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Volume 38, numéro 2, 2013

URI : [https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/scl38\\_2art09](https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/scl38_2art09)

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Éditeur(s)

The University of New Brunswick

ISSN

0380-6995 (imprimé)

1718-7850 (numérique)

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Citer cet article

Abram, Z. (2013). Knights of Faith: Christian Existentialism in Colin McDougall's *Execution*. *Studies in Canadian Literature / Études en littérature canadienne*, 38(2), 168–183.

# Knights of Faith: Christian Existentialism in Colin McDougall's *Execution*

ZACHARY ABRAM

SINCE WINNING THE GOVERNOR GENERAL'S AWARD in 1958, Colin McDougall's only novel, *Execution*, has been neglected, despite the richness of a text that provides ample critical avenues into Canadian war literature. Peter Webb calls the novel the "only masterpiece among Canadian Second World War novels" (163). Dagmar Novak praises *Execution* as "arguably the best Canadian novel about the Second World War" (112). Yet little has been made of the novel's complicated representation of wartime ethics. Even less has been made of its existential underpinnings. In the novel, Padre Doorn, a military pastor, comes face to face with a quintessential existential realization: "The Padre stared unremittingly at the sky, waiting for the parley to open — and nothing happened. Nothing except air burst" (145). Furthermore, McDougall's allusions to existentialists like Franz Kafka seem to indicate that he wished *Execution* to be read within the complex and multifaceted tradition of existential fiction. The novel's ending, however, which features a proxy crucifixion, complicates this interpretation since novels within that tradition, such as Jean-Paul Sartre's *Nausea* (1938) or Albert Camus's *The Stranger* (1942), do not typically allow for any kind of spiritual transcendence. Understanding this seemingly irreconcilable tension means eschewing the dominant form of mid-century existentialism characterized by Sartre and Camus in favour of one of existentialism's foundational figures. A close reading of *Execution*, considering the formative texts of existentialism and a comparative reading of works by its international influences, including Kafka, Herman Melville, and William Faulkner, reveals a valuable theoretical matrix for parsing the difficult philosophy of this neglected novel. For *Execution* accords with an earlier form of existentialism, one that predates the school's consensus atheism and is articulated primarily by Søren Kierkegaard in *Fear and Trembling*.

Twentieth-century existentialism is difficult to elucidate. A loose conglomeration of perspectives, aesthetics, and approaches to dealing

with the world and its inherent difficulties, existentialism deals, in the most general sense, with the recurring problem of finding meaning in existence. War novels, with their themes of absurdity, meaninglessness, and despair, represent a distinctive form of existentialism, even though early examples of existential war fiction precede the introduction of post-Second World War French existentialism embodied by Sartre, Camus, and Beauvoir. As “existence precedes essence,” so the writers of war fiction precede the French existential philosophers.

In the Canadian critical imagination, novels about the First World War have far outperformed novels of the Second World War. Timothy Findley’s *The Wars* (1977), Jane Urquhart’s *The Stone Carvers* (2001), and Joseph Boyden’s *Three Day Road* (2001) all are prominent in academic and popular discussions. Curiously, no novel about the Second World War holds an equivalent position. This imbalance only further cements the First World War’s reputation as “Canada’s war.” The narrative of the First World War as Canada’s de facto war of independence is still a compelling one. The Second World War, with its accompanying racist policies against Japanese Canadians and conscription controversy, is harder for authors and critics to pin down. Although some Second World War novels were well received in their day — G.H. Sallans’s *Little Man* (1942), David Walker’s *The Pillar* (1952), and Lionel Shapiro’s *The Sixth of June* (1955) all won the Governor General’s Award for fiction — most have been largely forgotten by critics and the reading public.

