

EROS, POEISIS, THEOLOGY

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I

Kevin Hart's poetic corpus is marked by two features that are at once formal and yet also separated conceptually by an aporetic tension: *eros* and *poiesis*. At the level of form *eros* characterizes a poetry of address that is frequently hymn-like, or even apostrophic: what is addressed elicits and retreats. By *poiesis* I want to refer to a radically asubjective quality of writing whereby language operates by its own self-making and quasi-autonomous force. If *praxis* is a living body's mode of acting in order to further its own being, then *poiesis* is that mode of acting and making that detaches itself from life, or we might say that *poiesis* brings praxis into being.

Giorgio Agamben, critical of the increasing tendency to contain all action within a dominating will—even seeing the world of art objects as nothing more than the act of the artists—argues for *poiesis* as a mode of making and doing that cannot be reduced to the self-constituting will of man. For Agamben, rethinking the distinction and indistinction between *poiesis* and *praxis* would enable us to rethink the ways in which a constituted system of meaning emerges from human action, while also bearing a force that disturbs any notion of human self-mastery. For Agamben, “The Greeks [...] made a clear distinction between *poiesis* and *praxis* (*poiein*, ‘to produce’ in the sense of bringing into being) and *praxis* (*prattein*, ‘to do’ in the sense of acting). As we shall see, central to praxis was the idea of the will that finds its immediate expression in an act, while, by contrast, central to poiesis was the experience of production into presence, the fact that something passed from nonbeing to being, from concealment into the full light of the work.”¹ Hart, similarly indebted to Heidegger, takes a different path from Agamben, and I would argue that the reasons for the difference between Hart and Agamben are both theological and philosophical. Agamben's conception of the divine, if we can call it that, is counter-deconstructive: critical of regarding language as the constituted system that would limit what might be thought, Agamben argues that what requires our attention is that immanent zone of the human that is most enigmatic and interior: “It is more

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urgent to work on these divisions, to ask in what way—within man—has man been separated from non-man, and the animal from the human, than it is to take positions on the great issues, on so-called human rights and values. And perhaps even the most luminous sphere of our relations with the divine depends, in some way, on that darker one which separates us from the animal.”² It would follow, then, that for Agamben *poiesis* would return human acting not to self-transparency but to man’s own opacity to himself. What is most other and transcendent—divine even—is that in ourselves which can be lived but never articulated. Poetry would not be expressive of what can be said, but would be marked by an event of *saying* in which nothing more is given than the mute inertia of human language. For all the theological framing of his work, Agamben is part of a wider counter-deconstructive tendency to criticize the positing of some divine non-presence. Just because this world is never fully given, this does not legitimate a stopping short at the limits of language and then arguing for some inhuman, transcendent beyond. Poetry would be constitutively immanent, and would be part of returning thought to its emergence from an action or praxis that is never fully transparent.

For Hart, by contrast, it is because the immanent, human and sensual world always gives itself in fragments (fragments that will never compose a final presence) that poetry or the voice ‘we’ address to the world takes both the self and the word to a mode of transcendence that is best approached by way of *eros*. Drawn by desire and incompleteness to an otherness that promises fulfillment, the self who addresses the world is at one and the same time bound by the already given forms of speech. Even so, by virtue of the desire that requires but goes beyond speech this desired sensuous world annihilates or sacrifices the individual voice and opens to a divine presence. *Eros* and *poiesis* might then be seen as formal strategies for rethinking the very possibility of relation: not relations that emerge from or are reducible to life, but relations within life that can never be lived.

