

ARTICLE

Special Issue: ARPA Symposium: A Celebration of Steven Burns

One (More) Last Thing

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Abstract

I survey my career in philosophy, which encompasses 44 years of teaching in Halifax, but begins in London, England with a thesis on self-deception. I describe a practice of using works of literature as a guide to conceptual analysis, and pause in Vienna to translate *On Last Things* (Weininger, 2001). A line of Wittgenstein's is the basis for reflections on the concept of a Last Judgement. I discuss in some detail a paper of mine for the Atlantic Region Philosophers' Association in 2018, "One Last Thing," which takes as its basis *The Sense of an Ending*, a novel by Julian Barnes. I conclude with some claims about Wittgenstein's relation to religion. I add an Appendix, in which I comment briefly on each of the other articles that make up this symposium.

Résumé

Je fais un survol de ma carrière de philosophe, qui comprend quarante-quatre ans d'enseignement à Halifax, mais qui commence à Londres avec une thèse sur l'auto-trouperie. Je décris l'utilisation des œuvres littéraires comme guides de l'analyse conceptuelle, puis je fais une escale à Vienne pour traduire *On Last Things* (Weininger, 2001). Une phrase de Wittgenstein forme la base de réflexions sur le concept d'un Jugement dernier. J'examine en détail ma communication de 2018 pour l'Association régionale des philosophes de l'Atlantique, intitulée « One Last Thing », qui prend comme point de départ le roman *The Sense of an Ending* de Julian Barnes. Je termine avec quelques affirmations sur la relation de Wittgenstein à la religion. En annexe, je commente brièvement sur les autres communications qui composent ce numéro spécial.

Keywords: Atlantic Region Philosophers' Association (ARPA); last things; religion; self-deception; the Last Judgement; Weininger; Wittgenstein

My text for today is: "I cannot call [Jesus] Lord, because that says nothing to me."
(Wittgenstein, 1980, entry dated 1937, p. 33e)

1. The Past?

Since this paper was a contribution to a conference session arranged in my honour, I approach the topic by meandering self-indulgently through some pastures arranged chronologically.

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1969

I began teaching at Dalhousie University's Department of Philosophy.

1970

I completed my Doctorate in Philosophy at the University of London, with a thesis on Self-Deception supervised by Professor Peter Winch. Self-deceit will be a recurring theme in what I discuss.

1977

In 1977, I was on sabbatical at the University of Vienna. I was sitting in on some Philosophy lectures in hopes of improving my German. One day, a professor unexpectedly interrupted himself, and said that Wittgenstein's literary executors had just published some *vermischte Bemerkungen* from his *Nachlaß*. He had written some remarks in the 1930s about being Jewish in Vienna. "He should have known better than to write such things," said the professor. I went to one of my favourite bookstores right after the lecture and purchased a copy of the book. I eventually reviewed it for *Dialogue* (Burns, 1982). And Peter Winch eventually published his English translation, under the title *Culture and Value* (Wittgenstein, 1980).

2001

I returned to Vienna for several more sabbaticals. One of my projects was to learn more about why the unfortunate Otto Weininger appealed so profoundly to Wittgenstein. In 2001, I published a translation of Weininger's *On Last Things*. These are essays and aphorisms that he left in the hands of his literary executor, just before he committed suicide at the age of 23. Due to the notoriety of his death, and the success of his first book, *Sex and Character*, this posthumous book went through many printings, but was not available in English until I gave it a try. It was Allan Janik (a co-author of *Wittgenstein's Vienna*) who pointed out that the title's most obvious reference is to the four last things of Christian eschatology. The four things are: death, judgement, heaven, and hell. For some time I resisted this suggestion, since Weininger's essays are more about Ibsen's views on love, the place of logic in Kantian ethics, and eccentric animal psychology than they are about eschatology. And as a boringly modern person who does not believe in the rewards of heaven or the punishments of hell in an afterlife, the idea that there is a judge who will decide my fate after death is more or less alien. So, of the four last things, I am inclined to believe only in the first. I do acknowledge the inevitability and the importance of death. Because of this, and because Jan Zwicky thought that it upset the rhythm of the title, I left out the definite article in my translation of *Über die letzten Dinge* (Literally, On THE last things; but I called it *On Last Things*), so that a vaguer list of last things seems implied. This meandering seems not to be going anywhere, but it is.

