



Kevin Hart's Poetry &  
Western Cultural TRADIOTIONS

哈特诗歌和西方文化传统

张少扬 / 著  
ZHANG Shaoyang

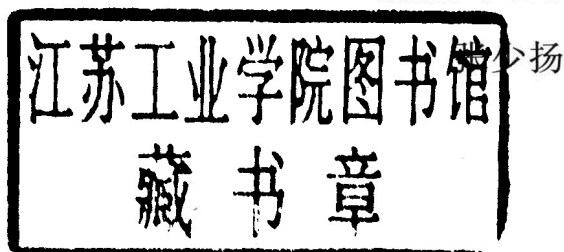
世界图书出版公司

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——Dual realities in the space of Kevin Hart's poetry

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世界图书出版公司

北京·广州·上海·西安

**图书在版编目(CIP)数据**

哈特诗歌和西方文化传统:英文/张少扬 著. —北京:世界图书出版公司北京公司,2007.12

ISBN 978—7—5062—8748—7

I. 哈... II. 张... III. 哈特,K.—诗歌—文学评论—英文  
IV. I611.072

中国版本图书馆 CIP 数据核字(2007)第 181983 号

**哈特诗歌和西方文化传统**

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**作 者:** 张少扬

**责任编辑:** 赵大新

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**出 版:** 世界图书出版公司北京公司

**发 行:** 世界图书出版公司北京公司

(地址: 北京朝内大街 137 号 邮编: 100010 电话: 64077922)

**销 售:** 各地新华书店和外文书店

**印 刷:** 北京世图印刷厂

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**开 本:** 787×1092 1/16

**印 张:** 26

**字 数:** 380 千

**版 次:** 2007 年 12 月第 1 版 2007 年 12 月第 1 次印刷

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ISBN 978—7—5062—8748—7/H·1026

定价: 48.00 元

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谨以此书献给：

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## ABSTRACT

This work argues that Kevin Hart's poetry has a close relationship with western traditions and there are dual realities in Kevin Hart's poetic space, and this space includes the elements of classicism, romanticism, modernisms (cubism, surrealism), dual tradition of theology (positive theology and negative theology), and French post-phenomenological thinking. The dual realities are testified to by some binary pairs in Hart's poetry: the concrete, conscious, definite, familiar, natural, phenomenal, physical, and positive standing side by side with the abstract, higher, ideal, indefinite, intellectual, metaphysical, negative, philosophical, surreal, transcendental, and unconscious. The latter are achieved from the former through a process of transcending or going beyond, and the mediums between the two poles of binary pairs are death, denial, denudation, deprivation, dying, idealisation, negation, rejection, transgression, transcendence, and transformation. While maintaining that there are dual realities in Hart's poetic space, this work explores and demonstrates the poet's affinity with and the influences of various figures from literary, philosophical, and theological traditions in two ways: historically and horizontally. Through comparison and contrast, it is seen historically that Hart is close to Pope, Wordsworth, Coleridge, Keats, Shelley, Apollinaire, Jacob, and Breton; and that he is even closer, when spiritual faith is reflected in his poems, to the Bible's Solomon and the mediaeval poets, especially certain anonymous lyricists, and to Herbert and Hopkins; and that Hart is also close to such Christian mystics as Augustine, Bernard, Eckhart, John of the Cross, Gilbert, Isaac, Plato, Plotinus, and Pseudo-Dionysius. Hart's hori-



zontal or contemporary influences come from such figures as Bataille, Blanchot, Bloom, Derrida, and Levinas. Although he is influenced by those figures the poet does not remain in the stage of being influenced; Hart transcends the influences by creating his own poetry and his own art.



## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This work is adapted from my PhD thesis which was completed in September 2005. I wish to express my gratitude to several people for helping me in completing this work.

The first person that my thanks go to is my supervisor Professor Leon Cantrell. I thank him for his constant encouragement, help, and support, and I appreciate his instruction, supervision, and thought-provoking questions that stimulated me to think profoundly.

My thanks also go to the poet, Mr. Robert Gray, who gave me a lot of advice. I want to thank the poet, Kevin Hart, for his brilliant poems that have been the catalyst for me to write this work. I am grateful to Professor Hart for reading this work and giving me many invaluable suggestions and explanations.

I want to thank my family members, especially my wife Yan Liu and my eighty-two-year-old mother. I thank them for their support and understanding.



## A Note on Citations

This work follows the instructions provided in *Humanities Style Manual* (third edition 2004) prepared by Greg Noble & Ruth Barcan at the School of Humanities of University of Western Sydney. When quotations from *Flame Tree* are cited in this work, the page numbers are provided in the text. All the other quotations cited are specified in the footnotes. The bibliography follows the “Author-Date System Bibliography”.





