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Adieu to James Bradley

> If one wants to honor a philosopher, then one must grasp him there,
> in his fundamental thought (*Grundgedanke*), where he has not yet proceeded to the consequences.
>
> F.W.J. Schelling

S.J. McGrath

On the 17th of May 2012 a light went out of the world. James Bradley, philosopher and teacher of philosophy at Memorial University of Newfoundland for three decades, passed away after a six-month battle with cancer. Those of us who knew him will never forget him. Although he had always published—a small but steady output of tightly argued essays, which earned the attention of, among others, Gilles Deleuzs—his philosophy has up to now been best known by his students and friends at Memorial University. In the next year, we shall endeavor to correct this. We are currently editing and publishing his collected papers under the title *Essays in Speculative Philosophy*, which is scheduled to appear from a major academic press in 2013. It is anticipated that this volume will be followed by others, for Jim wrote a lot and much of it remains unpublished.

The fundamental thought that animated Bradley's career is the Trinity—the central Christian dogma, which also happens to be a philosophical principle, as Jim tirelessly pointed out, in most of Western philosophy, from Plato to Heidegger and post-structuralism. At the centre of Bradley's reading of the philosophical significance of triads and trinities (not the same thing, in his view) lies his appropriation of Peirce's notions of Firstness, Secondness and Thirdness and their application to Bradley's highly original readings in the history of philosophy. For Bradley, Firstness means spontaneity, the originality, novelty, and freedom that grounds the emergence of order in the universe. This spontaneity could not be anarchic or absurd for it gives rise to system, even if it always exceeds any structure which it produces. Secondness is difference, otherness, multiplicity—the predominant theme of post-structuralist philosophy. Thirdness is the ordering of the multiplicity into coherent and productive unities. No one of these structures are found apart from the other two because they are not things but principles of all things. Bradley was no mere exponent of Peirce's philosophy. As Prof. Peter Harris, Jim's oldest friend at Memorial makes clear in

the opening piece in this mini-symposium, Bradley came to Peirce relatively late in his career, after thinking his way through British Idealism and its critics, the early analysts and ordinary language philosophers. But even this chronology fails to account for Bradley's thought. For there is something in Bradley's philosophy that is found nowhere else, a combination of commitments that one might characterize as broadly Peircian or even Schellingian (I am sure he would not object), but which Bradley qualified and developed in a totally unique way, a metaphysics with a strong theological orientation but with an equal commitment to the historicity of being. Among Bradley's contributions is a novel critique of the analytical/continental divide that marks academic philosophy from the second half of the 20th century to the present day. Both schools have it wrong, according to Bradley: the analysts forget existence, which cannot be reduced to a symbol of instantiation; the continentalist refuse the principle of reason and fail to follow their admittedly "strong" theory of existence into its inevitable consequence, a doctrine of the divine.[1]

Bradley's philosophy was first hammered out in the context of a lonely but vigorous defense of British Idealist positions among Cambridge analytical philosophers who wanted to hear nothing of them when Bradley was a post-graduate student at Christ's College. When he got to Memorial in the late 80s he found a welcoming community who were, at least among the students, enthusiastic to hear more about what he called "speculative philosophy." For Bradley, speculative philosophy is not Whiteheadian, not even exclusively Peircian. Speculative philosophy is simply philosophy insofar as it remains true to the principle of reason and refuses to concede any apriori foreclosing of questioning, be it a nominalist, positivist, naturalist, atheist, phenomenological, hermeneutical, political or otherwise ideological shutting down of reason's spontaneous production of hypotheses. Philosophy is always free to entertain a hypothesis about the ultimate nature of things, even if certainty on such questions must always elude it. There can be no certainty in an evolving universe, Bradley often said, for one simple reason: matters are not yet settled.

I first met Jim when I was 22 years old, an undergraduate in philosophy at Memorial. I remember his argument against scientism at that time (something that bothered me then and to some degree still does today): the scientific naturalists, Jim asserted, in his inimitable style, wish to settle philosophical issues by reference to facts, but they fail to see that this can never work, for in philosophy it is the facts themselves that are at issue. I was on my way to a monastery—I had decided that the *via contemplativa* was more authentically philosophical than graduate school. He did not disagree. His only concern was whether the monastery in question had a library. This exchange, which returns vividly to me now, 24 years later, expresses the essence of Jim's attitude to philosophy: success, fame, publications, even occupation, were accidental to a philosophical life. These things could no doubt become valuable additions to a

[1] See James Bradley, "Philosophy and Trinity," *Symposium: Canadian Journal of Philosophy*, vol. 16, no. 1 (2012): 155-177.

life lived philosophically but one ought never to confuse them with the thing itself. In short, philosophy does not need worldly success: what it needs is books, the leisure to read them, and a community to discuss the ideas to which they give rise. This sheds light on Jim's devotion to two central institutions in St. John's, the Queen Elizabeth the Second Library of Memorial University, which Jim made sure had the best collection of philosophy books of any library in Eastern North America, and the Jockey Club, which Jim co-founded in 1993, under the model of the Moral Sciences Club of Cambridge. Jim seldom missed a session, and kept careful notes of the important things that were occasionally said. It was, he insisted, the heart of the Department, and it remains so today.