2006

In 2006, the year of my retirement from Dalhousie, I sang at my own funeral. I was invited to give the Final Lecture to the students of the Foundation Year Programme

(FYP) at the University of King's College. I took the opportunity to talk about life after FYP, life after retirement, and life after death. As a conclusion, I gathered seven friends from my choral life, and we sang William Byrd's (1543–1623) immortal motet:

"Memento Homo"

Memento homo, quod cinis es, et in cinerem reverteris.

Remember, O man

O human, that you are dust, and to dust you shall return.

I cannot think of a better way to celebrate a funeral.

By now I was primed to think of the four last things in more funereal terms. In particular, I note that my opening quote from Wittgenstein continues in a provocative way. "I cannot utter the word 'Lord' with meaning. *Because I do not believe* that he will come to judge me; [so you see that we have circled back to the Last Judgement after all. And he continues:] because *that* says nothing to me. And it could say something to me, only if I lived *completely* differently" (Wittgenstein, 1980, p. 33e). This begins conventionally enough with the idea that a lack of belief undermines the ability to say something and mean it. If you don't believe in a last judge, then you can hardly believe in a last judgement, and cannot think of Jesus as your Lord (and Master). But then Wittgenstein introduces the idea that it is not just belief that is missing here; to believe in a last judge it would be necessary that he *ganz anders lebte* — that he lived completely differently. This cleverly introduces the conference theme: saying and doing.¹ It is not just the right beliefs that make a word meaningful, but LIVING a certain way. "In the beginning was the DEED," Wittgenstein quotes Goethe (Wittgenstein, 1980, p. 31e, my emphasis). Unless you DO certain things, live in certain ways, you cannot MEAN certain things, or say them with meaning. My first observation about this remarkable implication is that it invokes *Philosophical Investigations* §7. In §2 he had introduced a simple language that met Augustine's description: the builder's language consisting of four terms, block, pillar, slab and beam. He is still speaking of this minimal language when he introduces the closest thing to a technical term in the whole book.

We can also think of the whole process of using words in (2) as one of those games by means of which children learn their native language. I will call these games "language-games" and will sometimes speak of a primitive language as a language-game ...

I shall also call the whole, consisting of language *and the actions into which it is woven*, the "language-game." (Wittgenstein, 1968, §7, my emphasis)

The suggestion that we need to live differently to understand certain things seems to me a major challenge, and well worth the attention of that 2022 ARPA conference.

¹ "Saying and Doing" was the general theme of the ARPA conference, held at Dalhousie University in October 2022. The papers gathered in this issue of *Dialogue* had their origin at that conference.

I also think that it is often helpful in reading Wittgenstein to do a little spelling-out of the picture that he has sketched for us. What might he mean by “lived completely differently”? Surely, he will still walk to Sobeys to buy a roast chicken for supper? Or take a bus to the Neptune Theatre to catch Walter Borden’s monologue of a life-time in theatre, *Tightrope-Time*? (I was writing this in Halifax, in September 2022.) Surely, “completely differently” is an exaggeration? If we try to be more precise, I think that we will think of him as a believer if he goes regularly to worship services; if he is inclined to kneel when addressing his Lord, on the model of a feudal master, or a god; if he strives to treat strangers with kindness, on the explicit model of Jesus; if he spends time studying a holy scripture, perhaps memorizing some of it, in an attempt to school himself in true religion. In fact, Wittgenstein does none of those things, so that *would* be to live VERY differently, if not really COMPLETELY differently. True, he may be just pretending, and really not believe at all. But that is an exceptional case. And indeed, if he really did sincerely live that way, those changes would infect his whole life, and we might very well be tempted to think of him as a completely different person.

It is also worth noting that for all three of the Abrahamic religions of the “Middle East” the last judgement may not coincide with the funeral; one might die and be obliged to wait a millennium or two for the Day of Judgement at the end of time. I have been reminded of this by Elamin Abdelmehmoud’s recent autobiography, *Son of Elsewhere* (Abdelmehmoud, 2022). Of course, Wittgenstein’s context is explicitly Christian.