Few critics lament the loss to history of these novels. For Webb, “all of these authors write with a self-conscious masculinity that is overbearing and has caused them to date badly” (160). The First and Second World Wars were, of course, not the same, and soldier-novelists did not represent them in the same manner. While First World War novels are most often characterized by outrage and cynicism, Canadian novels of the Second World War are, according to Novak, “curiously detached” (95). In his First World War novel, *Generals Die in Bed* (1929), Charles Yale Harrison, for example, depicts war as the complete nullification of the individual: “Out on rest we behaved like human beings; here we are merely soldiers” (49). *Execution*, on the other hand, embeds a plea for personal responsibility not often found in novels about the First World War. Like the “cannon fodder” of *Generals Die in Bed*, the soldiers of Canadian Second World War fiction see themselves as insignificant

pawns trapped in a cycle of mechanized violence, but, in *Execution*, the possibility for personal redemption does return.

*Execution* focuses on a group of young Canadian soldiers during the Italian Campaign of the Second World War and is bookended by two executions. Early in the novel, as they make their way toward the Hitler Line, the Canadian 2<sup>nd</sup> Rifles take on two harmless Italian deserters to cook for them, despite the order of the platoon's commanding officer, Brigadier General Kildare, that all deserters be shot on sight. When Kildare discovers this insubordination, he insists that the men be executed. The two main characters, John Adam and Padre Doorn, must "acquiesce" to the execution, prompting an identity crisis for both men. Adam tries to forget his sin by becoming a hyper-competent soldier but is unable to fill the "aching emptiness inside himself" (49). Doorn has a nervous breakdown and becomes obsessed with finding pieces of the True Cross in his attempt to grasp authentic Christianity. Later a member of the company, the cognitively challenged but good-hearted Jones, is arrested as the scapegoat for the murder of an American soldier and, due to political pressure, sentenced to death. Adam and Doorn see this as an opportunity to redeem themselves for their previous crime. While their attempts to free Jones are unsuccessful, this new killing somehow atones for the first, and *Execution* ends on a note of optimism.

The ending may seem confounding given *Execution's* allusions to existential works. These works typically postulate that the absence of a transcendent force in the universe results in absolute freedom because the individual is entirely responsible for his or her own actions; it is the individual's responsibility to create an ethos outside of societal or religious constructs. As Sartre writes, "Man is nothing else but which he makes of himself" (291). For Steve Lukits, *Execution's* ending "strains its credulity" because it "provides a melodramatic answer to the character's moral despair" (80). Lukits is unable to reconcile "Jones' calm acceptance of his sacrificial role" with the novel's earlier and more realistic scenes of violence and accountability (80). Lukits's concerns get at the most difficult question about the novel — why does *Execution*, an existential novel seemingly marked by the absence of God, end with a de facto crucifixion?

When read in the context of Kierkegaard's *Fear and Trembling*, *Execution's* central philosophical tension — between the opposing forces of existentialism and Christianity — is easier to reconcile. As

intimated before, existentialism is not a wholly coherent philosophy. Walter Kaufmann argues that existentialism is not a philosophy at all “but a label for several widely different revolts against traditional philosophy. . . . Existentialism is not a school of thought nor reducible to any set of tenets” (11). This suggests not only that existentialism is contrarian by nature but also that its many opposing worldviews can exist under the same umbrella. *Execution*, then, can productively be read using the major premises of Kierkegaard’s Christian existentialism. Indeed, McDougall’s depiction of Padre Doorn’s quest for the True Cross, as well as the execution of Jones, takes on new meaning when read in tandem with the religious existential philosophy espoused in *Fear and Trembling*.

