

“LANGUAGE WAS TOO DIFFICULT”:
THE LIMITS OF LANGUAGE AND NON-LINGUISTIC FORMS OF EXPRESSION IN BURNSIDE’S FICTION

John Burnside’s most recent novel, *A Summer of Drowning* (2011), received most critical attention: it was reviewed in more national newspapers than previous fictional works, and made the Guardian’s Booker longlist. However, it received far less attention than other novels published around the same time, such as Ali Smith’s *There But For The*, Graham Swift’s *Wish You Were Here*, and Alan Hollinghurst’s *The Stranger’s Child*.¹ Unlike the new Swift novel, or the new Hollinghurst, Burnside’s novels are less anticipated, and consequently receive less media coverage. Also, unlike those authors, Burnside has not received the same kind of recognition in terms of literary prizes. These issues – although not at all unique to his novels – make Burnside something of an outsider in the literary landscape, even though he is every bit, if not more, prolific than authors such as Swift, Smith and Hollinghurst.

Those reviews that did appear shed light on other reasons, inherent to the novel itself, why *A Summer* received so little critical attention. In *The Telegraph*, Anthony Cummins, describes the novel as “slippery” (par. 6), says that it “rejects and frustrates expectations” (par. 7) and “uncanny moments abound” (par. 8). In her review in *The Independent*, Christina Patterson notes that “quite a lot” is left unexplained in Burnside’s fiction (par. 2). His novels, she suggests, are “haunted by the border between what we know and what we dream of [and] [m]uch of it takes place in a shadow land of mystery and myth” (ibid.). There are “moments when Burnside pulls us into territory that hovers dangerously near the supernatural, but he does it so adeptly that we can only grasp at the vision before us, and then watch it recede” (par. 6). This is precisely what I am concerned with in this paper: the difficulty of grasping, understanding or putting into words the things that happen in Burnside’s novels. Reading one his fictions, a reader may very well be left with both the sense that nothing has really happened, even though the characters seem to have experienced momentous changes or even epiphanies. It is rather like watching a film without sound, reading a book from which pages are missing, or overhearing just one side of a conversation.

I will argue that this inconclusiveness is one of the reasons that Burnside’s novels have received little critical attention. His fictional universes essentially consist of two layers: the everyday world of social life and social conventions, and a darker, chaotic world, verging on the supernatural, which is suppressed by the social. Although this second world is a significant part of the lives of many of Burnside’s characters, it is barely explicitly described and only referred to. Being beyond or underneath the social, it is also beyond language, and therefore cannot be put into words. The

¹ *There But For The* (published by Hamish Hamilton) appeared on June 2nd, *Wish You Were Here* (Picador) on the 3rd, *A Summer of Drowning* (Jonathan Cape) on the 9th and *The Stranger’s Child* (Picador) on June 27th.

interaction between these two spheres is illustrated particularly well by *The Locust Room* (2001), in many ways a precursor to *A Summer*. Specifically, I will look at the way in which Paul, the protagonist, tries to access the world underneath the social through photography. This attempt is not unique to *The Locust Room*: non-linguistic means of expression recur in, for instance, *The Devil's Footprints* and *A Summer*, as do theories of seeing.

Set in 1975, *The Locust Room* is about a young Cambridge student, Paul, whose search for connection or belonging is placed against the background of the historical figure of the Cambridge rapist. During the summer Paul works at a field station, where he experiments with taking pictures of the locusts – hence the title of the novel. It ends in winter when Paul encounters a fox on a country lane in Scotland and realizes that he cannot feel at home either in the social or the animal world.

Like many characters in Burnside's fiction, Paul is a loner, someone who likes to be away from other people. Solitude is a recurring theme: as one of the three epigraphs to *The Locust Room* states, "That is the only way to final, living unison: through sheer, finished singleness" (D.H. Lawrence). A similar sentiment is expressed in *The Devil's Footprints*, in which the protagonist's father tells him that "To be separate, to be apart, is to be whole again" (13), and in *A Summer of Drowning*, where the narrator, Liv, notes that she doesn't "like intertwined. I like intact. There is too much contact in the world. Too much *intertwined*." (62). Yet even though this solitude is a choice that Paul makes, he is haunted by a sense of not-belonging, of homelessness.