2018

As it has turned out, I have outlived my own funeral. Post-retirement, I continued to work on my long-standing professional relations in Europe. I attended conferences in Belgium and Wales and Hungary, and frequently in Vienna, where old friends and colleagues, Professors Herta Nagl-Docekal and Ludwig Nagl, continued in *their* retirements to organize conferences at the Austrian equivalent of the Royal Society: the Austrian Academy of Sciences. Often focusing on the links between Europe and North America, these conferences explored topics to which I sometimes thought I could contribute. I also learned a good deal, for instance, from writing about the philosopher Robert Pippin’s book about the American Western (Burns, 2016a; see also Pippin, 2012). Half-a-dozen publications resulted from these conferences (see e.g., Burns, 2016a). But now I am being really self-indulgent. Let me get back to ARPA!

In 2018 at St. Francis Xavier University, I presented what I thought would probably be my last paper for ARPA: it was called “One Last Thing!”

Perhaps I should say a word about that paper? I have often, as Jason Holt and Alice MacLachlan and Warren Heiti have skilfully reminded us, used a work of literature as a basis for philosophical analysis.² (May I say again how thankful I am to Jason and Alice and Warren, as well as to Robbie Moser and Darren Bifford

² This was encouraged by my doctoral supervisor, Peter Winch, who set me some excellent examples. Among my own efforts, I shall mention: Burns (1987, 2007, 2013, 2014, 2016b).

and Michael Hymers from ARPA's morning session, and to others who made the extraordinary effort to join us, and to find something creative to say in celebration of some of my philosophical interests. I have indeed been honoured.) At the St. Francis Xavier ARPA meeting, I used Julian Barnes' novel, *The Sense of an Ending* (Barnes, 2011). It won the Man Booker Prize in 2011. Barnes tells the story of an elderly man, Tony, his career over, his wife divorced from him, his daughter largely out of the picture. He begins to think that his life has been OK, he's done reasonably well, and the people who were important to him must think that he's not been a bad person. As he recalls his life, other people's memories begin to conflict with his own. Some historical evidence begins to show up: a page from another person's diary, a copy of a nasty letter that he has forgotten, but had written to his first girlfriend, Veronica, and his school friend Adrian. Veronica had broken up with Tony, and eventually fallen for Adrian. They had kindly asked for Tony's blessing of their new relationship, but got only jealousy and spite in return. As an indirect result of that letter, Adrian eventually committed suicide, and Veronica's life was essentially ruined. I argued that in revealing his own self-deceit (NB: the doctoral thesis comes back to haunt us), and re-discovering his spitefulness and its consequences, Tony effectively performed his own last judgement. He may not have believed in a Last Judge, but he judged his own life with the same care and accuracy and consequences. Or at least he came to realize that he had committed destructive evil in his life, and had deceived himself about it, and did not deserve to go gently toward the end of his life. So, I offered him as a model for a form of *secular* last judgement.³ I also think that Wittgenstein was not the sort to defer to a Last Judge. If anyone was going to judge his life, he would do it himself. So, there's another model of a secular last judgement. The passage I have been examining, in which Wittgenstein writes about the Last Judgement, seems to me to be speculative. Speculative but serious. He doesn't believe in it, but he takes it seriously.

2022

That was my paper, "One Last Thing!" One last thing before I go, was implied, but Lo! I have persisted. There is *less* of me now than there was then, but I am delighted to have reached 2022, and the very kind version of ARPA which took note of some of my career, including my modest role as "ARPA Regent." (William Sweet proposed that title more than a decade ago, and I have let it stick.) Along with many other people, I have helped to keep the institution going since I assisted David Braybrooke in starting it in 1970. Fifty-two years is not at all bad. I should add that the collaboration of the late Serge Morin (Université de Moncton) was fundamental to Braybrooke's project, and Moncton hosted the second annual conference in 1971. Braybrooke had said that by the mid-1960's people in our profession should have realized that a quiet career of teaching what we had been

³ A 2017 film based on *The Sense of an Ending*, directed by Ritesh Batra, has been criticized for "superficial use of the literary material." In the film, Tony Webster (a fine performance by Jim Broadbent) does not reach a 'last judgement' that he has been a destroyer of lives; on the contrary, he is transformed from a curmudgeon into a doting grandfather who becomes friendly with his letter-carrier and gets back on speaking terms with Veronica!