McDougall does not reference Kierkegaard in the novel itself in the same way he does Kafka; however, an examination of the Colin McDougall Archive, housed in the McGill Rare Books Special Collections Department, helps to establish a link between the Canadian veteran and the melancholy Dane. The “archive,” really just a battered banker’s box haphazardly stuffed with notes, some letters, and a notebook, sheds significant light on McDougall’s efforts to transmute his own war experience onto the page. The notebook spans the five-to-six-year time period it took him to complete the novel. Described initially as “a running record of the battle to [write],” the notebook became a vehicle for McDougall’s fears, insecurities, and everyday neuroses as well as a meditation on the particular difficulties of writing a war novel (*Notebook* 16/05/53). McDougall wrote in 1952 that he hoped that writing the novel would result in a “purging of the whole war experience” (*Loose-Leaf Notes*). During a bout of writer’s block, he expressed his desire to “settle on all the unbearably sad, aching, tender things I want to say about war, men at war, and write them down” (*Notebook* 11/04/53). His exploration of his unpredictable state of mind stands in sharp contrast to the notebook itself, which is organized with military precision. Between late 1954 and early 1956, however, he stopped writing in the notebook altogether, with no explanation.

Littered with famous names like Evelyn Waugh, William Faulkner, and Herman Melville, the notebook reveals that, while conceiving and composing *Execution*, McDougall was reading texts that explicitly deal with themes of Christian sacrifice. Although Waugh’s paeans to glory, like much of his *Sword of Honour* trilogy, are satirized in the novel’s

opening sections, it is Faulkner and Melville who are most thematically present in *Execution*. Jones has an obvious analogue in Faulkner's Benjy from *The Sound and the Fury*. Both are cognitively challenged, and both take on allegorical Christ-like significance. McDougall notes that his "intention" in writing *Execution* was "to be affirmative — an act of faith (as Faulkner)" (*Preliminary Notes*). McDougall was also reading Melville's *Billy Budd*, and the parallels between Billy's senseless execution and Jones's are obvious as well. Both executions are clear Christian allegories and provide the surviving characters with transcendent catharsis. Both men expire with surprising calm and provide comfort to their executioners. Billy Budd cries out, "God bless Captain Vere!" (124), whereas Jones tells Adam, "Please don't worry about me. I am not afraid" (259).

The affinity between these two American authors and Kierkegaard's philosophy has been long established. Jamie Lorentzen devotes his book *Sober Cannibals, Drunken Christians: Melville, Kierkegaard, and Tragic Optimism in Polarized Works* to the shared worldview of the *Moby Dick* author and Kierkegaard, writing that their "processes inform each other's works in scores of remarkable ways" (12). In his *Kierkegaard and Faulkner*, George Bedell makes a similar argument, writing that "Faulkner once [said] . . . 'I am telling the same story over and over, which is myself and the world [and] . . . the problems of the human heart in conflict with itself,' which is Faulkner's way of talking about what Kierkegaard considers the religious problem" (7-8).

For Kierkegaard, the power of the author "lies on the boundary of the esthetic and in the direction of the religious. . . . The lifeview is the way out, and the story is the way" (*Two Ages* 14). And it is at this confluence of literature, ethics, and Christianity that McDougall takes his place with Melville, Faulkner, and Kierkegaard. Allusions to Kafka make it easy to characterize *Execution* as another atheistic and cynical war novel in the vein of *Catch 22* (1961) or *The Thin Red Line* (1962). To do so, however, fails to incorporate the novel's continuity with an earlier form of existentialism, which still allowed for the presence of a transcendent force and the possibility of redemption.

In *Fear and Trembling*, Kierkegaard provides four different retellings of the biblical story of Abraham and Isaac in order to show that redemption is possible through sacrifice. For Kierkegaard, the term *ethics* has more than one meaning. In its primary sense, ethics is synony-

