

The Broken Estate or the Nameless Love: James Wood, Kevin Hart and the Bible's legacy in the West

*I caught the sudden look of some dead master
Whom I had known, forgotten, half recalled...*

T.S. Eliot, *The Four Quartets*

The Bible's legacy in the West—one could turn nearly anywhere to find attractive material for examining the issue. Indeed, the Judeo-Christian Scriptures stand opposite Homer and the Greeks as one of the great twin pillars of the Western intellectual tradition; one is hard pressed to suggest a single text to which the West might be an equal legatee. The scholarly festivities marking the four hundredth anniversary of the King James Bible just last year—and the concomitant downpour of publications seeking to capitalize on the publishing opportunity¹—are a recent confirmation of this fact.

Even on a mountain of gold, however, the miner must choose somewhere to dig. In this paper, I will explore the work of two particular scholars as a way into the question of the Bible's legacy in the contemporary West—they are James Wood and Kevin Hart. I choose these men because, in my opinion, they represent two equally intriguing ways of interpreting and responding to our biblical heritage. They have important affinities—each, for example, insists that the Christian tradition which we inherit today has been deeply affected by the procession of Western intellectual history. They also have important differences—the one is an unbelieving literary critic, the other a believing poet and philosopher. In the process of exploring the tensions in and between the thought of these men we will, I hope, not only gain a finer understanding of the legacy of the Bible in our time, but also shed light on some of the most

¹ Two notable contributions were Hamlin and Jones' excellent interdisciplinary volume of essays—*The King James Bible after 400 Years* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010) and Derek Wilson's enjoyable, short history of the KJV, *The People's Bible* (Oxford: Lion Publishing 2010).

significant philosophical, literary and religious questions which currently bear upon the contemporary West.

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James Wood is perhaps the most important literary critic writing in English today. He was the chief literary critic at *The Times* before he turned thirty, was appointed senior editor at *The New Republic* a few years later and his regular writing for *The New Yorker* has become determinative in guiding the fortunes of the work he reviews. Dipping into nearly any of his work will reveal a critic of enormous inter-disciplinary erudition, sensitive judgment, and bracing style.

However, Wood is not of interest to us here for his proficiency or his popularity, but rather for a peculiar orientation that he takes toward the Western tradition of religion and literature. In 1999, Wood published a collection of critical essays in a volume titled *The Broken Estate: Essays on Literature and Belief*.² In this book he deals almost exclusively with the novel form, but with impressive breadth, tracing a sort of personal canon of exemplary fiction—Austen, Flaubert, Woolf, Mann, Updike, Sebald, and others. In addition to critical essays on particular authors, Wood also outlines his own account of the legacy of the Bible and the function of religion in our time.

The reading of Western cultural history which Wood presents in *The Broken Estate* is predicated on an account of literature and religion which sees them as occupying the same cultural territory, with each to some degree therefore determinative of the other. In brief, Wood's thesis is that the "old estate" of Christian religion which provided the intellectual structure and aesthetic impetus of the West since Constantine was compromised in the nineteenth century, and that the cultural inheritance which we received in the twentieth century was a "broken estate", in which the old religious verities were no longer sure. Here, at some length, is the essence of his proposal:

² James Wood. *The Broken Estate: Essays on Literature and Belief*. (London: Jonathan Cape, 1995)

I believe that distinctions between literary belief and religious belief are important, and it is because I believe in that importance that I am attracted to writers who struggle with those distinctions. Around the middle of the nineteenth century, those distinctions became much harder to maintain, and we have lived in the shadow of their blurring ever since. This was when the old estate broke. I would define the old estate as the supposition that religion was a set of divine truth-claims, and that the Gospel narratives were supernatural reports; fiction might be supernatural, too, but fiction was always fictional, it was not in the same order of truth as the Gospel narratives. During the nineteenth century, those two positions began to soften and merge. At the high point of the novel's triumph, when people felt it could do anything, the Gospels began to be read, by both writers and theologians, as a set of fictional tales – as a kind of novel. At the same time, fiction became an almost religious activity...

