

*My Shadow* by Bryan Rostron (David Philip)

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*My Shadow* is set in a town 'in the far south' identified only as G-, in an unnamed country that one assumes to be South Africa – or would so assume if it seemed to matter, which it doesn't.

The fact that the protagonist-narrator is placed under house arrest 'under the State of Emergency' does of course recall recent South African history, but the allusion is complicated by the fact that the author quite explicitly directs us to a non-South African source, in that the protagonist's 'crime,' in so far as it is ever identified, is participation in a reading of Vaclav Havel's one-act play *Audience*. So close is the hitherto anonymous narrator's identification with this play that he assumes, for the rest of the novel, the name of the character whose part he read, Vanek, "a dissident intellectual watched over carefully by the authorities" (which here becomes Van Ek, and later simply Ek).

The allusion to the Havel play establishes a complex net of intertextual reference. Havel was himself, of course, before becoming president of Czechoslovakia (later the Czech Republic), a dissident playwright in his native Prague, home town also of Franz Kafka, whose *The Trial*, with its unexplained 'crime' and its faceless bureaucracy, this novel in some respects resembles. Also, Havel's career trajectory, from banned dissident to national hero to discredited leader, is itself paralleled by the rise and fall of Van Ek: put under house arrest at the beginning of the novel, he becomes celebrated as the historian of a new order, only to be shunned by the citizens of G- as a 'new' history' comes into fashion.

Havel's reflections on his own feelings of insecurity as President of the Czech republic apply pretty closely to Ek. In a *New Yorker* article marking his resignation early last year as President of the Czech Republic, he is quoted as saying: "I am the kind of person who would not be in the least surprised if, in the very middle of my Presidency, I were to be summoned and led off to stand trial before a shadowy tribunal ..."

All these resonances are activated through Rostron's allusion to Havel and his play.

Rostron's theme is memory and forgetting: in his laconic, sardonically understated narrative personal and national histories mesh in a complex and often absurd web of intrigue and counter-intrigue.

As children, Ek and his friend, the enigmatic, shadowy and ultimately legendary Petrus, first excite the community's alarm and displeasure by the simple expedient of chanting "I remember, I remember": remembering here, as in any newly "transformed" state, becoming a threat to the town's precarious sense of security, based as that is on collective amnesia: "I asked Petrus why adults always became so irrationally furious about our game of 'I remember.' Petrus had shrugged and said 'It's just a mirror.'"

As adult Ek acquires the initially unwelcome attendance of Posthumus, the secret policeman assigned to his case, and the most prominent of the various "shadows" in the novel. Posthumus points out to Ek that he is the most appropriate person to write the police report on himself: "Who the hell should know whatever the fuck it is they wanna know if not you?"

Following the absurdist logic of the novel, Ek duly writes the desired report, indeed finds in it a whole new "life's vocation": "I'm the historian of as yet unrealised truths: my task

is to hold up that mirror to my neighbours, and reflect their better selves. It is a tale of heroic endeavour, tender passions, fearless defiance, valiant spirits and an epic, selfless devotion to freedom.”

In due course, Ek’s flattering version of history establishes itself as the dominant one, and new heroes are created out of yesterday’s dissidents. More specifically, Petrus, whose shadowy “revolutionary” exploits are never described, becomes the national hero and Ek becomes the revered historian in charge of the national truth. The town of G- is nationally and internationally celebrated as a beacon of hope and enlightenment, and tourists stream to G- to gape at Ek, comfortably ensconced on his veranda with his old friend Detective Sergeant Posthumus, now Colonel Posthumus: “We reminisce fondly about the bad old days and our youthful adventures in bringing that era to an end.”

But Ek’s history of G-, it transpires, is only the first of a series of revisions, and is soon challenged by remnants of the “bad old days,” as the town lawyer informs Ek:

“‘Difference of opinion,’ grimaced Buzan, ‘how best to represent our history.’

‘But surely,’ I objected, ‘there can be no question. It’s all a matter of record.’”

This naive view of history as a “matter of record” eventually yields to a more experienced and more cynical view: “As a historian, I suppose, I’ve developed a certain fatalism regarding the final judgement of the facts. The kingdom of veracity and justice, I suspect, will come with posterity.”

By novel’s end, we are more or less where we started, with Ek regarded with suspicion by his fellow citizens, and with contempt by the progressive new custodian of the town museum who was hoping for Ek’s support in his battle against the forces of reaction:

“Your friend Vaclac would be ashamed of you,” he tells Ek, destroying at last the implicit parallel with the career of Havel – except if in his loss of credibility Ek now most resembles his “friend”.

As even such a simplified synopsis will suggest, *My Shadow* is a complex, cryptic, intriguing work, playfully and yet radically undermining our sense of history and significance. Rostron brilliantly creates a bizarre yet familiar world in which yesterday’s dissident is today’s hero and tomorrow’s head of state. In such a world, history is always relative. As Ek somewhat wearily concludes: “I don’t know. Time, it seems to me, is the great conniver: you remember, you forget.”