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# Part I



## Introduction





## Section I Introduction

It is a great challenge for a person who has no religious beliefs, whose first language is not English and whose background is not Australian but Chinese, to write a work on Kevin Hart's poetry. I took the challenge regardless of the cultural differences.

A scene I still remember is that how an eminent literary critic in China shook her head when I sought his opinion of the book containing about one hundred of Hart's poems that I had translated. She simply told me that she could not understand the poems. To be honest, I could not understand most of the poems myself either, although I had some knowledge of Western literary theories and a little understanding of deconstruction at the time, and my translation was good enough for the editors in one of the best translation-publishing houses in China - *Yilin Press* - to agree to publish the poems. It was more embarrassing when an editor of a Chinese national magazine *High-School Students' Reading* asked me to write an article to introduce Hart's poems to millions of Chinese high-school students - I dared not write a word. Not because I could not write something, but because I was afraid that what I wrote might lead the students towards misunderstanding Hart's poems and Western culture. Looking back, I have a kind of "back-fear": I would, indeed, have committed a terrible mistake if I had really written something for the magazine!

Embracing a strong desire and passion to understand Hart's poetry and to know more about Western culture, several years ago I came to the University of Western Sydney to study his poems under the supervision of Professor Leon Cantrell. After one or two years' study, I began to realise that Hart's poems have deep roots in Western culture and various literary trends, including classicism, romanticism, and modernism. What is more, there are, in his poems, elements of positive theology, negative theology, mysticism, and other esoteric religious elements. Although the poems con-



tain, more or less, these elements, I find that some of his poems are much closer to English poems written by anonymous mediaeval lyricists, and some are proximate to the ideas promoted by post-phenomenological writers such as Emmanuel Levinas, Maurice Blanchot, and Jacques Derrida (including Georges Bataille). Therefore, I explore the affinities, influences and Hart's creative transcendence in this work with six parts.

The first part is this part, the Introduction, containing four sections: "Introduction", "Hart's background and achievements", and "Literature review", followed by "Methodology". As can be seen, the first section provides the outline or structure of the work; the second section gives a brief introduction to Hart's background and his achievements in both his literary and theoretical work; the third section is a survey of the critical reviews of Hart's poetry, and depicts the context of earlier work from which my research starts; the final section establishes the basic methodology used to write this work; a complex form of comparison and contrast, through which various influences on Hart and his transcendence of these influences in his poetry are explored in the following substantial parts.

Part II, "From classicism to romanticism", is composed of two sections: elements of classicism and the romantic internalised quest in Hart's poems. The first section is an exploration of the classical elements in Hart's poems through a demonstration of the influences from classical thinking: as in classical poetry, drama, painting and sculpture, man is the central theme and subject matter in some of Hart's poems; and also an exposition of Pope's influence on Hart through satire, phantasmagoria, and transformation. The second section of this part explores the romanticism in Hart's poems, showing Hart's closeness to M. H. Abrams', Harold Bloom's, Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe's, and Jean-Luc Nancy's theories on the internalised romantic quest and romantic genre "fragment", and his affinity with romantic poets such as Wordsworth, Coleridge, Keats, and Shelley.

Two sections, concerning cubism and surrealism in Hart's poems, comprise Part III: "Modernism in Hart's Poems". In the section on "Cub-



ism in Hart's Poems", I argue that Hart's techniques in composing some poems are similar to Guillaume Apollinaire's cubist aesthetics, and techniques practised by Apollinaire and Max Jacob. It is also argued, in the second section, that surrealism is closely related to cubism, as the two schools belong to a kind of negation: cubism negates an objective reality to achieve a "higher reality" whereas surrealism negates the conscious self to reach "the infinite" or "higher reality"; and it is shown how the conscious and the unconscious collaborate and present the surreality through Breton's 'certain point of mind', and how this 'point' is replaced by different forms of mediums connecting two dimensions as entities.

Part IV, "Hart's Faith and Dual Theology" is also made up of two sections: "Positive Theology" and "Negative Theology". In this part I argue that there are two kinds of God for Hart; one is spiritual and the other philosophical, or one is that of positive theology and the other is that of negative theology. The two theologies cannot be separated from each other, for they function in collaboration. In positive theology God descends and enlightens, while in negative theology one is "beckoned to ascend" and become united with God through the "darkness of unknowing". In the section on positive theology, I demonstrate how Hart's poems show God's descent to this world in the form of traces of either nature or humans; the Bible's teachings and doctrines which reflect the nature of the Unity, the Trinity, and the Virgin Mary; and his closeness to mediaeval poems in subject matter. In the second section, I claim that Pseudo-Dionysius's "circular movement" of the divine being decides other beings' mystical unity with the divinity through purification, love, meditation, and silence. This involves an account of Hart's affinity to negative theologians or Christian mystics such as St. Augustine, Bernard of Clairvaux, St John of the Cross, Meister Eckhart, Gilbert of Hoyland, Plato, Plotinus, Pseudo-Dionysius, and Isaac of Stella, and the poets George Herbert, G. M. Hopkins, and the Bible's Solomon.