We re-connected in 2003. I was a newly minted PhD from Toronto teaching a couple of courses at Memorial in the summer. (Suffice it to say, the monastery lost its appeal after a time—not enough books nor the leisure to read and discuss them.) I found him little changed, still holding court in St. John's, unquestionably the master of the vibrant discussion that sprung up around him, but wielding his authority with an exquisitely light touch. When I joined the Faculty at Memorial in 2007, Jim became my regular interlocutor and my close friend: I consulted him on all matters, academic, philosophical and personal. I looked forward to many more years of conversation. I had so much still to learn from him, not the least, why he was so hard on the nominalists (among whom he included Aristotle and Aquinas), what he understood by God (which he often described as the *explicans* that explains itself), and why he insisted on explanations, when clearly they were always breaking down. He is no longer available for a chat. But he leaves behind him his papers, his questions, and above all the memory of his irrepressible zeal for philosophy.

In my first years at Memorial, I often wondered how Jim had adjusted so well to this environment, which was academically and intellectually miles distant from Cambridge. I realized only recently that his response to Memorial, which had rescued him from the unemployment allotted to many British academics coming of age under Thatcher, was to bring as much of Cambridge to his Newfoundland institutional home as he could. If he could not influence the administration to create a space more conducive to free intellectual discussion (what else is a university for?), he could at least change the atmosphere around him. When I sat in his book-lined study, with the rich smell of years of tobacco smoke suffusing everything, I often felt that I was in a medieval college at Cambridge or Oxford, i.e., in a bastion of civilization that still has the power to resist the instrumentalization of reason which has gripped the planet. As the discussion progressed Jim would produce volume after volume of things I had never read but which he insisted were intimately related to points I was trying to make: T.H. Green, Bosanquet, Buchdahl, and above all Peirce. For me Jim embodied what George Grant describes as the absolute pre-condition of ethical and political life: love of one's own. Jim loved Memorial and his department, not because it was better than any other department, but because it was his. By loving it so unconditionedly he changed it and made it better than it needed to be.

The papers that follow are intended as mini-symposium on the work of

Professor James Bradley, indeed, a mini-*Festschrift* for Jim who would have been 65 this year. The first paper, by Prof. Peter Harris, outlines the main events in Bradley's philosophical and theological education. The paper was given as the inaugural Bradley Memorial Lecture at Memorial University of Newfoundland, in the Junior Common Room on the 30th of October, 2012. The lecture was the first in a series of eight lectures given on the topic of Speculative Philosophy (broadly understood) by invited scholars from Europe and North America and funded by a grant from the President's "Support for Scholarship in the Arts at Memorial" program. Dr. Philip Rose's "Another Guess at the Riddle: More Ado about Nothing," was the fourth Bradley lecture. It was given at Memorial University on 14 February 2013. Rose discusses C.S. Peirce's 1887-1888 essay, "A Guess at the Riddle," which concerns nothing less than the origins of being. Rose takes it as an occasion to engage Bradley's work on Firstness and advance his own theory of what Peirce's most mysterious of categories might mean. The second essay, Dr. Scott Johnston's learned examination of Firstness in Peirce and Bradley, was part of the Memorial University's annual Philosophy Colloquium (this year's title, "What is Metaphysics?"). The paper was given on 5 March 2013. Bradley's reading of Peirce's Firstness is questioned for its Platonism by Johnston, who sees the category as a "regulative ideal." The third paper, by Dr. Peter Gratton, is a self-reflective deconstruction of not only the notion of Firstness in Bradley and Peirce but of the philosophical community which was so much a part of Bradley's life. Bradley would have no doubt been surprised to see Derrida emerge as an ally to his philosophy. All four papers honour Bradley's legacy as Schelling said a philosopher ought to be honoured: by grasping him in his fundamental thought, where he has not yet proceeded to its consequences. We will no doubt be proceeding to the consequences of James Bradley's life and work for many years to come. *Requiesce in pace.*