This homelessness is both caused and increased by his search for a different kind of reality: he wants to move[**HANDOUT 1**] "out and away, towards the unknowable, towards the impossible which was, in every meaningful sense, the fundamental ground of whatever he could think of as reality" (27). He discovers that he can only experience a glimpse of this reality when he is alone, without others: "Together, people constructed a narrative that did not include the fundamental, but made of the world what was needed for social life to continue" (ibid.).

The darkness or chaos that lies beneath or beyond Burnside's fictional worlds is a space that can only be referred to by means of myths or stories, and never directly described. Nonetheless it is a significant part of Burnside's fictional universe, in which darkness is always present at the edges. The characters' attempts to put this world into words is also a critique on language as the darkness also defies, or swallows, words. In *The Locust Room*, Steve, Paul's former roommate, tells himself a story in which the other world appears, about a boy who carries a mirror through a busy town. All goes well until he looks into a corner of the mirror and doesn't see his own reflection or that of the buildings around him, but "a small hole in nature": "an emptiness, a loose stitch which, if pulled, might unravel the universe and show its underlying blackness, a blackness like decay, or like the small local darkness that falls each and every time an animal dies" (158). Similarly, in *A Summer of*

Drowning, Liv writes that she has always been aware of “a gap – a dark, clean tear – in the fabric of the world” (321), which she hopes to discover in, for instance, the ashes of the Midsummer Eve fire (70). The menacing nature of this world beneath the ordinary world is emphasized in *The Devil’s Footprints* where Michael draws a connection between the devil walking through Coldhaven and himself: “I also belonged to those wide, eternal patterns, those laws that guided the birds and the tides and the weather that had brought me home: the pattern, the law, that kept everything in motion and the pattern that allowed it to open a little, every hundred years or so, to let the devil in” (200). Paul attempts to access this darkness or gap through photography.

He has been trying for years to take a certain kind of picture: as he puts it, “[h]e had wanted, not to *make*, but to *be* ... a magical pursuit that was integral to his very being.... He wanted it to exist outside time, outside narrative; he wanted it to be cryptic; he wanted it to be clear” (26). Although he can’t precisely put it into words – nor has he been able to capture it by randomly pointing his camera at objects – he knows that the picture he wants to take has “an abstract quality, an essential detachment from human concerns” (27). What he looks for, then, is to go beyond words and narrative through the visual, through photography, towards what he perceives as a reality different to that of everyday life. In doing so, Paul is inspired by the British photographer Raymond Moore (1920-1987). His pictures are characterized, according to Paul, by a “quality of estrangement” (28). In the foreword to a booklet of his pictures, Moore notes that he is interested in “the no man’s land between the real and fantasy – the mystery in the commonplace – the uncommonness of the commonplace” (qtd. on 28). In order to achieve such a re-estrangement from the familiar, Paul decides that he needs to be almost invisible [HANDOUT2]: “you had to go beyond the social, you had to refuse the given role, in order to perform a kind of alchemy that would be at once disappearance and a way of remaining utterly still” (29).

Moore, who, like Paul and Burnside, was influenced by Zen Buddhism, calls this disappearance or being utterly still an “awareness beyond the self” (McClelland par. 9). Looking at Moore’s work, it seems that the only way he could experience this detachment is by going to the edges of society, where there are few people about. His pictures hardly ever feature people and the landscapes look as if they’ve been deserted for years, if not decades. [Picture 1 (Untitled 1967)] shows a waste land which has a menacing feel about it because of the rows of fences in the distance. The purpose of the fences, or the buildings in the background are unclear. Also, are the fences keeping us as viewers out, or are they locking us in? Neither the picture itself nor the title (“Untitled”) say anything about the setting: it could be anywhere, in Britain, or Eastern Europe. [Picture 2 (Galloway)] is taken in a blizzard, in an area that – judging by the street signs – is populated, but is now empty. This emptiness is increased by the short distance between the

foreground and the horizon. And even though the title of this picture does place it – in Galloway – it is a space that is barely recognizable. Like many of Moore's pictures, there are no people in it: only traces of human civilization, infrastructures of human life, such as power lines and street signs, as well as the occasional piece of trash. Yet this may as well be a picture of Galloway after an apocalyptic event, after humans. Even [picture 3 (cottage window)], taken from inside a house, looks abandoned. It seems that no one will be coming back for the jacket, or blanket, even though someone took the trouble to mend the window at some time. As in the first picture, there is no indication of where the picture was taken: it could be anywhere. This lack of location makes the image both universal and existing outside of time and place. It is both instantly recognizable – a window, a jacket – as well as inherently strange.

