political power.

sustained by a radical separation of the sexes'.¹⁶ Othering in the sexual order supports the theological belief in a transcendent and unifying principle. Homosexuality, therefore, is a threat because its same/same symbolism refuses the way in which the dominant theopolitical discourse climbs a ladder of differences in order to put in place that One who is utterly beyond created beings. In the case of the Catholic Church, homosexuality has implications that go beyond the concerns of sexual morality. It threatens the whole design of intricately interrelated separations and distinctions that preserve the unity of doctrine. This whole design would be familiar to the adult Cassidys. They would know it from books and sermons that maintained a difference between creator and creature, divine and human, heaven and earth, eternity and time, faith and reason, revealed and natural law. They would know it, though they might not recognise it, in the hierarchies that accompany these differences: the authority of divine over human, of clergy over laity, of reason over emotion, of belief over faith, of truth over love. In this way, dogmatic Catholicism uses difference to confirm the unity of marriage, the unity of the church, and the unity of truth. It is heterotextual.

Perhaps this is why its prohibition on homosexual acts is so absolute. When the Church declares that '[t]o choose someone of the same sex for one's sexual activity is to annul the rich symbolism and meaning, not to mention the goals, of the Creator's sexual design,'¹⁷ it is not simply defending a single proposition. It is protecting the hard God

¹⁶ Kristeva, Julia, *About Chinese Women*, New York: Marion Boyars Publishers, 1977, p.19.

¹⁷ Ratzinger, Joseph, 'The pastoral care of homosexuals', issued by the Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *The Tablet*, 8 November 1986, p.1214. This reaffirms the Congregation's earlier 'Declaration on Certain Problems of Sexual Ethics', in Flannery, Austin, ed. *Vatican Council II: More Post Conciliar Documents*, Vol. 2, Dublin, Dominican Publications, 1982, pp.486-499. Both reiterate a view that would have been largely unchallenged at the time the play is set.

of consistency, that is, it is protecting its compound hermeneutic investment in notions of meaning, purpose, design and Creator. These notions have become so interconnected that to alter the sexual order is to begin unravelling the whole design. What this means in practical terms is that is not effective politics to isolate and oppose the Church's teaching on homosexual acts. It is necessary to deconstruct or at least decenter the whole design. Peter Kenna's *A Hard God* begins just such a decentering. This is most easily seen in the way the play uses the space between Joe and his family. It can also be seen in Dan's recognition of other religions, in Dan's diseased eye, and in the final moment when the word 'death' calls up and casts down the language of belief.

Most critics assume that Joe rejects Catholicism because he does not accept its sexual morality. It seems to me that he does something simpler and more dangerous: he refuses to believe happiness is wrong. In the final scene between the boys, Jack is turning back to the heterotextual and heterosexual space, while Joe is saying that if Jack leaves him, he will leave the Church and Jack will be responsible for his soul. Joe does not really believe his soul is in danger; he knows Jack is the one with an interest in the safety of the soul, and he uses this as the basis for emotional blackmail.

Jack's concern for the safety of his immortal soul was established in the previous scene between the boys, when they meet after their holiday at Woy Woy. There they slept in the same bed (that is all) and were then nearly drowned in a sudden storm. Jack has interpreted this as a warning from God and gone to confession, where he has had his worst fears confirmed. Joe is a very proximate occasion of a very mortal sin. When Jack then discovers that Joe has not confessed their intimacy, he accuses Joe of making a 'bad confession'. Joe's response is interesting: 'There was no sin to confess. All that happened was that I was happy.'

And that's not a sin.'¹⁸ If Joe had wanted to be a safe moral theologian, he could have stopped at 'There was no sin to confess.' They did not engage in sexual activity. They did not commit a mortal sin. There is no sin to confess. He could spend a lifetime debating whether or not certain acts are sins, sustaining the centre by opposing it. Joe, however, starts something different. He begins undoing the whole system with that little word, 'happy'. Joe identifies happiness with Jack. The Church identifies happiness with God. The Church makes happiness consequent upon goodness, that is, upon obedience to the will of God interpreted by the Church. The Church teaches: 'As in every moral disorder, homosexual activity prevents one's own fulfilment and happiness by acting contrary to the creative wisdom of God.'¹⁹ Obviously neither Joe Cassidy nor Peter Kenna are likely to have read their Ratzinger. Nor is the play theopolitically explicit. Nevertheless it does, I suggest, know what it is unsaying.

When Jack reveals that the priest told him to avoid Joe as a 'bad influence', Joe is angry. One of the reasons for his anger is that he refuses the very idea that he will later use on Jack, the idea that anyone else can be responsible for your soul. 'I'm not a bad influence. If there's anybody a bad influence it's you. You're a bad influence on yourself.'²⁰ To be a 'bad influence' was, of course, to compromise something more important than someone's dress sense. It was to threaten the soul:

JACK: What do you want from me? Do you want me to lose my soul?