mous with the Hegelian notion of prevailing social norms. Kierkegaard reconciles the tension between ethics and religion, embodied in the Abraham parable, by invoking what he calls the “teleological suspension of the ethical” (41). This teleological suspension is the proverbial leap of faith. Kierkegaard argues that Abraham must sacrifice Isaac “for God’s sake, and (in complete identity with this) for his own sake” (41). George Price writes, “What is at stake in the book is Abraham’s self, his struggle *to be*. . . . [He] is therefore the paradigm for every individual who finds himself at the frontier of ethics” (192). Kierkegaard argues that, in deciding to kill his son for God, Abraham is ethically wrong but religiously right. Much of *Fear and Trembling* turns on the notion that Abraham’s would-be sacrifice of his son Isaac is not an act performed for the sake of social norms but rather a duty to something higher than both Abraham’s social commitment not to kill an innocent person and his personal commitment to his son. In other words, his duty is to the Absolute (God) and not to the Universal (ethics). This recognition and the accompanying sacrifice elevate Abraham to what Kierkegaard terms a “Knight of Faith.” He acts not under the belief that God must always be obeyed but rather under the assumption that God would not ask Abraham to do something unethical.

It is not difficult to extrapolate Abraham’s plight to those of the Canadian soldiers in *Execution*. They must, at great personal expense, acquiesce to senseless violence for the sake of the “universal” ethic, at the behest of powerful forces like the military, nationalism, and bureaucracy. The mechanized approach to death characteristic of the wars of the twentieth century meant that soldiers had to justify their actions in a unique ethical context, a context difficult to duplicate in civilian life. Within this paradigm, Adam, Doorn, and the other members of the company must themselves become Knights of Faith and find a way to assert that they remain ethical beings. Ultimately, *Execution* is a philosophical meditation on what it means to act ethically under constraint. For Warren Cariou, “the men of McDougall’s Italian campaign are something like Beckett’s characters Vladimir and Estragon, except that they must try to find meaning not through waiting, but through obeying” (273). In other words, when is killing another human being justified? In its opening lines, *Execution* foregrounds this difficult question with Krasnick’s steadfast refusal, “I ain’t gonna shoot no horses!” (3). Although Krasnick does not express any qualms about killing Germans,

he implicitly knows where to draw the ethical line. His dilemma demonstrates how war alters the moral lives of otherwise good men.

The existential and ethical conflict found in the novel may have been inspired by a real-life incident. The Canadian military long maintained that it had not executed any of its own men during the Second World War. On 5 July 1945, however, months after the war was over, twenty-three-year-old Private Harold Pringle was executed by firing squad for military crimes. McDougall recapitulates this true story, integrating it with Kierkegaard's particular brand of existentialism, in order to impose credible order on what is otherwise a chaotic and senseless act. In appropriating Pringle's execution, McDougall depicts how war renders normal that which should be abhorrent. After his father's discharge for poor eyesight, Pringle became a disciplinary problem, going AWOL several times. After the battle of the Hitler Line, which coincidentally is the climactic battle in *Execution*, Pringle likely suffered from post-traumatic stress. He once again went AWOL to Rome, where he took up with a gang of small-time smugglers. The gang's criminal success was short-lived due to excessive drinking and squabbling. Eventually, one gang member was shot dead, and the others were arrested. At the trial, one member testified against the rest in exchange for immunity; Pringle was found guilty and sentenced to death (Clark 287). Pringle's life and death are examined in Andrew Clark's *A Keen Soldier: The Execution of Second World War Private Harold Pringle* (2002). While there is no mention of Pringle in the McDougall papers, and it is not known how much McDougall heard through the military grapevine, the similarities between Pringle and Jones are too conspicuous to be simply coincidence. McDougall appears to have reworked Pringle's story, elevating it from a meaningless bureaucratic tragedy into something else.

Reading *Execution* with *Fear and Trembling* evinces a coherent order to the violent and seemingly chaotic events. Kierkegaard argues that people live on three planes of existence: the aesthetic (living for one's self), the ethical (living for others), and the religious (living for God) (*Fear and Trembling* 78). Characters in *Execution* embody all these planes. Kierkegaard's Christian existentialism, moreover, has three major premises. The first is his calling of the masses back to a more genuine form of Christianity. For Kierkegaard, the type of Christianity that existed in the decades following the crucifixion of Jesus Christ was the most pure and unadulterated form. He believed, however, that



by his own time the New Testament concept of love had been perverted. The second premise equates God and love. According to *Fear and Trembling*, to engage in the act of loving is to approach the divine. The final premise of Christian existentialism involves the undoing of evil acts (redemption). Versions of all three of Kierkegaard's premises are enacted in the novel.