Moore's pictures defy many conventions of photography: most of the time, neither image nor title explains the picture, or what the viewer is seeing. It is also not completely clear why these images were chosen, why this perspective or time of day. Through their refusal to express more than there is – fences, snow, street signs, a window – these pictures also defy a narrative. There is very little to be said about them: this is all there is. There is no story about these pictures, and the objects in them are relevant not because of the role they play in a larger story, but for what they are. Moore shows objects simply as they are, and as such accords significance to everyday scenes.

Inspired by Moore, Paul seeks his own way of going to the edges of civilization. In the urban environment of Cambridge he starts to take "night pictures", without a flash, of the dark and empty city parks. He aims to capture "the gaps between the hidden and the revealed" (9) – a borderland. Yet taking the kind of pictures he wants is not merely a case of finding the right environment or perspective, but also a personal process in which Paul tries to achieve a state of being that he terms absence. Photography to him is a way of "setting in motion a process that might end with that absence, a form of invisibility that would consist of nothing but attention, nothing but being itself" (9-10). He first becomes aware of the possibility of such absence as a child, driving with his father through the dark countryside [**HANDOUT3**]: "he had guessed that there was something there, some state, resembling absence, that might be achieved in the half-light, achieved or chanced upon, perhaps, by simply staring out and catching a glimpse, here and there, of lit windows through the woods, or passing through those small towns on the road home" (9). The state of being that Paul aims for is paradoxical: it is a way of not being present – of self-forgetting or moving beyond the self – while at the same time registering his surroundings nonetheless. It's a bit like a twist on the familiar story of the tree falling in the forest with no one there to hear it. Paul wants to be absent, in order to find out whether the tree makes a noise as well when there's no one to register it. Yet at the same time, if he's not actually present, he won't be able to tell whether the tree makes a sound or not.

Once he starts work at the field station, Paul realizes he can't be the detached observer he earlier believed himself to be. He becomes aware that photography is a creative act – not so much creating anew, out of nothing, but rather foregrounding the true nature of something that already exists: “the essential creative act was one of seeing, and making seen, for the first time, the true nature of the world, a world that had seemed given, and finished, and entirely nameable until that moment” (175). Paul compares it to the myth of Orpheus who by singing revealed, for the first time, the reality of the world, which until that moment had been obscured by names, by language: “Until Orpheus sang, the animals were mere objects, named and forgotten and shrouded in the contempt bred of familiarity; afterwards, however, they were new, they had become strange. They were themselves again, and not the creatures men had taken for granted” (ibid.). Orpheus reveals the essential being of the creatures he sings to, much like Adam, according to Foucault, also revealed the actual names of the animals he named: “Adam, when he imposed their names upon the animals, did no more than read those visible and silent marks” (43). Since the sixteenth century, however, - the date which Foucault suggests – the relationship between language and the world changed. Consequently, Paul feels that he can no longer draw on language to describe what he calls “the impossible which was, in every meaningful sense, the fundamental ground of whatever he could think of as reality” (27). Whereas Orpheus could still use words, Paul can't: he can only approximate. Not happy with such an approximation of reality, he seeks a non-linguistic medium to capture it. Photography, he believes, is “the art that brought us back to the things themselves if anything could free things from their names, as Orpheus had done, it would be a form of photography, a way of picturing the world from which all invested meaning had been stripped away” (175-6) – a way of seeing anew the familiar.