II

What is the relation between *eros* and *poiesis*, and how might such a relation be thought at all fruitfully today—in the twenty-first century—when it might seem that we ought to be thinking beyond our own desires, our own bodies, and also the things of our own making? Does not the twenty-first century—the epoch of the anthropocene and the post-human—demand questions that are cosmic rather than human, catastrophic rather than erotic, and certainly not theological? If I pose this series of questions to the poetic corpus of Kevin Hart I do so primarily because of this beautifully reflective poetry’s *prima facie* lack of urgency and its apparent disjunction with Hart the philosopher’s insistence on the gap of negativity that would preclude this sensuous world from ever offering us solace or presence. There seems to be so much in this poetry that is languid, yearning, and yet resigned to the waiting of desire. It is almost as though the great deconstructive call to responsibility that follows from the radical lack of presence and good conscience is then ameliorated by the sensuous beauty of this world that promises (but never yields) redemption. If there is something irresponsible about the theological tone—about suggesting that the life of this world might have its spirit elsewhere and therefore need not be the proper domain of our concern—there seems something doubly irresponsible about Hart’s theological poetics, in which the spirit that is being anticipated, intimated, desired but never disclosed, is nevertheless insistently felt. It is as though we have the worst of all worlds: Hart’s poetry at once focuses on the smallest of things, the simply present and the immediately felt, and yet every desired sensation opens to an infinite that captivates desire but never arrives. This is at once a poetry of *eros*, of radical incompleteness, and yet also a poetry that takes seriously the condition of *poiesis*: the poem stands alone, allowing words, desires, sensations and affects to bear a persistence or survival that transcends the moment of their making.

If we were to ask why one ought to read this poetry today we might have a task on our hands. Yes, Hart’s work possesses a fragile sublimity, with each word of prayer and each touch of flesh opening onto a desired infinite that can never be presented; but, as recent eco-critics of Derrida have insisted, the fetishization of the futural and open dimension of deconstruction occurs precisely when this planet’s time and potentiality are contracting.³ Despite all this, I want to suggest that it is the coupling of *eros* and *poiesis*, especially as articulated via Hart’s poetry, that might awaken thought from its anthropocentric slumbers, and I want to do so by focusing on Hart’s use of a poetic form in “Gacela.” Consider, first, the very possibility of poetic form: there is a

wanting or desiring to say, a will to speak, but this desire proceeds not by way of emergence from self, but as a submission or sacrifice to an already given structure of articulation. The repeated “I want” of the *Gacela* is it once insistent and personal but also destructive of the self who speaks precisely because of its impersonality and formality. It is as though the most intimate of givens—the self, desire, speaking—were also the most distant and inhuman. I want to suggest that *eros*, considered poetically and therefore theologically (as that which is at once the self’s own but also the self’s undoing) has a binding and unbinding power, radically finite and also therefore necessarily infinite. The repetition of the “I want” is at once an expansion and opening out of the self to a proliferating world that seems to elicit desire and voice, such that the *eros* of the poem is primarily connective and open, at the same time as the poetic distinction and formal repetition of the “I want” constrains and distances desire. The very desire that the world elicits, from the poem’s opening “There is...,” follows the sunlight on hair to a series of fleeting refractions, dreams and reflections: “the stream / That makes the bird a fish and then a bird.” (“Stream” is at once the stream of mango juice, present and sensual, and the transforming stream of water.) It is as though the opening presents two worlds: the ‘there is’ of tangled sunlight (that will proliferate and increase with movement and complexity) and the “there are” of sleep, guns, dust, statues, laziness, storms and war:

There is the sunlight tangled in your hair
And there are soldiers sleeping with their guns.
“This viper, the world!” Teresa cried, and yet

I want the mango’s wealth of juice, the stream
That makes the bird a fish and then a bird;
I do not want the desert’s cayenne dust

There is at once a desired and described transformation, that allows the poem’s opening “there is” to arrive at a final “I want *to feel*.”

I want the snake to shed its skin and fly,
I want to feel the sunlight in your hair.⁴