...Christianity, instead of disappearing, merely surrendered its truth-claims, and turned itself into a comforting poetry on the one hand, or an empty moralism on the other. Truth slipped away.³

On Wood's account then, the fate of the Christian Bible and the Christian religion is bound to the fate of fiction: Christianity was pulled into theological liberalism by the imaginative power of fiction, and fiction stepped in to fill the cultural vacuum which was left behind.⁴ The Western mind has been reordered; the monopoly of orthodox Christianity has been subtly undone, almost from within. Here, in the broken estate, fiction represents a new realm of belief, a realm of belief "as if", since fiction always already "knows itself to be a true lie" and its readers know this too. The aesthetic, imaginative, moral, communal and spiritual functions which religion performed in the old estate now operate in this literary realm, one in which the sceptic is made to feel

³ Wood, *The Broken Estate*, p. xv and xvii

⁴ As a piece of historical analysis, Wood's thesis here is almost certainly wrong, though this fact does not diminish his interest for our study. The determinative source of the notion of Christianity as "comforting poetry" was surely Schleiermacher's *On Religion: Speeches to its Cultured Despisers* and his introspective intuitions of absolute dependence, while the notion of "moralism" is surely a debt firstly owed to Kant's *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason*. The breaking of the estate was first an accomplishment of German philosophy, not English literary criticism. The great irony of Wood's position is that, these days, literary approaches to biblical narrative actually serve to *consolidate* orthodoxy, not undermine it, since eccentricities in the Scriptural text can be read as "art" rather than "error".

quite at home, since “fiction asks us to judge its reality” while “religion asserts its reality.” The broken estate is thus “a special realm of freedom.”⁵

In order to see how this thesis is applied in reading particular texts, we will attend to Wood’s (frankly brilliant) essay on Herman Melville, titled “The All and the If: God and Metaphor in Melville.” We want firstly to show how Wood sees Melville operating within this “broken estate” scheme (and therefore how the “broken estate” proposal itself functions) and, secondly and most significantly, what implications Wood’s vision might have for the place of Christianity and its Bible in our present cultural moment.

In this essay, Wood casts Melville as an enormously ambitious—and enormously successful—model of the Broken Estate novelist. Melville inherited his mother’s rigid Dutch Reformed Calvinism, and its unbendingly transcendent divinity remained the “absent, sunless centre” of his life and thought. In adulthood his nascent scepticism was sharpened by reading Montaigne and Pierre Bayle and, complemented by with his implacable occupation with metaphysical conundrums, this propelled in Melville an unending struggle with God, or at least the question of God. As Nathaniel Hawthorne would say of the writer, “he can neither believe, nor be comfortable in his unbelief; and he is too honest and courageous not to try to do one or the other.”⁶

Melville’s theological ordeals were, of course, expressed in his writing. But, as Wood observes, Melville’s writing was more than an expression of his theological questions—it functioned itself as an alternative theology:

Above all, while he is busy seeing the world stripped of God’s presence, [Melville] is busy theologizing literature. God has disappeared and returns as literature. If the Messiah comes again, it will be as Shakespeare. But the Messiah has come again, and he is called Melville... Literature is the new Church, and *Moby-Dick* is its Bible.⁷

This contention fits squarely within Wood’s recurrent paradigm in *The Broken Estate* of fiction as a new space of “the real.” The stock of beliefs, narratives and practices which the Bible bequeathed to us as the most real of all realities are in Melville

⁵ Wood, *The Broken Estate*, p. xiv-xv

⁶ quoted in *Ibid.* p. 33

⁷ *Ibid.* p. 37-8

subverted and recast in line with the novelist's new, distinctly American saga of human reality. Wood goes on to argue that the primary way by which Melville achieves this subversion is through his use of metaphor throughout *Moby-Dick*. Metaphor, says Wood, is "the very essence of fiction-making" and constitutive of "a fictional alternative, a likeness, an other life", and Melville uses it to scrutinize and subtly evacuate—I think that paradoxical phrase is a perfectly apt one—the Christianity he has inherited.

While we could take any from nearly endless array of passages from *Moby-Dick* to examine the significance of Melville's use of metaphor—the text is indeed, as Wood puts it, "a hysteria of metaphor"⁸—the phenomenon reaches perhaps its highest pitch in the oft-celebrated chapter 42, "The Whiteness of the Whale". Here the whiteness of the whale's flesh is freighted with a simply stunning semantic stock: whiteness stands for purity, beauty, authority, happiness, the sacrosanct, the holy; yet it also stands for ugliness (in the albino's appearance,) death and danger at sea. Ultimately, though, at the uttermost peak of Melville's metaphysical reflections, we are asked:

Is it that by its indefiniteness it shadows forth the heartless voids and immensities of the universe, and thus stabs us from behind with the thought of annihilation, when beholding the white depths of the milky way? Or is it, that as in essence whiteness is not so much a color as the visible absence of color, and at the same time the concrete of all colors; is it for these reasons that there is such a dumb blankness, full of meaning, in a wide landscape of snows—a colorless, all-color of atheism from which we shrink?