Kierkegaard's first premise, the desire to return Christianity to its post-crucifixion purity, is embodied by Padre Doorn's quest for pieces of the True Cross, which serves as the central metaphor for Christianity in the novel. At the beginning, Padre Doorn firmly believes in the holy nature of war. The Canadian soldiers he serves with and has grown to love and respect are doing God's work: "It was sacrilege to think that those strong young bodies, created in God's image, might be smashed or maimed, flung lifeless on a Sicilian beach. In the whites of their eyes tonight he had seen their closeness to God; these were dedicated men, these were *crusaders*" (10). Martial language and religious language are indistinguishable in his early rhetoric. But he is unable to reconcile his early and naive vision with the horrific scene he witnesses in the barnyard where these "crusaders" kill two innocents; this causes a crisis of faith for him and, as for Adam, a crisis of self. In the novel's second section, Doorn occupies a liminal space between life and death: "As for Padre Doorn, the man had simply become a graveyard ghoul" (49). He is forced to re-evaluate his entire worldview, pushing him to the brink of madness and launching his own existential quest.

As Doorn approaches the chapel of St. Agatha in the hope of recovering bits of the True Cross, he is in a religious trance: "The Padre's eyes were on fire. His gaze at the gleaming reliquary was devouring, consuming, as though in glance he celebrated visual Mass" (107). The chapel contains what he believes he needs to save himself and, indeed, all of Christianity: "That reliquary held doom and salvation, life and death — everything. . . . Inside the case was the object marking the end of his search. . . . He walked into the blaze of sacramental light" (107). Yet, his mission accomplished, Doorn is still met with a suffocating nothingness as he thrusts the True Cross at the sky and God. Walking toward the battlefield, he makes an impassioned declaration: "No — there must be no more execution!" (144). This will not be the case. Doorn erroneously equates the gathering of aesthetic objects with sacrifice.

When read allegorically, the sacrifice of Jones takes on both New

and Old Testament significance. He is both Jesus and Isaac. It is no coincidence that Brigadier General Ian Kildare is ultimately responsible for both executions, ordering the first and acquiescing to the second due to political pressure. In the beginning, the braggart soldier, with his Balmoral cap (which is strictly against regulation), seems to be the sole bastion of individuality. He is revealed, however, to be merely an ambitious bureaucrat and not always the best judge of character. He privileges aesthetics over essence. When he meets Jones, a man who looks like the ideal soldier and does exactly as he is told, Kildare laughs: "See that? A damn fine soldier" (21). Cariou points out Kildare's error: "Jones is anything but a fine soldier, precisely because he obeys every order unthinkingly" (274). His total lack of self-awareness means that he is one of the few characters in the novel not suffering an existential crisis.

Major Bazin, the novel's most explicitly existential character, is not so lucky. His cynical worldview is confirmed when he takes a position as a military prison guard. Adam describes Bazin as being "grotesquely misemployed" in this endeavour. Bazin agrees with this characterization, describing the prison as "purest Kafka": "To myself I call it *Der Strafekolonie* [sic], and I recognize, of course, that I am the principal prisoner. . . . I have at last, you see, found my vocation in life: I am commandant of a Field Punishment Camp. I have a Sergeant descended from Captain Bligh, and an Adjutant straight out of Stendhal" (152).