The fifth part, "Religious without Religion", has three sections: "Questing for 'Continuity of Being' through Transgression", "Seeking for



‘Exteriority’ through Transcendence”, and “Religion without Religion”. In this part I argue that theology has a great impact on Hart’s poetry, and this is shown in his affinity with the post-phenomenological thinkers such as Emmanuel Levinas, Maurice Blanchot, and Jacques Derrida. These thinkers’ theories are, more or less, related to Georges Bataille’s theory. So is Hart’s poetry. Hart’s closeness to Bataille is supported through a demonstration that some of his poems are “a quest for a lost intimacy with the continuous”<sup>①</sup> through desire, death, and transgression, which are the tenets of Bataille’s theory on eroticism. I maintain that Hart is influenced by Levinas for the reason that he follows Levinas’s way to seek for the divine ‘Exteriority’ through “fecundity”, “futurity”, and “transcendence”. It is widely known that Derrida and Blanchot have influenced Hart, and this is seen from Derrida’s “Religion without Religion” and John D. Caputo’s further illustration of the concept: “Derrida’s work as an author is religious - but without religion and without religion’s God”,<sup>②</sup> and from Derrida’s and Blanchot’s structure of *le pas au delà* - the step not beyond.

The final part, Part VI, is the conclusion of the whole work. There is a mode or pattern in Hart’s poetry: there are some binary pairs - something concrete, definite, natural, and physical stands side by side with something abstract, higher, indefinite, intellectual, metaphysical, philosophical, and surreal in classicism, romanticism, cubism, surrealism, theology, and post-phenomenological thinking, and to reach the latter from the former is a process of denying, dying, negating, surpassing, transcending, transfiguring, and transforming. The same can be said of Hart’s poetic creations: Hart is influenced by various literary trends and schools of the Western tradition, but he does not simply remain at the stage of being influenced - he creates his own art through transcendence and by going beyond.

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① K. Hart, *The Dark Gaze*; Maurice Blanchot and the Sacred. Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2004, p. 42. (hereafter Hart, *The Dark Gaze*)

② J. Caputo, *The Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida*. Indiana University Press, 1997, p. xviii. (hereafter Caputo, *The Prayers and Tears*)





## Section II Hart's Background and Achievements

To understand Hart's poems, we need to have a brief look at Hart's publications in poetry and criticism, and his awards or honours. Hart has published the following collections of poems: *The Departure* <sup>[1978]</sup>; *The Lines of the Hand* <sup>[1981]</sup>; *Your Shadow* <sup>[1984]</sup>; *Peniel* <sup>[1991]</sup>; *New and Selected Poems* (1995); *Wicked Heat* <sup>[1999]</sup>; and *Flame Tree: Selected Poems* <sup>[2002]</sup>. For his poetic achievements, Hart has won wide acclamation and acknowledgements. Since 1974 he has won more than ten major awards. These awards include the Christopher Brennan Award for Poetry (1999); the Grace Leven Prize for Poetry (shared) (twice: 1995, 1991), the NSW Premier's Award for Poetry (1985), the Victorian Premier's Award for Poetry (shared) (1985), the Wesley Michel Wright Award (University of Melbourne) (1982), the John Shaw Neilson Poetry Award (1977), the Australia Council Award (1977), the Farmers International Poetry Award (1975), and the Canberra Day Poetry Award (1974).

In addition to his literary achievements, Hart has had a successful academic career. From 1984 to 2002 he taught Doctor of Philosophy, Master of Arts, Master of Theology, and Bachelor of Arts courses in the English and Philosophy departments of several universities, including the University of Melbourne, Deakin University and Monash University. He was also appointed as visiting professor at two universities in the USA: Villanova and Georgetown. From 2002, he has held the Chair in the Philosophy Department at the University of Notre Dame in the USA.

Hart is also an eminent literary critic. He has written five books of criticism: *The Trespass of the Sign: Deconstruction, Theology and Philosophy* (1989), *A. D. Hope* (1992), *Samuel Johnson and the Culture of Property* (1999), *The Dark Gaze: Maurice Blanchot and the Sacred* (2004) and *Postmodernism: A Beginner's Guide* (2004). In addition, he has edited or co-edited the following books: *Experiencing God* (2005), *The Power of*