Here, at the centre of the metaphorical matrix cast by "whiteness", Wood finds "the end of metaphor, and therefore the end of language," an end which is also, crucially, an "atheism."⁹ This is the way in which Melville enacts the "shadow of doubt" epistemology which Wood sees at work in fiction,¹⁰ by finessing and stretching metaphors such that they demonstrate their own eventual and paradoxical emptiness. It is a line of thought very much akin to the *apophatic* or negative theology of the

⁸ Ibid. p. 38

⁹ Ibid. p. 44

¹⁰ As over against the unbending *assertion* of religious truth—see Wood, *The Broken Estate*, p. xiv

Christian tradition,¹¹ in which positive assertions about God (say, “God is loving”) are ultimately subsumed by a recognition of the inadequacy of language to get true ontological purchase on the divine and that therefore only negative statements (say, “God is not evil”) can be valid ways of speaking of God.

But for Melville, the failure of speech to comprehend the divine does not lead to some ineffable encounter with the divine beyond the scope of language, but rather to a sheer and silent absence, an empty and therefore meaningless metaphor, a terrifying whiteness. Wood’s account of the whale’s place in Melville’s new (a)theology is thus distinguished from other popular readings:

Critics who persist in seeing in Melville an American Gnostic do so because the whale is a demiurge, a bad god (the Gnostic premise was that we are ruled by a bad god). But what, Melville asks, if the whale means nothing at all? What if, at the very heart of the sarcophagus, there is absolutely nothing?

The account of the religious dimensions of *Moby-Dick* presented here by Wood may be helpfully supplemented by Robert Alter’s reading, presented in his 2008 Spencer Trask Lectures at Princeton and subsequently published in the volume *Pen of Iron: American Prose and the King James Bible*.¹² Alter’s impressive background in Old Testament studies lends him a certain biblical attentiveness which is clearly evident in these lectures, and will allow us highlight a specifically *textual* dimension in Melville’s absorption of Christianity which is not emphasized by Wood.

There are deep similarities between Alter and Wood: both see Melville thoroughly enveloped in the religious tradition he inherits and constantly occupied by it, both see him asserting himself *against* that tradition (Wood uses the language of “atheism”, Alter of “un-Christian,”) ¹³ both judge Melville’s self-assertion to be extraordinarily

¹¹ As confirmed in passing by Wood in a recent article: “Melville’s *Moby Dick* is an ironic version of ‘negative’ theology: the white whale is bombarded with masses of descriptions, and freighted with allegory, but remains gigantically unknowable.” From “The modern novel and the New Atheism”, *ABC Religion and Ethics* (July 4, 2011) <http://www.abc.net.au/religion/articles/2011/07/04/3259863.htm>.

¹² Robert Alter, *Pen of Iron: American Prose and the King James Bible* (Princeton University Press, 2010). This book represents yet another KJV anniversary production, but unlike some of those previously mentioned, it is quite simply an accomplished and beautiful work.

¹³ Wood, *The Broken Estate*, p. 45, Alter, *Pen of Iron*, p. 60

grand and essentially successful,¹⁴ both agree on the vast scope Melville's influence on subsequent American prose style.¹⁵ But as we shall see, Wood's definite interest in Melville's existential and theological tumults stands in contrast to Alter's interest in Melville's peculiarly *literary* intentions.

In *Pen of Iron*, Alter is interested in Melville's handling of the Bible he inherits, which is a slightly different issue to that approached by Wood.¹⁶ While interaction with biblical texts is nearly as frequent as metaphor in *Moby-Dick*, there is perhaps no better passage to consider than Melville's famous account of the gaze upon the whale which comes in chapter 86, titled "The Tail". The narrator laments:

Dissect him how I may, then, I but go skin deep; I know him not, and never will. But if I know not even the tail of this whale, how understand his head? much more, how comprehend his face, when face he has none? Thou shalt see my back parts, my tail, he seems to say, but my face shall not be seen. But I cannot completely make out his back parts; and hint what he will about his face, I say again he has no face.

Alter notes that the narration in this passage has subtly changed from the diction used elsewhere in the chapter: the syntactic shuffling of the expected "I do not know" to "I know not", the second sentence's triadic form, and the archaic diction of "when face he has none", the introduction of the second person "Thou"—all these signify that Melville is assuming a deliberately biblical register. And, of course, the content which fills this form is an unmistakable echo of Exodus 33, in which Yahweh speaks to Moses, "Thou shalt see my back parts... but my face shall not be seen." The blasphemy pregnant in the scene is impressive.

