

# The Poiesis of Place: Notes for a Biography of Ray L. Hart

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People are often amazed that Ray Hart, the urbane philosopher of religion and consultant to major university systems, was born and raised on a ranch in West Texas. And just as striking, for many years he lived in Montana on a remote outpost on the North Fork of the Flathead River in sight of Glacier National Park near the Canadian border. This is not the geography that readily brings Shakespeare, Goethe and Heidegger to mind. Yet these authors have been Hart's conversation partners whether writing college essays at a desk in Abilene, casting a Grannon Caddis Fly on a glacier-fed stream, or exegeting a Meister Eckhart text in a Boston University classroom on Commonwealth Avenue.

## The Inherited Place

You can earn an Ivy League doctorate, and Hart certainly did, but that alone is not what made him a good teacher. You can be erudite, and Hart surely is, but that alone did not make him the first choice of university search committees seeking a faculty colleague or a consultant. These credentials are necessary, but not sufficient. Social intelligence is the elusive quality that rounds out the ideal candidate. Hart's amiable personality and understanding of university politics checked that box.

Faculty, administrators, students and staff alike enjoy working with Hart. He is easy to be with. While demanding, he is convivial and without airs. In part, this is the legacy of being a barbed-wire boy.<sup>1</sup> He knows the rigours of growing cotton and corn as well as raising sheep, hogs and cattle on the treeless expanse of the Texas panhandle. The milking of the Guernsey cows began at 4 a.m. Some chores were down and dirty. Gloves were essential. Nature carries nonnegotiable rhythms and whims. You ignore them to your peril. Consequently, Hart learned patience and discipline. He worked with nature, not against her. What were the rhythms of the season? How do you grow crops without irrigation? How do you respond to flood and drought? So, too, the rhythms of institutions and people. Hart took time to learn the culture of an organization, the issues, the personalities, even what had been swept under the rug. As a newcomer, he knew you could not be presumptuous. You couldn't barge into ongoing conversations, even if you held the gavel.<sup>2</sup> Hart was the consummate student of institutional and interpersonal complexities. A Texas ranch had been his tutor.

Henry Bugbee, the head of the Department of Philosophy, chaired the faculty search committee that enticed Hart to the University of Montana. The committee was looking for a scholar to take the University's resolve for a Department of Religion off the drawing board and steer it into reality. When he offered Hart the position, it was not simply out of admiration for his credentials and experience.<sup>3</sup> It underlined something that Hart lacked—a condescending attitude to the West. While Hart's roots were not a secret, his Lone Star State pride did not carry a swagger. Nor had his years at Yale intoxicated him with Ivy League superiority. He enjoyed people of every variety. He respected them. Whether in a faculty meeting, at a seminar table, a cocktail parry, or a local bar, he took pride in patiently encouraging disparate people to engage with each other.<sup>4</sup> He knew in his bones the principles of social capital before they were heralded by Robert D. Putnam in *Bowling Alone*. Prime among them: 'Frequent interaction among a diverse set of people tends to produce a normal of generalized reciprocity.'<sup>5</sup> These sensitivities were finely tuned as he negotiated the transformation of the American Academy of Religion, led its journal into prominence and enlarged his role as a fundraiser. His sense of humour, whether in a memo, a letter

or conversation also proved invaluable. It had defused more than one volatile situation in the AAR and at Drew and Vanderbilt. It would prove invaluable in Missoula. The only favour he asked of his friends and colleagues was that they indulge his ever-present pipe and the aromatics of Captain Black Pipe Tobacco.