taught was no longer possible. It was not possible to avoid research and renewal, and efforts to communicate new results through conferences and publication. This is a slightly patronizing way of characterizing the culture into which David had recently moved (he joined the Dalhousie faculty in 1963, after being denied tenure at Yale), but he hit some nails on heads. ARPA was to be first of all an encouraging venue in which we, and our Atlantic colleagues and students, could embrace this future. I think it has served this function admirably, as well as taking its place as one of the regional conferences of the Canadian Philosophical Association open to national and international contributors. So, special thanks to the Dalhousie organizers for ARPA's 2022 conference, and for that celebration of ARPA.

That was yet another aside. But because of that 2018 paper, I have had to amend today's title to "One (More) Last Thing."

I want to return to my close reading of a line of Wittgenstein's. The next obvious move is to consider the context in which it is made. Here I am indebted to the revised edition of *Culture and Value*, which was published in German in 1994 and with Winch's revised translation in 1998. Georg Henrik von Wright made the first edition selections. Alois Pichler prepared the revision. Pichler's edition includes more information, including precise references to the dates and manuscript sources. And in some cases, including the case of our passage, the text has been enlarged to include material that the original editor judged to be of less interest. As a result, we know that our passage was written on 12 December 1937, and that the surrounding passages were written days earlier or weeks later. This immediate context is about one page long: it is in the 1980 edition found on p. 32e, and in the revised edition is found on pp. 38e and 39e. Winch changed a few words in his translation of our passage, too. (As an example, for "ganz anders" he changes "completely differently" to "quite differently." That makes my earlier riff on "completely" rather redundant. The ambiguity is in the German.)

Can we learn much by reading the remark in its immediate context? Wittgenstein begins this aside with, "You cannot write more truly about yourself than you are Here you don't stand on stilts or on a ladder but on your bare feet."⁴ Clearly, this counts as an interruption in the philosophical manuscript, and the editors were right to select the passage on calling Jesus "Lord" for inclusion in their collection of more personal remarks. It is about what says something to him, what he can meaningfully say, what he believes, and ultimately about how he behaves and lives his life. But it could all be different. This is explored in the subsequent paragraph. If he were to believe that the Lord would come to judge him, he would have to believe in the Resurrection, that Jesus rose from the dead and sits at the right hand of God, and so on. "It is as though I play with the thought" (Wittgenstein, 1980, p. 33e). "*He is dead and decomposed.* In that case he is a teacher like any other and can no longer help; and once more we are orphaned and alone" (Wittgenstein, 1980,

⁴ In the first edition (Wittgenstein, 1980), this remark is placed at the end of the passage I am discussing. In the revised edition (Wittgenstein, 1998), it is replaced ahead of it. Presumably, it was moved in the first edition because it seems in a way to summarize the discussion; but in the manuscript it comes first.

Also in the first edition, Winch correctly attributed the Biblical quotation to "1 Corinthians, 12." The revised edition introduces an error. It cites "1 Corinthians, 3" (Wittgenstein, 1980, p. 38e). In fact, the words are from 1 Corinthians, Chapter 12, Verse 3.

p. 33e). Here Wittgenstein is entertaining the feelings of helpless abandonment that are familiar to many people, and which give rise to much religion. I need to be saved! Otherwise, my life is merely finite and pointless. While Wittgenstein did not lead a life of faith (that would have been quite different), I believe that he often suffered from such proto-religious feelings. Thus, he continues: “But if I am to be REALLY saved, — what I need is *certainty* — not wisdom, dreams or speculation — and this certainty is faith. And faith is faith in what is needed by my *heart*, my *soul*, not my speculative intelligence” (Wittgenstein, 1980, p. 33e). This is a philosopher who does understand what religion wants him to know, but who cannot live it and cannot accept it. [A side note on *Glauben*: it is the German word for both belief and faith. Winch rightly uses both in his translation of our passage. We can think of Wittgenstein here as working on the distinction between “belief” in the normal epistemological sense (something less than knowledge), and “belief” in the religious sense of faith with certainty (arguably something more than knowledge).]