JOE: I'm not afraid of losing my soul. One of us has to be wrong.²¹

¹⁸ p.78.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ p.78.

²¹ pp.77-78.

The soul is itself a risky idea, because it too is played out between different spaces. It is unique, and it is a capacity for sharing eternity with God and all the blessed. To save one's soul, one has at once to exercise personal conscience and obey the will of God. It gives a still point to the turning self and remains itself restless till it rests in God. Once Jack and Joe begin fighting about the soul they enter the space between transcendent and immanent theologies and introduce into the play a tension that has been more and more evident in church politics since the play was first performed at the Nimrod Theatre in 1973. Jack is arguing for an ultimate kind of happiness, the kind of happiness that comes to those who submit to God's design. Joe thinks Jack sufficiently divine and wants his happiness now. Jack is trying to save his soul; Joe is trying to save his friendship. Joe says, 'I don't know why we can't go on being friends';²² Jack says: 'This isn't just something between you and I. I've got to take notice of the priest or I can't get absolution.'²³ By invoking the authority of the priest, Jack repositions himself at the theopolitical power centre, where he commits the separations that sustain monotheistic unity, preferring truth to love, divine to human, spiritual to physical. If this makes it inevitable that Jack will leave Joe, it also signals, not that Joe will leave the Church, but that the Church will leave Joe.

Just before the boys have their final scene, Dan enters with a blood-stained towel over his eye, calling out, 'Aggie! My eye! It feels like it's burst in my head.'²⁴ The play of course opens with, opens through, this image:

The lights rise on the living room. DAN CASSIDY is discovered sitting in a chair on top of the dining table. He has placed part of a newspaper under the legs of the chair so that it will not mark the table. He reads

²² p.77.

²³ p.79.

²⁴ p.74.

the rest of the paper through a magnifying glass, holding it as close to the overhead light as possible. He whispers what he is reading as if to be doubly sure of its meaning.²⁵

The play also closes with and through this image. Dan is dying from cancer of the eye. Aggie is looking into the darkness that his death unveils and, since the stage lights are dying, darkness is looking back. I am prepared to wager that Dan's dying eye sees death into a certain theological view: the Catholic dogmatic synthesis that had such confidence in the forties and fifties, when it was able to define itself against Communism and draw strength from a renewed interest in natural law. (This was the Catholicism that attracted James McAuley, whose *The End of Modernity* was published in 1959, the year Kenna's *The Slaughter of St Teresa's Day* was first produced.) In a sense the play needs to be seen between the forties, when it is set, and the seventies, when it was written. This stages it between the world of the Cold War, when God had to be hard if he wanted to win the war of souls, and the world that has more 'posts' than a farmer's fence, the world that finds the One God hard to imagine in the con/texts of decentred and multiplying authorities, truths, and narratives. It also plays it right into a dilemma characteristic of recent Catholicism: the centre defined by the bureaucratic management of morals and dogma need not coincide with the centre defined by personal spiritual growth.

As Dan the good Catholic is dying through his eye, he and Aggie have a conversation whose negatively theological importance has been overlooked:

DAN: I've never asked you before, Aggie. Not in all the years we've been married. What do you think about God? Honestly.

²⁵ p.21.

AGGIE: Honestly! I don't think I think much about him at all, Dan. I believe I've always been a good Catholic doing everything I was told I should. I've never had much of a chance to do the things I was told I shouldn't. I was always too busy having kids and then bringing them up. Just ... surviving. Do you know what, Dan? I think you've been my religion. I've loved you above everything else in my whole life. Above myself and the kids and comfort and ... well, I don't suppose that makes me a very good Catholic after all. What do you think, Dan?

DAN: I've always supposed I was a good Catholic too. But, lately I begin to doubt it. I don't mean I think our religion is a bad thing. I was born into the Church and I'll die in it ... gratefully. It's just that I don't think its (sic) the only thing any more. Working on those ships I've watched the Buddhists and the Mohammedans and the Hindus at their worship and I can't believe they're praying to an empty space. But, whoever it is, whatever it is outside ourselves, it's not telling anybody. Martin was right. He's a hard God, and our total ignorance of what he's about is what finally drives us to distraction. It would be unbearable if I wasn't sure he loved me. And I am sure of that.²⁶

It is easy to assume that Dan is simply revisiting an earlier conversation with his brother, Martin, the one that is usually taken as the key to the play's title. Martin, remembering the death of his young son (struck by lightning, as Jack and Joe might have been), declares 'Oh, he's a hard God, Dan. He's a hard God.' The conversation continues:

DAN: There's probably a pattern to it somewhere, Martin, if only we could see.

²⁶ pp.80-81.