But there is also a counter-movement that is undecidable. The seeming opposition between the embrace (“I want”) of fecund appearing set against the refusal (“I do not want”) of inertia is complicated by the figure of Teresa. Here, it is at once the passionate refusal of this “viper” world that is almost immediately counteracted by the, “and yet” The student “dreams” of Cleopatra, and within the dream “sees the asp reflected in her eyes.” Dreaming, eyes, reflections and Cleopatra: all seem to indicate a proliferating desire and yearning for the world, and yet the *reflection* of the asp intimates the very risk or danger of experience.⁵ It is this desire for the world that at once yields a self of wanting and not wanting, where the wanting exposes the self to the complications of appearing, and where the *not* wanting or refusal of stasis and inertia still hints at a world of simulation and doubling; the statues are fighting, and the soldiers are tossing and turning, and there is “imitation of war.” It is as though the desire that is elicited by the world is multiplied by the world’s own rich appearing and seeming. The repeated “I want” that is prompted by the poem’s opening—“There is”—gestures to various forms of transformation, complication and multiplication: bullets becoming giddy, roads tying in knots, gun chambers spinning, and the flight of birds. What is refused is dust, fighting, turning to stone. And yet even that fixity of being turned to stone is a metamorphosis. The ongoing embrace and vibrant life of the ‘I want’ begins with sunlight in hair, and yet never arrives at its desired end.

The unfolding voice of “*Gacela*” proceeds by being at once drawn to the fecundity of the world and the multiplying light while nevertheless battling against all the negations of life. The initial “There is...” yields a series of “I wants” but concludes by returning to hair and sunlight, only this time with a desire to feel. From “There is the sunlight...” to “I want to feel the sunlight,” Hart’s “*Gacela*” grants experience a structure of *eros* and *poiesis*: experience is always experience *of*, such that every yearning desire exposes the self to a path of

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refusal, and every articulation of that same desire—"I want"—takes the form of a repetition that compromises desire's singularity, rendering it impersonal.

One might think here of a theology that is not so much *post-human* as counter-human. It is the condition of desire to be drawn toward that which is given, but that which *in being given* also withdraws. It is this necessary wanting and not wanting that enables a theological poetics. The letter, the sensation, the touch, the affect—all are intimately felt and lived, but also open to what cannot be fully lived. All begin with an assaulting and undeniable presence, and yet all refuse any full presence. All are finite, but precisely by way of finitude enable a poetics of separation—a confrontation with a world that is *not* one of our own making or meaning. Hart's poetry is marked by an erotics that is both proximate and distant in equal measure.

I would suggest that this give us pause for thinking about poetics, deconstruction and theology today. One notion might be that deconstruction was fundamentally a refusal of proximity: any supposed presence, nearness or being would always be given through a series of traces that could never be brought to presence. It would follow that a responsible deconstruction would be a refusal of the present, the near, and certainly all forms of theism.

Consider this other possibility: perhaps the easy leaps to the post-human, and the simple affirmation that we can simply think beyond our own conditions and be post-theological are delusional, hubristic and symptomatic of an epoch in which we have long ceased to perceive, witness or desire the world (where desire is not a wanting to possess, but rather a mode of self-loss). Perhaps then a theological poetics of *eros* might draw us near to what is close at hand in order to destroy an all too easy complacency of finitude.

III

Deconstruction and religion have fallen on tough times lately. If there's a darling of Derrida studies today it is probably Mark Hagglund, who names Hart as one of the great domesticators of the thought of the trace.⁶ If, for Hart, the materiality of the trace—in its inscriptive distinction and ungrounding power—detaches us from any simple worldly finitude, it also necessarily opens an uncontainable infinite and irreducible immateriality. By contrast, Hagglund has tirelessly insisted that such theological gestures are unfaithful to the destructive power of the trace; what we have is finitude, nothing more. To posit some presence beyond the trace, even an intimated presence, is to do an injustice to the radical atheism of deconstruction. The trace, in its finitude and movement, gives us only the destruction of presence, and *not* the destruction of a present world that would thereby indicate some "beyond presence." This gesture might seem worthy and salutary today: for all the arcane rigor and exegetical focus of Hagglund's argument, it might still have some practical purchase. If we could just resign ourselves to finitude we would not be laboring under the illusion of redemption; we might start asking the proper—materialist—questions. All we have is here and now, and our response can appeal to nothing more than what is of our own unwilled, but responsible, making. By the same token, we might say that Hart's poetry just adds to the regressive opiate of religion. First, and ostensibly, Hart's is a corpus dominated by *eros*, and an *eros* of the smallest, most immediate and fleeting of things: a kiss, sunlight on hair, the taste of a mango, late afternoon rain. The diction of these events is not that of significance or sense but of sensation, in a way that can be understood through Hart's own thoughts about poetry and writing via Blanchot and Mallarmé. This is an erotic poetry of poesis; the poem stands alone, and in turn allows sensations to stand alone: not in their significance or meaning for the poet, but in a mode of sacrifice. A kiss does not present *eros* in the form of a unification of the self, but a giving over of the self to something that draws out, stands apart and almost annihilates: "And once I nearly die inside your kiss." The poem *articulates*—in the sense of cutting out and marking out—the desire of the sensation, *sensations as desires*, or as forces to create relations that are not those *of the self*.