¹⁴ It is worth noting, however, that for Wood Melville's project in *Moby-Dick* is a deeply individual and internal one, a twin pursuit of language and God, and "Melville follows it as Ahab follows the whale, to the very end" (p. 45). For Alter, Melville's ambition is less solipsistic, and more socio-historic: "to make this book an American tragedy, an American encyclopedia, and an American bible all at once" (p. 42). For mine, I reckon Alter's is a more convincing approach, but the two readings are obviously not exclusive of each other.

¹⁵ Interestingly, Alter (p. 77) and Wood (p. 44) each highlight Saul Bellow as the most Melvillean recent American prose stylist.

¹⁶ Wood's interest is broader, in the whole nexus of belief, practice and culture associated with the Christian tradition.

The whale is thus “the chief avatar of the inscrutability and the blind power of the natural world,” and in that capacity bears a correspondence with the unapproachable supremacy of the Hebraic deity.¹⁷ It is quite appropriate then to speak of Melville as a “post-theistic” writer, but he is one who “still carries the weight of theistic ideas” (which another way of describing a Broken Estate artist.) But, as we noted, more important for Alter than this *theological* subversion is the *textual* subversion which Melville enacts here. Alter writes:

Melville is at once profoundly biblical and paradoxically anti-biblical. Scripture as it was perceived by the Christian community from which Melville inwardly set himself apart was for the most part a safe and reassuring book... All this Melville categorically rejected, and in the *Leviathan* he discovered a kind of hole in the fabric of Scripture opening up into the shadowy vastness of pre-scriptural reality.¹⁸

In teasing out the Ancient Near Eastern mythical sources from which the *Leviathan* is drawn (and in many other ways,) *Moby-Dick* represents a subversion of both the Bible and the stream of literary tradition which runs from biblical headwaters, deep into the cultural landscape of the West. For Alter, the great achievement of this passage—and *Moby-Dick* as a whole—is the sheer ambition, subtlety and energy of Melville’s textual subversion. While Wood casts Melville as anti-theist, Alter casts him as anti-biblical, though the two figures are by no means incompatible.

In light of Wood and Alter’s analyses, we can see that Melville is a paragon of Wood’s Broken Estate. He demonstrates what Wood calls “the duress of recoil”—the strain of rejecting and yet never forgetting or wholly casting off the religious inheritance one has received. This Melvillean mode, this duress of recoil, is for Wood the way we must be in the age of the Broken Estate.

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¹⁷ Alter, *Pen of Iron*, p. 56

¹⁸ Alter, *Pen of Iron*, p. 72

At the conclusion of *Pen of Iron*, Alter says of the United States:

The role of the Bible in the general culture of this country, despite fervent adherence to Scripture in evangelical circles, has surely receded since Melville wrote his masterpiece in the middle of the nineteenth century... we no longer have a culture pervaded by Scripture.¹⁹

As far as mainstream culture goes, this is certainly true of the United States, and surely true to an even greater degree of the West in general. On the whole, we live in a post-Christian, post-biblical age. Modernity was and is secular. For many, this is an entirely happy development. Francis Fukuyama, for example, famously announced that the West had arrived at the end of history, that the global triumph of liberal democracy represented the culmination of cultural development.²⁰

However, this celebration is by no means universal. Indeed, there is a growing stream of thought within many streams of the humanities which rejects this simple embrace of liberal, secular, capitalist modernity. A crucial component of this resistance to liberal modernity in recent decades has been, believe it or not, a *return* to the theological.

There are innumerable avenues by which we could trace this resistance,²¹ but as we noted at the outset, our focus will be on Kevin Hart. Hart is an ex-pat Australian, now at the University of Virginia, and has won wide critical acclaim for both his philosophical/theological scholarship²² and his poetry.²³ As we shall see, these two labours of his—the intellectual and the aesthetic—are inextricable for him.

¹⁹ Alter, *Pen of Iron*, p. 180

²⁰ The claim was originally made in his enormously controversial article “The End of History” in *The National Interest* (Summer 1989).

²¹ One alternative route leaps to mind: the shared work of Anglican theologian John Milbank and Slavoj Žižek, that indomitable Marxist-Lacanian-Hegelian *enfant terrible*. Their co-authored volumes are indicative of the generosity with which the Christian tradition is being considered once again by some sectors of mainstream philosophy. See their *The Monstrosity of Christ: Paradox or Dialectic?* (USA: The MIT Press, 2009) and *Paul’s New Moment: Continental Philosophy and the Future of Christian Theology* (USA: Brazos, 2010).