In the last part of the passage I am examining, Wittgenstein makes a familiar move. It is one that George Grant was known for. Some things can only be known by someone who loves them (God, other people) (see Burns (2013)). “Perhaps we can say: Only love can believe the Resurrection What combats doubt is, as it were, redemption. Holding fast to this must be holding fast to that belief” (Wittgenstein, 1980, p. 33e). This is not exactly the claim that doing precedes saying, but it is closely related. Believing in the Resurrection, and in redemption/salvation, is a consequence of doing something, viz., loving God. He adds one of his great similes (Gleichnisse) (cf. Burns, 1989).

[You can hold fast to this belief] only if you no longer rest your weight on the earth but suspend yourself from heaven. Then everything will be different and it will be “no wonder” if you can do things that you cannot now. (A man who is suspended looks the same as one who is standing, but the interplay of forces within him is nevertheless quite different, so that he can act quite differently than can a standing man.) (Wittgenstein, 1980, p. 33e)

We could extend this examination of context in various ways. We could read more from *Corinthians*, for instance. Or we could read more widely in *Culture and Value*. One example: a telling and isolated remark some weeks earlier (21 October 1937) seems to confirm my first speculation about the relation between saying and doing, “The origin and the primitive form of the language game is a reaction; only from this can more complicated forms develop. / Language — I want to say — is a refinement, ‘in the beginning was the deed’” (Wittgenstein, 1980, p. 31e).

But here’s a different way to expand the context. I had a chance to sketch my theme to Alice MacLachlan not long before the conference. She recommended a paper by Michelle Panchuk, on religious trauma. I have learned a good deal from it, but am not yet ready to comment. Alice’s first reaction, however, was to recall the *Pensées* of Blaise Pascal.⁵ Almost buried in Chapter XLV (Chapter 45, fairly

⁵ Pascal (1623–1662) left 743 “thoughts” about religion, not intended to be published and not in any decided order. A version was published in 1670. I am quoting from the 1995 edition by Oxford University Press, translated by Honor Levi (Pascal, 1995).

late in the volume) is a three-page argument now known as Pascal's Wager. If you read beyond that famous passage, however, you find, "It is the heart that feels God, not reason: that is what faith is. God felt by the heart, not by reason" (Pascal, 1995, p. 157). One recognizes a thought of Wittgenstein's. And here is another. Pascal asks: "You want to find faith and you do not know the way?" (Pascal, 1995, p. 155).

[There] are people who know the road you want to follow and have been cured of the affliction of which you want to be cured. Follow the way by which they began: by behaving just as if they believed, taking holy water, having masses said, etc. That will make you believe quite naturally, and according to your animal reaction. (Pascal, 1995, p. 156)

Pascal's "animal reactions" approximate Wittgenstein's "primitive reactions."⁶ And his "behaving precedes faith" thesis approximates Wittgenstein's "doing takes precedence over saying/believing" thesis. But Pascal is affirming the necessity and superiority of Christian faith; Wittgenstein is denying it.

2. The Present

I hope to have sketched a thread in my career, which slowly approaches the question of a last judgement, and prepares me to think about a singular line in Wittgenstein's marginalia. I hope to have revealed something of Wittgenstein's self-examination, of his character, and one strand of his contribution to the ARPA conference theme.

The picture with which I want to end is of Wittgenstein, not a man of religion, not a man of faith, but a man nevertheless who experiences sin and despair. He has religious sensibility, knows obliquely what he is missing, but cannot live in the necessary way. He is cut off from salvation.

Months later (April 1938) he writes: "Nothing is so difficult as not deceiving yourself" (Wittgenstein, 1980, p. 34e).

Amen

3. Appendix

Here I briefly respond to the contributors to this symposium. I am touched and honoured by their willingness to write something relevant to various aspects of my teaching and publishing. I hope that they enjoyed it all half as much as I have. The discussion points which follow raise just one matter of interest in each of the five contributions.