Hart's poems appear to emanate from what is most personal and human—desire, and the qualities that generate desire—but his poetry grants once-human, once-personal events, a separation or 'stand alone' quality that is

destructive of *chronos*, and destructive of the finite time that—for Hagglund—can only appear in the finitude of things coming into being and passing away, in a time of non-presence in which the now is implicated in an absent past and absent future.⁷ But what if the desired sensations destroyed the processes that marked out events as sequential and bound up in a necessary passing away? What if the cutting power of desire destroyed the present or the sake of some quality that was radically eternal, not capable of being reduced to finitude? In both “Gacela” and “Your Kiss” it is poetic form—something that despite use and reappearance has an ideal iterability—allows each instance of desire to intimate an imbrication with a desired that is radically excessive and infinite in being irreducible to an insistent finitude. One can see in this mode of poetics just the sort of spiritualism that Hagglund objects to in Hart’s philosophy: if the trace cannot be exhausted by any worldly referent or sense then for Hagglund this means we are left with a definite absence of sense, an imperative to refuse what cannot be presented. For Hart this pressing and desired finitude opens to a spirituality that is not that of presence. Three words: *poiesis*, *eros*, and theology. *Poiesis*: those things that emerge from our making possess a power that is not ours. They stand alone or endure, indicating a time or survival beyond the self. *Eros*: the desire that draws the self from itself necessarily possesses a force of annihilation or sacrifice that is not so much one of *self-loss* (where I lose myself) as *self-loss* (where the self is lost, giving over to what can only be desired, never given.). Theology: all reading is a submission to what is given, finite and before the self. The given demands to be read, to be given voice and spirit; and yet the same imperative to read is also a recognition of a spirit that can never exhaust or be exhausted by the letter. Hart’s poetry generates a separation of the sensation and the letter, and operates by an *eros* of finitude that opens onto infinity. Both disturb the world to the point of indicating a radically uncontainable power.

YOUR KISS

I feel your nakedness inside your kiss
(And once I nearly died inside your kiss)

All day the sky just lazes on the sea
And I am swimming in that tide, your kiss

How everything I see is soaked with time
(But in your arms I’ve always sighed “Your kiss!”)

It’s summer and the days peel off their skin
And naked half the day I ride your kiss

At night my walnut tree soaks up the dark
(Just as one night in bed you lied your kiss)

Death has its fundamentalists as well
But I shall take another guide: your kiss!

The heart is ringing in its spire of bone
(Then pushes time aside — just for your kiss)

NOTES

1. Giorgio Agamben, "Poiesis and Praxis." *The Man Without Content*. Trans. Georgia Albert. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999, 68-69.
2. Giorgio Agamben, *The Open: Man and Animal*. Trans. Kevin Attell. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004, 15.
3. *Deconstruction in the Anthropocene*. *Oxford Literary Review* 34.1. Ed. Timothy Clark. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2012.
4. Kevin Hart, *Flame Tree*. Highgreen: Bloodaxe, 2003, 96.
5. Kevin Hart, "Introduction." *The Experience of God: A Postmodern Response*. Ed. Kevin Hart and Barbara Wall. New York: Fordham, 2005, 1-19, 12.
6. Martin Hagglund, *Radical Atheism: Derrida and The Time of Life*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2008, 6.
7. Martin Hagglund, "Radical Atheist Materialism: A Critique of Meillassoux's *After Finitude*." *The Speculative Turn: Continental Materialism and Realism*. Eds Levi Bryant, Nick Srnicek and Graham Harman. Melbourne: re.press, 2011.