### **The Chosen Place**

It was love at first sight. The simple cabins sat on a bluff overlooking the flowing waters of the North Fork. Across the river rose a showcase of glistening glaciers sitting astride the massive granite peaks of Glacier National Park. The night sky featured the Northern Lights—surreal sheers of green and red colour rippling across the darkness, upstaging the bashful glow of single-wick oil lanterns in the cabin windows. Silence ruled both night and day. The sounds of civilization were confined sixty miles south, guarded by the one-lane North Fork Road that was largely unpaved and axle-damaging. Black bears and grizzlies roamed the boreal territory, competing with the human intruders for the huckleberries, native cutthroat trout, and meat stashed in less-than-secure root cellars.<sup>6</sup> Mail arrived just once a week. They were 23 miles removed from the tourist traffic that flowed into the National Park. The closest telephone was a pay phone ten miles away at the Polebridge Mercantile.<sup>7</sup>

Hart and family were the guests of Robert W. Funk, a faculty colleague at the Theological School at Drew University in Madison, New Jersey. Funk had won a prestigious scholarship to study for a year in Germany, so he and his family couldn't summer in Montana.<sup>8</sup> They offered their vacation home on the North Fork to the Harts, their close friends.<sup>9</sup>

The Harts not only enjoyed their summer-long visit, they began dreaming of owning a cabin nearby of their own. The experience of fly-fishing in that awe-inspiring setting is sufficient in itself to account for that desire. Standing knee-deep in the river, fishing over many afternoons, is its own reward.<sup>10</sup> But the unexpected experience of feeling 'the rod become a wand that made "contact with the magic current of the world"' changes a person.<sup>11</sup> Awash in nature, the importance of things can become unmistakably clear.<sup>12</sup> As Henry Bugbee, a philosopher and frequent fly-fishing partner of Hart, wrote, 'The gift of things in their independence is also the gift of ourselves together with them . . . [We are in] complete intimacy with them . . . Ours is a holy place.'<sup>13</sup> Hart knew that he had been 'held in the embrace of nature.'<sup>14</sup> That mysterious intimacy changes a person.<sup>15</sup>

When the opportunity arose to purchase some adjacent acres including several turn-of-the century homestead cabins, Hart and Funk pooled their resources and bought 40 acres of stream-side land. Hart was in ecstasy. Like William Butler Yeats, he had found his Innisfree, his 'deep heart's core.'<sup>16</sup> Ever the wordsmith, Hart christened his new mountain home 'HartsCore.' From that date forward, he spent his summers there.<sup>17</sup> Years later, he served as president of the North Fork Landowners Association and enjoyed the title, Mayor of Polebridge, a fact proudly registered on his curriculum vitae.

Needing more space and modern facilities, Hart designed and built a grand log lodge on his forested property. Its floor-to-ceiling windows framed stunning views into Glacier. For the first time in decades, his entire library could not only be released from cardboard boxes, not only reside in one location, but be properly shelved in magnificent rooms that outshone the Pierpont Morgan Library with their distinctive high country beauty.

Since retiring from teaching, Hart has lived year-round on the North Fork. He has not resorted to prepackaged hyperbole when he calls his home 'paradise.'<sup>18</sup>

## A Far Country Place

During his days at the University of Montana, Hart took pride in heading to his cabin as early as possible in May. Bob Funk's calendar showed the same pattern. The purpose? To plant their gardens. The growing season doesn't last long in the high country. Getting a head start was essential. A column in the *Hungry Horse News*, the weekly newspaper for northwest Montana, often commented on the early spring visits of the eager scholars from Missoula. A note in the newspaper from 1976 read:

Bob and Ray (Funk and Hart) were up crowding the season (as always) and tried to cultivate the muddy ground [for their gardens]. You'd think they'd learn. But now that the ground is really ready to break, they are not about.<sup>19</sup>

In 1980, Hart was not able to get out of town until the last day in May. His yellow station wagon was packed to the gunnels with garden plants. The pungent aroma of cabbage, broccoli, cauliflower, and Brussels sprout plants filled the Subaru. A copy of Goethe's *Conversations with Eckermann* kept Hart company on the empty seat beside him. It signaled that he was beginning a sabbatical year, twelve months to be devoted to Goethe's theology of nature.<sup>20</sup>

Late in the afternoon, academic responsibilities finally completed, he headed up Evaro Pass to his Innisfree. As he passed the Evaro Bar, 20 miles north of Missoula, exhaustion caught up with him. He fell asleep. Rudderless, the car careened across the median and crashed head-on into a pickup truck. Hart lost consciousness. Traffic stopped. The passengers in the car behind him included medical students. They radioed for help. An ambulance helicopter arrived and flew him and the other driver to St. Patrick Hospital in Missoula.<sup>21</sup> The garden did not get planted that year.