3.1. Michael Hymers: *Beetles and Nothingness: Sartre, Wittgenstein, and First-Person Authority*

Michael Hymers goes back to the beginning, when he took classes with me on Wittgenstein and Sartre. He develops a fascinating parallel between them on the

⁶ See my discussion of primitive reactions in Burns (2020).

nature of sensation, almost finding a beetle box in *Being and Nothingness*. I promised one point per essay, but in this case, although circling the same issue, I am moved to make three remarks. One is that his discussion of Sartre on love adumbrates things that Alice MacLachlan writes about friendship. The issue is that the lover, like the friend, should seek to preserve the autonomy and freedom of the Other, since that is essential (if we can say that of an Existentialist) to the being who is cherished. This makes it difficult to see without contradiction how friends and lovers also revel in their mutual dependence.

Second, Mike takes us through Annette Baier's exploration of the grammatical second person. We are perhaps too familiar with the contrast between subjective "I" and the objective "he" or "she," between first- and third-person discourse. But the second person implies relations between the subject and a particular other. "My first concept of myself," writes Baier, "is as the referent of 'you,' spoken by someone whom I will address as 'you'" (quoted in Hymers, Section 2). This corrects the thorny problem of Other Minds. The other cannot be related only contingently to our self, like a third-person object in our field of consciousness; it is a necessary component of the very constitution of the concept of self. This seems to me to adumbrate Warren Heiti's discussion of self-consciousness. That should be no great surprise, since they have a common origin. That is, both Hymers on Baier, and Burns on Boyd Staunton, have Sartrean starting points.

Third, Mike returns more than once to the voluntarism and individualism which seem to be the crucial weakness of Existentialism. Sartre's analysis of "bad faith" is that we fall into it either by thinking of our facticity as fixed, or by thinking that our transcendence of facticity always affords us a way of escape from any fixed character. An authentic person must reconcile both of these features of human consciousness: that our history is a determinant of our character, and that however difficult it may be (e.g., to give up an addiction, or a settled sexuality) we are always free in principle to transform ourselves and to live differently. The tension between these extremes is such that the emphasis on human freedom tends to undermine any attempt at such a reconciliation, and leads Sartre to suggest that sincerity is always in bad faith — i.e., that authenticity is impossible. I think we can agree that something has gone seriously wrong here.

3.2. Darren Bifford and Robbie Moser: Talking Lions

Consider "A dog believes his master is at the door. But can he also believe his master will come the day after tomorrow?" (Wittgenstein, 1968, II, i, p. 174).

I have sometimes recast this as a point about expectation: a dog can expect to be taken for a walk. But can a dog also expect to be taken for a walk the day after tomorrow?

Many dog-lovers immediately object that THEIR dog certainly can. In discussion, Rob Stainton asked whether this could be an empirical discovery? Darren and Robbie agree with me that Wittgenstein is making a conceptual point, but it is often misunderstood. Some readers think that their dog expects to be taken for a walk every day, and by implication tomorrow and the day after tomorrow, etc. The dog barks and fetches his/her leash mid-afternoon every day. But I don't think that solves

this issue. Wittgenstein is clearly thinking of the dog expecting a walk not tomorrow, but the day after tomorrow. And, as he puts it elsewhere, “the surroundings which are necessary for this behaviour to be real [expectation] are missing” (Wittgenstein, 1968, I, §250).

I imagine a real dog lover, call her Marylou, who has a clever pet, call him Dogdog, or Dodo for short. Marylou leaves the house for work every Monday, Wednesday, and Friday. After breakfast, Dodo is let into the fenced yard, where he has play space, toilet space, and shelter if needed. There is dinner after Marylou returns from work, but no walk on Monday, Wednesday, or Friday. But, on Tuesday and Thursday, Marylou works from home. Dodo stays at her feet, and mid-afternoon they go for a long walk in the park. Dodo loves these walks, and signals his expectation faithfully every Tuesday and Thursday afternoon. Why couldn't Dodo expect on a Tuesday morning to go for a walk in the afternoon? He has clues enough: Marylou has her slippers on, and he is curled at her feet. This is not a yard day. Can he not further expect that tomorrow will be a yard day, but expect another walk the day after tomorrow? Are there not enough “surroundings” in this elaborated story?