²² Philosopher Phillip Blond speaks for many when he hails Hart’s most important theological work, *The Trespass of the Sign*, as a “contemporary classic”. See Phillip Blond (ed.) *Post-Secular Philosophy: Between Philosophy and Theology* (London: Routledge, 1998) p. 33

²³ Indeed, the not-to-be-sneezed-at Harold Bloom has in various places named him Australia’s finest living poet.

In regard to the return to theology already mentioned, Hart sits squarely within a cohort of contemporary philosophers who we might broadly call “phenomenologists,” though such a label is inevitably reductive.²⁴ For him (and they, to some degree,) a return to the religious is required as a response to, among other things, the failure of the reductionistic ontologies which developed after the Enlightenment (particularly expressed in the Positivist philosophies of Comte and Russell.) For Hart, a reconfigured Christianity is the solution to the inadequacies of Modern philosophy.

Whereas Wood’s narrative about the decline of biblical faith is, as we noted, specifically *literary*, Hart’s account is distinctly *philosophical*. In his book *Trespass of the Sign*,²⁵ Hart presents an outline of this narrative of decline and then gestures toward what he sees as the solution. We will briefly trace this argument.

In contrast to Wood’s identification of nineteenth century liberalism as the site of Christianity’s historic slippage, Hart locates it much earlier—at the various moments in the Christian tradition where theology was absorbed into the categories of mainstream philosophy, that is, when the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob is subtly replaced by the God of the philosophers, *Yahweh* for the *causa sui*.²⁶ When this sort of integration of philosophy and theology occurs, we have an expression of what Heidegger called “ontotheology”, which is Heidegger’s term for the sort of totalizing system which posits a transcendent, absolute *grund* (ground) of all ontology and epistemology, the sort of system which nearly all postmodern philosophies militate against.²⁷

²⁴ Other members of this cohort would include Maurice Blanchot, Emmanuel Levinas, Jean-Luc Marion and Jacques Derrida.

²⁵ Kevin Hart. *The Trespass of the Sign: Deconstruction, theology and philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989)

²⁶ The most obvious moment is of course the initial arrival and assimilation of the Christian evangel into Greco-Roman intellectual life in the first few centuries AD. The so-called “Hellenization thesis” (which sees this initial embedding into the pagan world as a philosophical sully of the originally pure gospel) has remained a continually hot question since it was first propounded at length by Adolf von Harnack.

²⁷ We think of, to name but a few, Wittgenstein’s “therapeutic” reduction of metaphysics to language-games, Lyotard’s incredulity toward the Enlightenment project, Rorty’s allergy to foundationalism in epistemology, and of course—grandfather to them all—Nietzsche and his proclamation of perspectivism and the death of God.

However, as a thoroughgoing Derridean, Hart sees Heidegger's own opposition to ontotheology as insufficiently radical. Heidegger's project throughout his career – the recovery of the question of Being in the wake of the Western tradition which has swamped it under a morass of metaphysical speculation – ultimately falls short because Heidegger cannot shake, in Derrida's words, "a nostalgic desire to recover the proper name, the unique name of Being."²⁸ Hart therefore seeks to complete Heidegger's incomplete attempt at a *Destruktion* of ontotheology²⁹ by way of a Derridean deconstruction of Christian theology. While this may surprise some who would assume that deconstruction must be inherently anti-theological, Hart goes on to demonstrate that in fact the Christian tradition of *apophatic* (negative) theology has actually to some degree always "deconstructed" *kataphatic* (positive), and that it is high time for Christianity to appropriate this tradition and thus re-emerge as a thoroughly postmodern, philosophically tenable worldview.

In order to grasp what Hart achieves with this project, we will briefly examine a little of his poetry, which is clearly freighted with the drama of his philosophical and theological interests. We will first consider a section from the latter half of the poem "Dark Retreat", published in Hart's recent volume *Young Rain*.³⁰

Hide me, Dark One,
The things of day are strong:
Horizons pass
An inch away from me
And I must rest

And wait for you
And wait for all the night
Turned in at last
Turned inside out all night;
I cannot sleep

And cannot cross
The shortest word to you –

²⁸ Derrida, Jacques. 'Deconstruction and the other', quoted in Hart, *Trespass of the Sign*, p. 269

²⁹ See Martin Heidegger. *Being and Time* (MA: Blackwell, 1962) p. 44 for the first instance of this idea in the Heideggerian corpus.