Hart's signature humour did not desert him even when reflecting on the devastating accident and the long dark night of the body. He was at his mischievous best when theorising that he might have made a contribution to the flora on mountain highway 93. 'No doubt,' he said, 'in the future some University of Montana botanist will get a million dollars from the NSF to determine how Evaro Pass came to be covered by New Zealand Brussels sprouts.'<sup>22</sup>

But the accident expanded more than his repertoire of humor, it more than realigned his physical frame. It abducted him and sped him past Evaro Pass to a place not on the map. He crossed the river Styx and joined Persephone who was holding up spring in the 'underworld, the other world, which is to say in the *this* world of which we are nescient.'<sup>23</sup> As Hart put it, I was 'in latitudes and longitudes [for which] there is no sextant extant to shoot.'<sup>24</sup> He hovered in a series of comas, some lasting several weeks. Exactly one hundred of his bones were broken or fractured. Numerous surgeries were required. Years later, he called this the Far Country of the Not. His doctors did not know if he would survive. His colleagues, worried that his days were numbered, hurried to create for him what is perhaps the highest gift in academia—a collection of essays written by your peers in your honor. Their scramble became a special issue of the *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, a gift he has cherished ever since.<sup>25</sup>

When he was finally able to return home, he experienced an uncanny sense of having lost a part of himself, of having lost continuity with the self. Yet, he was not unnerved by these thoughts nor filled with angst. Rather, he was flooded by the contrary—'the benign well-being of being not. . . [An] absence *as* presence.'<sup>26</sup> In Heidegger's language, this was *poiesis*. Hart's accident had become a 'threshold occasion.' A moment of *ecstasis* when something moved away from its standing as one thing to become another.<sup>27</sup> Hart's perception of the event and of existence had changed to a

different modality. In religious language, it approached the experience of the *numinous*, evoking awe and wonder, an experience better approached through music. Perhaps Norman Maclean, echoing the *Gospel of Matthew* (10:39), comes closest, ‘Part of the way to come to know a thing is through its death.’<sup>28</sup>

Hart did not return to the classroom for three years. When he did, he stood three inches shorter. And equally striking, he exuded a new intensity. Like Coleridge’s Ancient Mariner, he arrested his students with a kindly fierceness, an urgency, and took them on voyages to the deep waters of theological and philosophical thought.

### **A Curated Place**

Hart’s skills extend beyond the university campus. His manifold reputation is not incidental, but rather well-deserved—he is known and appreciated as a gardener, cook, connoisseur of Bordeaux wine, fly fisherman, collector of art and antiques, architect and manager of his investments.<sup>29</sup> Given his scholarly acumen, it is not surprising that the list of his *bona fides* includes ‘book collector.’ He began collecting books (distinct from haphazardly buying books<sup>30</sup>) during his college days, and his purchase rate escalated with the years. Over the years, he developed a keen eye for bargains in the rare book market.

When he and Bob Funk joined forces to create the Department of Religion at the University of Montana in Missoula, their exploratory trips to the University Library startled them. The holdings in religion were paltry.<sup>31</sup> Undaunted, they conscripted their personal libraries for public duty. Their books and journals became the primary collection to support students taking courses in the fledgling department. Supportively, the University installed extensive shelving units in a large seminar room adjacent to their offices. As a result of Hart’s negotiating skills, the costs for moving the collections from Nashville to Missoula were fully covered by the University.