I am inclined here to think that the morning's clues are critical. I concede that the slippers indicate a walk in the afternoon, and that Dodo may well anticipate this, waiting patiently for the appropriate time of day to fetch the leash, begin his insistent quivering, and so on. But, as to his expectations for tomorrow, and the day after, I remain sceptical. He has no names for days of the week. I don't know what it would be for him to “count the days,” even in case he should linger at the garden gate for years, longing for a “master” who has been taken from him. He keeps no diary in which he might locate the day after tomorrow, and so on. The idea that such an explicit expectation might nonetheless “be in his head,” in such a way that we might, for instance, find brain states which “count the days,” seems to me to be empty speculation. So, I think that the surroundings remain missing.

3.3. Alice MacLachlan: “Who Do You Think You Are?” The Epistemic Intimacies of Friendship

Alice MacLachlan gives a subtle reading of my paper on Alice Munro's 1989 story, “Differently.” In that story, there are three instances of “differently.” First, Georgia meets Maya, shares among other things her conviction that their husbands are innocent and wearying to manage, and she wishes to live differently, more like Maya. Second, after a tiff with her lover, Miles, Georgia discovers that Miles has been consoled by Maya, and slept with her. She considers this a betrayal, resolves to live differently, and never speaks to Maya again. Third, on learning of Maya's death, she recalls having had thoughts of “repairing the friendship,” and tells Maya's widower, Raymond, that they ought to “live differently,” i.e., not expect friends to live forever. I argue that these three “differentlys” indicate that Georgia and Maya had a life-long friendship, however abrupt the break and the separation.

Alice argues that I am overly tempted by an Aristotelian concept of complete friendship, one in which each friend finds the other to be “another self,” loves the other for their own sake, wishes them to be virtuous and to have a good life, and to retain their autonomy and independence. This is an idealized friendship. Both

are virtuous people. Real-life friends, on the other hand, are variously dependent on one another, which is certainly true. Both Plato and Aristotle, Alice writes, “find it equally puzzling how bad people could be friends with one another — to my mind, a fairly egregious failure to understand the distinct rewards of sharing one’s favourite vice with an enthusiastic co-conspirator” (Maclachlan, Section 2).

I understand the appeal of this usage of “friendship,” to cover the normal range of relevant human relationships. I also agree that I do not want to be Otto Weininger. He notoriously uses “Male” and “Female” as what he calls Platonic archetypes and insists that no actual people fully instantiate them (Weininger, 2005). We are all arranged on a continuum defined as being between these two ideal types. True, we mostly cluster in the two groups near either end of the continuum, but there are many variations in sex as well as gender, and there are people who find their place at every spot on the continuum, and as I have argued, even off it, aside from the imaginary straight line that runs between M and F (Weininger, 2001). For all his realism about the complexity of human sexuality, Weininger’s Platonism imposes a binary logic on his subject matter, which is a source of insult and falsification. I do not want to think of friendship as a Platonic Form, either.

Nonetheless, it seems to me that it is an ideal to which we aspire, that takes many different forms, depending on the people who instantiate it, and that can persist even when broken off. Bad people make inadequate friends. I have cited some evidence that, for Georgia, the friendship with Maya persisted at least as revivable, and that it had been a mistake to live as though that revival could be infinitely postponed (as though they both would live forever). Georgia carries some of Maya with her even in their separation. Maya’s widower, Raymond, thinks so, too. That is what explains his creepy gestures of clinging to Georgia when she comes to visit. He sends his second wife shopping, for instance. He wants to hang on to Georgia as a form of holding Maya.

3.4. Jason Holt: “Nothing I Could Teach Him”: Good Burns and Best Readings

Jason Holt takes issue with a thesis I have defended, namely that given enough, but finite, evidence, a work of art will indeed support various interpretations, but some of them will be better than others, and there will be a tendency for one to be best. In a favourite example, which Jason kindly included in his volume of essays on Leonard Cohen, I defend the thesis by defending a particular interpretation of the novel, *Beautiful Losers*, against the most plausible other interpretations I could find (Burns, 2014). I depend here on a thesis by Anthony Savile:

the objective meaning of a string of words uttered in a given context is given by that reading of those words which (a) accounts for the presence in that string of as many relevant features of that string as possible and in the best of cases accounts for all of them; (b) which is as simple as any other equally complete reading; (c) which gives as unitary an account as possible of that string; and (d) which makes the production of the string appropriate in the intersubjectively identifiable circumstances of its utterance. (Savile, 1972, pp. 169–170)

Thus, the best interpretation will be the one that is most complete in its accounting for the evidence, the simplest, the most unitary, and the most appropriate. I do not argue, as Jason infers, that other interpretations are thus excluded, or of no use at all, but I do claim that our interpretive lives are given shape by a search for better and best interpretations.