³⁰ Kevin Hart. *Young Rain* (USA: University of Notre Dame Press, 2009) p. 70

Horizons stretch
 And in their space I make
 My dark retreat

With open eyes
 That watch for all the night:
 For all the night
 The things of night are strong
 Hide me, Dark One

We have here a psalm, in the mode of the Davidic laments. Its structure is roughly chiasmic, with the repeated “hide me” requests bracketing the whole, and the form draws attention to the innermost lines, highlighting the “I cannot sleep / And cannot cross” pairing. The poet is thus cast as agitated and helpless, neither able to move nor to rest, whether in body or by word. The God to whom he cries is impenetrable and inaccessible, at least for the moment.

Moving outward from the centre, we notice the repetition of waiting and turning, and we are again reminded of the biblical laments in which the psalmist passes whole nights with tears and pleas, asking how long O Lord, until his enemies are dealt with. Our speaker does similarly, seeing with trepidation the things of day and night, and pleading to be protected. In all but one of the Psalter’s laments, there is some note of hope, redemption or comfort. Hart gives us none here, just troubled uncertainty, just a slow waiting and watching for all the night.

“Horizons stretch / And in their space I make / My dark retreat”—here is the heart of the matter, for our interests. The poet is contending with God, but he encounters no presence, no light, no beatific vision. Rather, the horizon of his experience expands to create only “space”, expanse, and void, an *abgrund* or non-ground. It is here, in absence, that the poet makes his response to the divine Other, makes his approach toward He to whom he prays, but we see that it is a very strange approach, a non-approach, a “retreat” in fact.

Hart is clearly writing here in the mode of negative theology (in a similar vein, as we noted earlier, to Melville.) The God of his Christianity is the “Dark One”, to whom kataphatic designations will not stick and who remains an elusive but desperately desired Unknown. This aspect of apophaticism is amplified in another poem of Hart’s, “Facing the Pacific at Night.”³¹ Here the specifically Derridean tenor of Hart’s theology fully emerges. I cite the poem here in full:

Driving east, in the darkness between two stars
 Or between two thoughts, you reach the greatest ocean,
 That cold expanse the rain can never net,

And driving east, you are a child again -
 The web of names is brushed aside from things.
 The ocean's name is quietly washed away

Revealing the thing itself, an energy,
 An elemental life flashing in starlight.
 No word can shrink it down to fit the mind,

It is already there, between two thoughts,
 The darkness in which you travel and arrive,
 The nameless one, the surname of all things.

The ocean slowly rocks from side to side,
 A child itself, asleep in its bed of rocks,
 No parent there to wake it from a dream,

To draw the ancient gods between the stars.
 You stand upon the cliff, no longer cold,
 And you are weightless, back before the thrust
 And rush of birth when beards of blood are grown;
 Or outside time, as though you had just died
 To birth and death, no name to hide behind,

No name to splay the world or burn it whole.
 The ocean quietly moves within your ear
 And flashes in your eyes: the silent place

Outside the world we know is here and now,
 Between two thoughts, a child that does not grow,
 A silence undressing words, a nameless love.

³¹ Published in Kevin Hart. *Flame Tree: Selected Poems* (Northumberland: Bloodaxe Books, 2002) p. 103

The most immediate change between this poem and the last is that the poet here speaks to himself, not God. But the exact identity of the speaker and the addressee is not straightforward. The narrator speaks in the second person “you”, addressing the man standing before the ocean from the standpoint of, well—whom exactly? Whomever he is, this narrator displays complete and intimate knowledge of the poet’s experience (even “within your ear”), can reflect on the poet’s past (even the primordial “rush of birth”) and also displays philosophical profundity in perceiving the Husserlian thing-itself phenomena “flashing” before the man. He obviously speaks from a vantage external to the man’s experience, but it is a very *close* vantage point, close enough to be talking in the mode of intimate, gentle conversation. Finally, in the last stanza, the narrator asserts kinship with the man before him, recognizing himself in a world that “we”—that *they*— share.

Following our reading of “Dark Retreat”, we might suggest that we have here an internal dialogue similar to that of the Psalmist with his own soul.³² But it seems to me that a better reading is a Heideggerian one: we have here Hart the poet cast as the *man* and the *thinker* of Heidegger’s later philosophy; two tightly bound but distinct figures. Hart the man stands facing the Pacific at night, and Hart the thinker (which for Heidegger means something like a poet-philosopher) looks in and around, interpreting and articulating the experience, both to himself, to Hart the man, and to us.