The reference to Kafka serves as another example of the connection between *Execution* and *Fear and Trembling*. Kafka's "In the Penal Colony" revolves around the final use of an elaborate torture and execution machine that carves a sentence onto the prisoner's arm before letting him die. The device has fallen out of favour with the new commandant of the penal colony. Nostalgic for this old brand of justice, the officer lobbies the new commandant to reverse his decision and reinstate the machine. His efforts unsuccessful, the officer puts himself in the machine and is impaled. The way in which the officer describes the physical appearance of the machine reveals that his affinity for it has as much to do with aesthetics as ideology. As Danielle Allen writes, "The officer's gestures establish a context for judging his beloved Commandant's apparatus: it should be viewed, or read, as a work of art" (327). In his fetishizing of the aesthetic, the officer is like Kildare. The technological allure and absolutism of the torture device override even

the most basic forms of human decency. Kafka's correspondence with Max Brod shows that Kafka had read *Fear and Trembling* before writing "In the Penal Colony" and "felt that Kierkegaard's writing deepened his own understanding of ethical individualism" (Heidsieck 134).

Kafka's officer does not have to "acquiesce" to execution because he believes it to "be just" every time, but the Canadian troops in Italy do not have this luxury because they cannot fully give themselves over to the military. The fact that they were performing an order is of little comfort. Bazin may be the commandant of a prison, but he is nothing like the officer. Indeed, he refers to "this *Strafekolonie* [sic] . . . [as] a minor beach-head of hell" (153). Bazin, moreover, recognizes the artifice behind Kildare's persona, the image of "Ian Kildare, recovered from his wounds, and now apparently the darling of Canada since the newspapers told of his gallant charge to the bagpipes" (153). Kildare's heroism at the Hitler Line, as the reader knows, was at least part performance. His bagpiper was a Jewish soldier named Cohen, not a Scot named Fergus. He, like Brazin, lacks the officer's sureness of purpose: "Both men were actors. They had created a rare character role between them: that of laird and gillie; and now Brigadier Kildare wanted to see if Fergus would play his part to the end" (137).

Kildare is just as multifaceted as the other soldiers in the novel. It is, indeed, a testament to McDougall's skills and depth as a writer that even his lesser characters are complex. His name may betray Kildare as a Waugh-like military caricature, but he is decidedly three-dimensional. He struggles against the execution even if he must, in the end, acquiesce to it. He vehemently opposes charging the Hitler Line, believing it to be a suicide mission, before eventually relenting to his superiors. He makes a crucial misjudgment of Jones but promotes Adam, a fine leader, while firing Dodd, an incompetent one. He agrees to commute Jones's sentence but is overruled by his superiors. His charge at the Hitler Line, with its accompanying bagpipes, is emblematic of his character. He is part sincerity and part performance. For Webb, "Kildare is in the same position as the men under him: bound to carry out orders, no matter how unethical they might be, yet determined to preserve whatever shreds of humanity remain available to him" (173). It is this sophisticated view of military authority that differentiates *Execution* from previously anti-authoritarian Canadian war novels like *Generals Die in Bed* or *Turvey* (1951).

Major Bazin's Kafkaesque time as a military prison guard foreshadows Jones's captivity after Jones is implicated in the murder of an American soldier. Adam worries, "What would happen to Jones in a Field Punishment Camp?" (153). He does not have to wait long before Jones is confronting his own execution without knowing why. The sergeant assigned to hold Jones is unable to reconcile the double meaning of execution either: "Up north, men were being killed every day; their life was regarded as precious; every effort was made to preserve each life — but back here this band of soldiers was assembled for the sole purpose of killing one of their number. Like all the others he could not help feeling it was wrong, in some basic, indefinable way" (226). It is hard not to read these lines as an indictment of the Canadian military for the execution of Private Harold Pringle.

The time immediately after the sacrifice of Jones is one of contemplation and restored faith. Adam says, "I don't know why but I feel alright now. And yet, I thought — I believed — when the execution was over everything would be over" (260). Adam is one with humanity: "Today he felt himself to exist at the central suffering of all humanity. He was filled with a huge compassion and love and understanding for every man who had ever lived" (269). Having failed to see God on the battlefield with the True Cross, Padre Doorn returns to God cured of the selfish hypocrisy that plagued him at the beginning of the novel: "It seemed to Adam that the Padre looked younger. Why, he looks like a man of God again, Adam thought, one who has been away, and has at last returned" (263). This restoration of faith in God for Doorn and personal regeneration for Adam are the gifts Jones gives them through sacrifice.