When Hart later moved east, Boston University cast a covetous eye on his highly regarded library, even though most of the books remained back home in Montana. Thinking creatively, the administration pitched a plan. A new library was being planned that would combine the holdings of the School of Theology Library with the philosophy collection of Mugar Memorial Library, the main library. They instructed the consultants to design a space for the hoped-for gift of Professor Hart’s library. It needed to be a significant feature in the evolving plans. The size of the Hart collection was approaching 20,000 volumes.<sup>32</sup>

The final home of the Hart library, however, will not be in Boston but in Montreal, at the School of Religious Studies on the campus of McGill University. The library is part of Hart’s legacy gift to the Montreal School. Garth W. Green, its director, is a former student of Hart. Rather than being catalogued and inter-shelved with the general holdings of the University Library, the Hart collection will stay intact and be catalogued as a special collection. A dedicated room will be created for the books in the School of Religious Studies. It will be named The Ray L. Hart Seminar Room.

The books will be shelved in the distinct order as they currently reside at Hart’s home in Montana. Consequently, future students and scholars will be able to experience the intellectual geography of an influential philosopher-theologian. After all, the placement of individual books, as well as the adjacencies of groups, are important. Are they subject categories, chronological gatherings, project clusters?<sup>33</sup> What books claim proud citizenship in this library that the Library of Congress does not classify as religion or philosophy? What books are *not* in the library? What books did Hart like

to have within easy reach of his desk? These questions are worth pursuing, for the books are a curated collection both in selection and in placement.

Unusual rewards await those who discover the marginalia in the volumes. As historian T.J. Stiles observed, ‘highlighting and marginalia function like enzymes, breaking the book down to supply nutrition for [a scholar's] work.’<sup>34</sup> Hart was well nourished.

Thanks to thoughtful planning, Hart’s intellectual home will not stagnate as a glass-protected museum. Like the North Fork, it will invite generations of students and scholars into its currents of thought.

### **A Photo in Place**

A photo of Hart awaits the reader on the back flap of *God Being Nothing*. It is quintessentially Hart. If the University of Chicago Press was going to insist on a photo, it had to be recent and realistic. Plucking a version of himself from an earlier decade, as many age-conscious authors do, was not an option. He could not countenance an imposter. Not a year could be airbrushed from his four score and seven. So, it was taken outdoors in his chosen wilderness, aspen trees in the background. And if you listen carefully, you will hear the sound of water. For a river runs through it.

### **Notes**

1 The phrase, ‘barbed-wire boy,’ comes from the title of a song by Susan Werner.

2 Hart often quotes Kenneth Burke, known for the Burkean Parlor metaphor and the protocols of intellectual discourse. See *The Philosophy of Literary Form: Studies in Symbolic Action* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1973), pp. 110-11.

3 For example, both scholars engaged Eckhart, Hegel, Hume and Thoreau in their writing, thus evoking intellectual rapport.

4 During his University of Montana years, he was a regular at the Milltown Union Bar, a drinking establishment east of Missoula that attracted artists, writers and scholars. The poet Richard Hugo was also a regular and a friend of Hart and Funk. He made the place famous with his much-quoted poem, ‘The Milltown Union Bar.’ See *The Last Best Place: A Montana Anthology*, edited by William Kittredge and Annick Smith (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1988), p. 1048.

5 Robert D. Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000), p. 21.

6 Fern Hart, Interview with Annemarie Harrod, 19 September 2015, The North Fork History Project, 3. Cf. ‘Introduction to the 1971 edition,’ Cecily McNeil, *North Fork Country Kitchens Cookbook*. Edited by Lois E. Walker and Gary L. Haverlandt (Polebridge, MT: Self-published, 2014), p. iii.

7 Lois E. Walker, *History of the Polebridge Mercantile* (Polebridge, MT: Self-published, 2023), p. 47. Walker is a historian and Archivist of the North Fork Landowners Association.