The significance of this distinction for our interests is that it helps to make sense of the “darkness” which is introduced in the first stanza and which pervades the rest of the text. This darkness is, firstly, an epistemological figure—“No word can shrink it down to fit the mind,” Hart says, for “it is already there, between two thoughts.” The darkness is linguistically intractable, ineffably large, always-already present, and it stands for the mysterious gaps in human thought. It is the stuff of the non-rational.

³² As in Psalm 42:5—“Why art thou cast down, O my soul? and why art thou disquieted in me? hope thou in God...”

Hart surely has Heidegger's late work *The Principle of Reason* in mind here.³³ This little book (originally a series of lectures) was published late in his career and in it Heidegger presents, in my opinion, his finest thematization of an idea which runs beneath all of his work: the *falsity* of the dominion of Reason in the history of the West and Western philosophy. Heidegger's argument in *The Principle of Reason* is too complex, subtle and strange to follow here. Suffice to say that Heidegger critiques the priority of "calculative thinking" (that is, the strict processes of logical deduction and scientific method, the sort of thing which could easily "splay the world or burn it whole") by claiming an epistemological and ontological ground *outside* the dominion of the *ratio*. He describes this movement with the figure of "the leap"—a leap into and beyond the accepted *grund* (ground) of being and rationality by way of "meditative thought". In this leap of non-rational thought, Heidegger argues that, contra the entire ontotheological tradition, the *grund* of ontology and rationality is actually an *abgrund*, a non-ground, an *abyss*.³⁴ In Hart's terms, it is "a darkness."

This non-rational, epistemological darkness prepares us for the second referent of "darkness" in the poem—"the nameless one, the surname of all things." And so we meet Hart's God again: non-metaphysical, deconstructed, mystical, dark. He is the nameless surname, which is to say, in another mode, the groundless ground; He underwrites all things and yet is unwritten. The final stanza tells us yet more: this God is a "silence undressing words" and "a nameless love". Here, I think, with the "nameless love", we see all the strains of Hart's philosophy and religion coming together. The Derridean suspicion of straightforwardly referential language and its

³³ Martin Heidegger. *The Principle of Reason*. (USA: Indiana University Press, 1991) Trans. Reginald Lilley

³⁴ John Caputo helpfully sums up Heidegger's critique: "Heidegger shows us that reason is one of the powers which only *pretend* to be, and that we ought not to take its pretensions to universal jurisdiction seriously. And Heidegger had an excellent reason for saying this. For the fact is that the *arche/king*, let us say, the emperor, has no clothes. It is one of the most embarrassing things in the history of metaphysics. If we ask the principle of reason for its own reason, if we ask what is the reason for the principle of reason, if we ask about the reasonableness of reason, we get no answer." John Caputo. *Radical Hermeneutics: Repetition, Deconstruction, and the Hermeneutic Project*. Indianapolis: Indiana University Press (1987) p. 225

inevitable collusion with a “metaphysics of presence”³⁵ is here at work in Hart’s refusal to positively name God. In a sense, this is a defence against idolatry—construing God as or like a thing in the world, even as the concept “God.”³⁶ It is also subtly reminiscent of the I AM declaration of the Exodus narrative, in which the giving of the tetragrammaton acts as a sort of refusal of God to name himself with reference to anything beyond himself.

We then see that this deconstructive, apophatic “nameless” names “love.” Hart here displays his fundamental commitment to the Christian tradition, despite his criticisms of it—Derrida’s *différance* is not love; *God*, we are told in 1 John 4, is love. Thus Hart places himself squarely within the long tradition of Christian mystics who, in their dark night of the soul, eventually are met by the God who even in that darkness may be known as Love. This meeting and knowing is, as we’ve suggested above, a thoroughly non-rational experience—the ontological darkness is matched by an epistemological darkness. And yet in all this, the dark absences of Hart’s poem is not the absence of an atheism, but rather the darkness of a radical theism. This is the essential drama of the poet—man and thinker—as he stands before the darkness of the Pacific at night, and it is also the drama which we can see propelling all of Kevin Hart’s theological and literary work.