In Kierkegaard's reading of the story of Abraham and Isaac, Abraham has enough faith to trust that God would not make him kill his son, although he is prepared to do so. In *Execution*, the characters also have their faith tested: Padre Doorn has his religious faith tested, while Adam's faith in the structure of the military is tested. Adam teleologically suspends his ethical code when he decides to give up his quest to free Jones in order to provide comfort to him in his final hours: "He saw that there was only one possible course of action: and that was to stay with Jones until the end, and envelop him with a cocoon of protection" (251). Major Bazin similarly laments, "Perhaps it is man's plight to acquiesce" (115). This concept of acquiescence stands

in for Kierkegaard's concept of the leap of faith. Bazin, for instance, concludes that recognizing your own acquiescence might be enough to save your soul: "even recognizing execution as the evil may be victory of sorts; struggling against it may be the closest man ever comes to victory" (115). Unlike with Isaac, no angel interferes on behalf of Jones; he must die because it is not enough, as Bazin hopes, to recognize one's own compromises.

Ultimately, *Execution* examines whether it is possible to follow orders ethically. The command structure of the military is predicated upon an equivocation of responsibility: one must simply do as one is commanded. For soldiers, whose sole reason for being is to follow orders, "execution" goes beyond capital punishment to represent a state of being. Novak writes that, in the most sophisticated war novels, a "constant tension exists within the individual's consciousness as he attempts to come to terms with his role as a soldier" (97). This tension results in an increasing isolation both from "the cause for which he is fighting and from his own moral identity" (97). In *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, another existentialist, Hannah Arendt, insists that moral choice remains even under oppressive structures such as the military or totalitarianism:

[U]nder conditions of terror most people will comply but *some people will not*, just as the lesson of the countries to which the Final Solution was proposed is that 'it could happen' in most places but *it did not happen everywhere*. (135)

Given Arendt's reasoning, the age-old equivocation, "I was just following orders," is wholly insufficient.

Kierkegaard's second premise, the conflation of God and love, is evident in Adam's curious interaction with an Italian sex worker while on leave. Set adrift and numbed by the execution of the two Italians, Adam strives to follow orders and does not engage his moral consciousness until an encounter with an Italian prostitute, Elena, in the town of Bari. Adam repeats "*Io ti amo*" to Elena in order to prevent her from feeling like a commodity, and these words have a significant impact on him as well: "It was pretence, but he had given her something; and, oddly, he felt better at once as though he had also given something to himself" (102). He continues, "*Io ti amo*. . . . He knew they meant something of immense significance; at this moment they were the only words in the world that mattered" (102). His encounter with Elena shocks Adam out

of the cycle of denial: “There was only one difference in his state before and after Bari. Now he was aware of the emptiness inside him; and he knew that not all his competence, nor all his passion of concern for the men of his Company, would ever suffice to fill it” (108). His declaration in Bari is pure performance — the performance of love — but it has a profound impact on him. In this episode, McDougall evokes Pascal’s formula for belief: “Kneel down, move your lips in prayer, and you will believe” (Althusser 114). Ideologies are lived as much as they are known. Performing the ritual of love has a genuine effect on Adam and on Elena. Love insinuates itself into his identity through pretense and performance.