Seeing anew, or at least of seeing differently than the social world dictates, recurs in Burnside's most recent novel, *A Summer of Drowning*. Liv, the protagonist and daughter of a renowned painter, notes that there are two ways of looking at the world, two ways of seeing [HANDOUT4]: “The first is the way we learn from infancy onwards, the way of seeing what we are supposed to see, building the consensus of a world by looking out for, and finding, what we have always been told is there. But there's another way – and that's what I am after. It's the way we see when we go out alone in the world, like a boy going out into the fields, or along the shore, in some old story. When he's at home, he sees what he is supposed to see, but as soon as he leaves the safety of the farmhouse, or the village schoolroom, everything is different” (323-4). The first way of seeing is a linguistic way, seeing in terms of language in which meaning is attributed arbitrarily and relationally. Once the boy in the example is alone and free of social structures – embodied by the farmhouse and the village schoolroom – he sees things differently. The second way of seeing, then, is

an example of the kind of re-estrangement that Paul is after: photography as a “continual re-estrangement from the given” (176). It is also taking yourself out of the picture and leaving existing perceptions behind, and of attaining the “awareness beyond the self” (McClelland page 2) that Moore sought. Similarly, in *A Summer*, Liv says that “To become nothing, to remove yourself from the frame – that is the highest form of art” (26).

Yet whereas Liv and her mother largely succeed in their exile, *The Locust Room* questions whether Paul will ever be able to remove himself from the frame. His desire to go beyond the social is challenged by the narrative of the rapist that runs through *The Locust Room*. In a discussion about the rapist, Paul thinks “The whole thing, the whole sorry mess of men and women and sex, was fundamentally flawed. So why bother with it? Why not live apart from one another, why not maintain a respectful and wary distance?” (89-90). His friend Richard, however, implies that even if men and women were to live separate, this would not fix “the whole sorry mess”, as Paul calls it. All men, Richard contends, are angry and have “been trained to think of sex in terms of conquest. A man has to bear in mind how conditioned he is by that” (114). Richard is aware that no one can escape the social, even though it is often at odds with the self: “The social world demands persons, to do its business. We want to live as spirits. There is a conflict there” (98). And even though he realizes that he himself is part of the social world no matter what, Richard’s values have “become discontinuous with the social world”, forcing him to live alone (ibid.).

At the end of the novel Paul learns that he will never be really able to connect to something beyond the human world. When he is visiting his mother in Scotland for Christmas, Paul takes a walk in the countryside and encounters a fox. Even though this event, at Midwinter, holds the promise of a new beginning, perhaps even rebirth, it turns out to be an anticlimax as it makes Paul feel at home neither in the human nor the nonhuman world. Instead, he realizes that [HANDOUT5] “there was nothing to which he could truthfully say he belonged, other than to this world of silence and light, and this dangerous nostalgia for other animals. It was this nostalgia, this longing for the unnamed world of other creatures, that made him homeless in the world” (275). The world of other creatures for which he longs cannot be named because it is (part of) the darkness beyond the social world, and as such beyond language. However, Paul also acknowledges that he may never become part of the world of the animals but instead will always be on the brink of achieving freedom from society and social constraints: “while he could never say at any particular moment that he was free, he was always at the point of freedom” (ibid.). Nonetheless, for the time being, he has little choice left except returning to the social world, and to his mother who has cooked Christmas dinner.

In all three novels, the darkness or chaos that the characters are aware of and even consciously seek to connect to, remains elusive. Both characters and readers fail to adequately grasp

it, or describe it, because this other world is beyond that of social life, and beyond language. As such, Burnside's novels are inherently paradoxical, as well as inherently confusing: literature's reliance on language means that the chaos will never be described, since it exists in a realm beyond language. Nonetheless, as a written medium, words are all that novels have available to them. The most a narrative can achieve, is to *refer to* or approximate the darkness, yet never enter or explain it. *The Locust Room*, then, is premised on two conflicting impulses: the novel's task to describe in words/linguistically, and Paul's desire to go beyond language. *A Summer of Drowning* is equally complex or confusing, as Cummins concludes in his review: "Its evasions may discomfit those who like to know exactly where they stand" (par. 11). In the end, Burnside's novels are much like the stories told by Liv's neighbour [HANDOUT6]: "in his stories, something hideous or starting was always present, concealed behind the facade people created and running through the customs and prayers that made mortal men comfortable, and I always enjoyed the moment when they came to the surface, and nobody knew how to continue with the illusion of order" (76).