8 It was a Guggenheim Fellowship.

- 9 'Oral History Interview: Ray Hart.' Interview with Debo Powers, October 31, 2011. North Fork History Project, North Fork Landowners Association, 3. Also, 'Interview with Dr. Ray L. Hart,' Interview with Lois Walker and Jack Poppen, June 8, 2019, Ford Schoolhouse, p. 2.
- 10 Ray L. Hart, 'The Poiesis of Place,' *The Journal of Religion*, 53:1 (January 1973), pp. 46-7.
- 11 Jack Miles and Mark C. Taylor, *A Friendship in Twilight: Lockdown Conversations on Death and Life* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2022), p. 148. The inner quote is from Norman Maclean, *A River Runs Through It and Other Stories* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1976), pp. 110, 112.
- 12 Henry Bugbee, *The Inward Morning: A Philosophical Exploration in Journal Form* (Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 1958, 1976), p. 106.
- 13 *Ibid.*, pp. 164-5.
- 14 Ray L. Hart, 'The Dialectic of Home and Homelessness: Religion, Nature, and Home,' in Julian Hartt et al., *The Critique of Modernity: Theological Reflections on Contemporary Culture* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1987), p. 47.
- 15 The writings of Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, Henry David Thoreau, Norman Maclean and Henry Bugbee powerfully converge in Hart's reflections on nature, wilderness, beauty, wonder, gratitude and art.
- 16 From William Butler Yeats' poem, "The Lake Isle of Innisfree."
- 17 'Oral History Interview,' p. 3.
- 18 The directions that Hart gives to friends who are driving up to the North Fork for a visit are titled, 'Directions to HartsCore (aka Heaven!).' They end with vintage Hart humor. When you arrive: 'No doubt it will seem like the end of the world. And why not? IT IS!'
- 19 H. Frank Evans, 'Up the North Fork,' in *Hungry Horse News*, May 6, 1976. Evans owned the Panorama Ranch in Polebridge.
- 20 Ray L. Hart, 'To Be *and* Not to Be,' in *Trajectories in the Study of Religion: Addresses at the Seventy Fifth Anniversary of the American Academy of Religion*. Edited by Ray L. Hart (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1987), p. 83.
- 21 The event was recorded in *The Missoulian*, 18 June 1980. Both cars were totalled. The driver of the other car was also treated at St. Patrick Hospital and released.
- 22 Hart, 'To Be *and* Not to Be,' p. 84.
- 23 *Ibid.*, p. 83.
- 24 *Ibid.*, p. 84.
- 25 'Unfinished . . . : Essays in Honor of Ray L. Hart,' edited by Mark C. Taylor. Volume XLVIII/1 (1980). The title echoes the title of Hart's first book, *Unfinished Man and the Imagination* (1968) as well as the deepest hopes of the editor and contributing authors.
- 26 Hart, 'To Be *and* Not to Be,' p. 85.
- 27 Ray L. Hart, 'The Poiesis of Place,' *The Journal of Religion*, 53:1 (January 1973), pp. 36-47.

28 Norman Maclean, *A River Runs Through It and Other Stories* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), p. 72.

29 An entry that I plan to mischievously add to Hart's curriculum vitae is that his profile appears prominently in Joseph Cruse Johnson's blog, 'Famous Pipe Smokers,' 7 February 2009. <https://josephcrusejohnson.blogspot.com/2009/02/dr-ray-l-hart.html>

30 Cf. 'Every phenomenon requires to be "collected," according to Plato, in order to be an object or intention of the mind,' Ray L. Hart, *God Being Nothing: Toward a Theogony* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2016), p. 152.

31 A startling contrast to their years in the abundant stacks of the Yale, Drew, and Vanderbilt libraries. Yet another factor contributing to their colleagues' disbelief that they would leave the privileged precincts of a top-tier university. Cf. *Graduate Education Religion: A Critical Appraisal*, Council on the Study of Religion, Claude Welch, (Missoula: University of Montana Press, 1971), esp. pp. 90-4. Cf. *Information Needs in the Humanities: An Assessment*, Constance C. Gould. The Research libraries Group, 1988, p. 36.

32 "The Future of the Theological Library: A Report to Robert Neville," Dean of the Boston University School of Theology, 1993.

33 Andrew D. Scrimgeour, 'Handled with Care,' in *New York Times Book Review*, 28 December 2012. <https://www.nytimes.com/2012/12/30/books/review/handled-with-care.html>

34 Andrew D. Scrimgeour, 'Scribbling in the Margins,' in *The New York Times*, Opinion, 2 February 2014. <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/02/02/opinion/sunday/scribbling-in-the-margins.html>