The key word in the exchange between Elena and Adam is *amo*: love. His encounter with the Italian sex worker is problematic but, nevertheless, accords with Kierkegaard’s philosophy. For Kierkegaard, the act of loving is the closest any individual can get to the divine. While Padre Doorn attempts to approach God by retrieving the True Cross, Adam has more success through the illusion of love. Bazin also recognizes the power of love, even if this realization comes too late to save him: “There was less in him to change: he had lost his saints when he was very young; long ago he had made his compromises” (50). He cynically conjugates the verb *to love* as he fires at the enemy: “‘Amo’ said Major Bunny Bazin, snapping the bolt of his rifle closed. ‘I love’ . . . ‘Amas’ . . . ‘You love’” (109). And he asks Adam, “Tell me, do you know any better way of passing the afternoon than to lie at ease sniping at the enemy, while conjugating the verb ‘to love,’ and drinking the best issue Egyptian rum? Hell, it’s the vocation I’ve been searching for all my life” (110). Yet, although Bazin may have given in to cynicism, he still encourages Adam: “Maybe you found something in Bari — something stronger than the other thing. Whatever it was, hang on to it — *believe* in it” (116). This statement is Bazin’s tacit confession that his way of coping with the random brutality of war may not be the only way. Love may be another way. Thanks to Adam, even Bazin is optimistic: “*Amabo, amabis, amabit*. . . . We’ll love in all the future inflexions too” (109).

While Padre Doorn’s search for the True Cross and Adam’s declaration of love accord with the first two premises of Kierkegaard’s Christian existentialism, the execution of Jones is congruous with Kierkegaard’s third premise: the undoing of evil acts. Jones’s execution

functions in much the same way as the performance of love between Elena and Adam. As Cariou observes, it is a “ceremonial performance Adam creates in order to transform the act of execution from the most vicious, pointless slaughter to something else. . . . The execution is really a ritual of love, in which *amo* becomes ammo, and Jones becomes a Christ-like figure who does not die in vain because the ceremony of his death enables the moral salvation of others” (277). It comes as no surprise when, after Jones’s execution, Adam observes that each of the Canadian soldiers “was changed, in a sense, perhaps, restored to whatever they had been before Sicily” (263). The “vulture fear” that had haunted Adam leaves him as well when he observes a “large bird, wings a-whirr, shot from its branch, and went speeding in a tight spiral to the top of the sky; it became a black dot, and then it disappeared” (27). Jones provides what Ronald Sutherland calls “the vital pretense,” by which those witnessing his bureaucratic execution are able to achieve some sort of victory (28).

On the same day that Kierkegaard published *Fear and Trembling*, he also published the comic philosophical novel *Repetition* (1843), in which he makes the case for repetition: “Repetition is an indestructible garment that fits closely and tenderly, neither binds nor sags. . . . [R]epetition is a beloved wife of whom one never wearies, for one only becomes weary of what is new. One never grows weary of the old, and when one has that, one is happy” (4). The broad question *Repetition* poses is how meaning in life can be regained after a great trauma. Kierkegaard argues that a sense of peace can be achieved through repetition and re-enactment, provided one is able to learn from his or her repetitions and strive for epiphany.

McDougall, a veteran who strove to purge himself of his war experience through writing, was understandably drawn to these philosophical questions. Kierkegaard scholar Edward F. Mooney writes, “Repetition is epiphany that sometimes grants the old again, as new, and sometimes grants something radically new” (viii). This is how, within the complex paradigm of the novel, it is somehow possible for one execution to atone for another. Repeating past behaviour can yield new knowledge provided those involved do not lapse into intellectual and ethical laziness, as Adam and Doorn do after the first execution. Jones’s death is different from the execution of the Italians because the characters closest to the act, Adam and Doorn, are different. They no longer try to stifle

their culpability with competence or trinkets but rather strive for honest epiphany. Therefore, McDougall's project is the same as Kierkegaard's and, indeed, Faulkner's. McDougall repeats the same story again and again as Kierkegaard does with the parable of Abraham and Isaac, not to suggest a vicious cycle of recidivism, but in order to find new directions from old. Hopefully, critics of this often-overlooked novel will do the same and strive for new interpretations in order to deliver to readers what the novel also promises — regeneration and renewal.

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