I have argued that in case of ambiguity, where two or more interpretations are equally complete, simple, unitary, and appropriate, we are likely dealing with a case in which the best interpretation is that the work is ambiguous. Many works, for instance stories like Alice Munro's "Wild Swans," are deliberately so. So too is Jason's own title: There was "Nothing I Could Teach Him," which has a double meaning, one rather more complimentary than the other. I do not mean anything trivial by this; M. C. Escher's famous drawings would not be improved by being made less ambiguous. Nor would Akira Kurosawa's film, *Rashomon*, nor Jason's own novels! I think that sometimes a Marxist interpretation and a Freudian interpretation can be equally rich, and I admit that they are grand theories which pose enormous questions. Usually, however, I think that one will be more appropriate than the other.

Jason replies that I vastly underestimate the possibilities here. Even in a simple case, like a duck/rabbit that can be ambiguous between duck and rabbit, if you simply double the duck/rabbit the result is four possible interpretations, and of three duck/rabbits, eight — i.e., there are rapidly escalating ambiguities. I am forced to concede, that if such ambiguities do multiply, and are not just a figment of the artificial simplicity of the case, then there is something not merely unpopular, but technically implausible to my claim.

3.5. Warren Heiti: *Listening and Silence: An Essay in Honour of Steven Burns*

Warren's essay is about attention, (silence makes it easier to listen carefully), about Simone Weil's idea of "reading," and the epistemological value of being open to the truth, letting it speak to us. Along the way, he performs a peculiar service. He excavates a paper of mine from 1987, in which I take a work of literature, Robertson Davies' *Deptford Trilogy* (Davies, 1990), and use it to illuminate the self-construction of the self. In the particular case of Boyd Staunton, he has lived a very successful capitalist life, but has a dark secret. As a boy, he placed a heavy stone at the centre of a snowball, and threw it at Dunstan Ramsey. Ramsey ducked. The snowball hit a pregnant Mrs. Dempsey in the temple. She becomes mentally incompetent, and gives birth prematurely to Paul Dempsey. Ramsey is haunted by guilt at the destruction he inadvertently caused. Staunton is not. He forgets his evil deed, and lives in deep self-deception. Paul Dempsey has a very troubled childhood, but becomes a stage magician. He also becomes guardian of the stone that injured his mother. At the end of the third novel, Dempsey, now known as Eisengrim, spends an evening with Staunton. In the morning, Staunton's body is found, drowned in his car which he has apparently driven off the end of a wharf. The stone is in his mouth.

As my reader might imagine, I diagnose this death as a suicide, precipitated by the uncovering of Staunton's self-deception, the revelation of his guilt and its consequences, and his own self-judgement. If you have read my preceding essay,

you will recognize that it follows the same plot as my 2018 reading of *The Sense of an Ending*, by Julian Barnes. My insightful friend, Jim Meek, has labelled this “the Second Coming of the Last Judgement.”

I am humbled by this revelation. It took me more than 30 years to forget the first account. In my own defence, my main concern in 1987 was with the quasi-Hegelian dialectic of self-consciousness. That was the basis of my analysis of Staunton’s social construction of his self-identity, of his ability to deceive himself so successfully, and most importantly of the discovery of his own self-deceit through the viewpoint of Eisengrim. In the later version, I was more interested in the idea of a Last Judgement, and the uncovering of a secular version of it, powerful enough to stop a person in his tracks. I did tell the convoluted story of how my research on Otto Weininger slowly led me to have a different focus when I chanced upon a very similar story. So, we could put the similarity of the two cases down to my advancing senility; or we might rejoice in the consistency of my interests over a long career and put it down to my ingenuity. Both analyses are in a way footnotes to my doctoral thesis. In any case, I am deeply grateful to Warren for posing the challenge, as I am to all of the contributors to the *Dialogue* discussion of Burns.

Competing interests. The author declares none.

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