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The final chapter of *The Broken Estate* is titled “The Broken Estate: The legacy of Ernest Renan and Matthew Arnold” and it is a very curious conclusion to Wood’s volume. In it he extends his historical argument about the seed of liberal theology sprouting within literary studies, emphasizing the roles of Renan and Arnold in this process. What is so intriguing about the chapter, however, is Wood’s positive *fury* at

³⁵ A suspicion exemplified in his piece “How to Avoid Speaking: Denials,” in *Languages of the Unsayable* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1989) translated by Ken Frieden eds., Sanford Budick and Wolfgang Iser,

³⁶ Hart himself suggests something along this line in his recent book *Postmodernism: A Beginner’s Guide* (Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 2004) p. 113

the disseminators of the sort of liberal theology which C. S. Lewis once memorably described “Christianity-with-water”³⁷—theology in which Christianity becomes only “a poetry that brushes our moral fibres the right way.”³⁸ Such thinking, says Wood,

...which does not deserve to be called thinking, with its clownish contradictions and repulsive evasions, positively *deserves* Nietzsche’s decisive hammer.³⁹

This disdain for less-than-orthodox Christianity has lost none of its vehemence since Wood’s 1992 book. Earlier this year Wood delivered the Weidenfeld Lectures at Oxford with the topic “The modern novel and the New Atheism.”⁴⁰ He lambasts the Ditchkins⁴¹ collective for a similarly reductive reading of Christianity’s theological traditions, for their ridiculing of religious commitment and their stifling evolutionary materialism; they are “parochial polemicists” who must lift their critical game or otherwise leave the public square.

This all prompts an obvious question—why such an impassioned defence of the religion which one has rejected? It is, I think, another side-effect of the “duress of recoil”—the religion he denies is too significant for him for it to be treated lightly, or misrepresented. Wood is quite aware of the irony buried in this situation:

Like many raised in a religious household, I often find myself caught in a painful, if comic paradox whereby I am involved in an angry relationship with the very God whose existence I am supposed to deny. Contradictory this kind of non-believing might at times be, but those contradictions feed, perhaps constitute, its brand of militancy; it is because God cannot be entirely banished that one is forced to keep on complaining, rather than merely finalize one’s elegies.⁴²

³⁷ C. S. Lewis. *Mere Christianity* (London: HarperCollins, reprint 2009) p. 40

³⁸ Wood, *The Broken Estate*, p. 292

³⁹ *Ibid.* p. 292

⁴⁰ Subsequently edited into an online article: James Wood. “The modern novel and the New Atheism”, *ABC Religion and Ethics* (July 4, 2011) <http://www.abc.net.au/religion/articles/2011/07/04/3259863.htm>.

⁴¹ Terry Eagleton’s charming phrase, from his *Reason, Faith and Revolution: Reflections on the God Debate* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010)

⁴² Wood, “The modern novel and the New Atheism” (July 4, 2011)

And so we meet just the sort of restless theological drama which Wood has already identified in Melville. Perhaps it is the case that Wood desires a God who is worthy of his unbelief—just as Melville’s exceeding vision of the whale stands as a mighty, satisfactory cipher to the God of his Puritan inheritance—a God sufficient to underwrite the profundity of his literary life, even if He underwrites it by his absence. This is, I think, the final impression left by *The Broken Estate*. Wood is a man who glories in the legacy which the Bible has handed on to the West while simultaneously lamenting its decline, and all this while rejecting (but respecting) its claim to truth.

While Wood agitates to preserve the religion he denies, Hart agitates to transform the religion he accepts. As he sees it, the Bible’s legacy in the West is a religion that in many ways was co-opted by faulty philosophical projects, collusions which produced a long line of idolatrous Christian “God”s created in the image of whichever sort of Promethean rationality held sway at the particular historical moment. Postmodernity thus represents a unique opportunity for Christianity to wander back along the road from Athens to Jerusalem, to return to her Biblical roots, and to re-emerge as a compelling option in the contemporary West. As he himself puts it, “a deconstruction of Christianity would not mark an untroubled exit from the faith. It might even revivify the faith.”⁴³In so doing, the nameless love of Christianity might be found once again in the West.

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This essay opened with a citation from Eliot’s *Four Quartets*. Eliot’s ghost was perhaps Poe and Yeats (or Mallarme or Swift or whomever scholarship currently prefers). But today, surely, our ghost is Christ. Flannery O’Connor used this very image a few decades ago to describe the religious mood of the American South—“Christ-haunted”, she said. Today Christ haunts *the West*, “some dead master... forgotten, half recalled.”

⁴³ Kevin Hart. *Postmodernism: A Beginner’s Guide* (Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 2004)

Wood and Hart agree that the legacy of the Bible which we receive today has been thoroughly shaped by the intellectual vicissitudes of history, but they tell different stories about why this is so, how it has happened that Christianity is today a spectre and not a man. And while there are surely many different responses we might make to the Christian heritage, they present us with two particularly compelling options: on the one hand, a passionate exploration of the cultural ruins which remain after the collapse of the Christian tradition, on the other, a passionate return to the God who has resurrected from the ruins of Western philosophy—the Broken Estate or the Nameless Love.

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