MARTIN: That is his hardness, Dan. He doesn't allow us to. We just have to stumble on blindly with his mercy raining down on us like thunderbolts.²⁷

But the brothers are not quite saying the same thing. Martin is interpreting the term 'hard God' to confirm the supreme centre of mystery. Martin seems to have read Aquinas who taught that the reason we do not understand God's purposes is not because they are unknowable but because they are too knowable. Our ignorance, then, becomes evidence of the true and transcendent One. Dan is beginning to wonder whether God might be spoken of in many ways because She can be spoken of in none. Dan is starting to undo the system. It is almost as if he has exchanged Aquinas and Ratzinger for Derrida, who, calling back (to) Eckhart, says:

If by religion you mean a set of beliefs, dogmas, or institutions – the church, e.g. – then I would say that religion as such can be deconstructed, and not only can be but should be deconstructed, sometimes in the name of faith.²⁸

²⁷ p.32.

²⁸ Caputo, John, ed., *Deconstruction in a Nutshell: A Conversation with Jacques Derrida*, New York, Fordham University Press, 1997, p.21. See also Derrida's 'The Divine has been ruined by God': *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass, London, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1978, p.243. In the context of advocating radical inner poverty, Eckhart teaches: 'Therefore I pray to God that he may make me free of 'God', for my real being is above God if we take 'God' to be the beginning of created things. For in the same being of God where God is above being and above distinction, there I myself was...That God is 'God,' of that I am a cause: if I did not exist, God too would not be 'God'.' See Meister Eckhart, *The Essential Sermons, Commentaries, Treatises, and Defense*, trans. Edmund Colledge and Bernard McGinn, London, SPCK, 1981, pp.202-03. For Derrida's engagement with negative theology, see Caputo, *The prayers and tears of Jacques Derrida: Religion without religion*, Bloomington & Indianapolis, Indiana University Press, 1997; Coward, Harold, and Toby Foshay eds. *Derrida and Negative Theology*, Albany, State University of New York Press, 1992; and Hart, Kevin, *The Trespass of the Sign: Deconstruction, theology and philosophy*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1989.

Dan's appeal to emptiness and silence allows the play to begin deconstructing the Church's claim to possess the one, saving truth, and to begin resisting its practice of preserving the purity of that truth by othering those who are different.

Aggie, meanwhile, is making the same choice her son makes. She is loving the particular person more than the absolute truth, confessing her belief in Dan. Because she is doing this within the heterotextual space, she is not exposed to censure in the way that Joe is. Nevertheless, she suffers. As the play ends, Aggie is trying to hold off Dan's death with a prayer.

AGGIE: Not yet, dear God. Not yet!
(She takes a few deep breaths to control her fluttering heart and sits again, slowly. She presses her hand to her eyes and recites the first part of the Hail Mary.)
Hail Mary, full of grace,
The Lord is with thee,
Blessed art thou among women...
(The prayer fades off to a mumble and rises again for the second part.)
Holy Mary, Mother of God,
Pray for us sinners now
and at the hour of –
(She pauses. Her lips cannot frame the words 'our death'. With a great effort she mouths them silently as the lights die.)
END

It is clear why the character Aggie cannot say the word 'death'. She does not want to accept that her beloved is about to die; she's been to Catholic sacraments long enough to believe that the word might be efficacious. It is clear, too, that this moment shows a character struggling to believe. But what is the theopolitical effect of ending the play with and in this silence? Fitzpatrick, as noted earlier, has argued for the richness of the language of the family

scenes. He recognises that this language can convey profundity and complexity, and so equips its users to engage with the world as a grand narrative. The play, however, has always been somewhat sceptical about the power of this language. Dan at the beginning is whispering words as if to be doubly sure of their meaning. He even manages to say, 'It's like a veil in front of me. I want to keep brushing it aside.'²⁹ Aggie has suggested that Martin believes a little too much in the power of his own words. Martin is also a terrible poet of the kind that confuses substance with resonance. (Martin is, I suggest, mildly satirised as someone whose big words are empty.) Paddy, who remembers being whipped to learn his prayers, experiences both marriage and religion in terms of power and fear – until he finally frees himself of the burden of truth, becoming 'More puzzled...but not as afraid.'³⁰ Monica is a concentrated study in the idolatry that comes from taking religious metaphor too literally. And then there is Sophie Cassidy. She who used to be a 'sweet little creature' who would blush at rude words, disrupts the narrative of the good Catholic family and rejects proper language when, in public, she shouts at the other Cassidys, 'You know what you can do with your decency. You can shove it right up your arses.'³¹

The play has been using moments such as these to put pressure on the hard God who is an effect of, a reflection of, that rock on which the Church believes itself built. This is the God incarnate in a language of undeniable truth, inflexible coherence, intricate design, and impenetrable purpose. Yet that language, that God, gapes open at the end as the lights come down on Aggie's unfinished prayer, and another enters, whose death is the face, whose face is the death that Aggie must hardly look upon.

²⁹ p.22.

³⁰ p.85.

³¹ p.50.