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# D. Z. Phillips' contemplations on religion and literature

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**Abstract** This paper critically discusses D. Z. Phillips' use of literary works as a resource for philosophical reflection on religion. Beginning by noting Phillips' suggestion, made in relation to *Waiting for Godot*, that the possibilities of meaning that we see in a literary work can reveal something of our own religious sensibility, I then proceed to show what we learn about Phillips from his readings of certain works by Larkin, Tennyson, and Wharton. Through exploring alternative possible readings, I argue that, although Phillips' discussions are of considerable philosophical interest, they undermine his claim to be deploying a purely contemplative hermeneutical method.

**Keywords** D. Z. Phillips · Religion · Literature · Contemplative philosophy

> … [T]he words in our lives and the life in our words reveal where and who we are.
>
> —D. Z. Phillips[1]

[1] Phillips (2006, p. 88). My references to this work will be to the second edition. The first edition was published by Macmillan in 1991.

D. Z. Phillips was a pioneer in the areas of both philosophy of religion and philosophy of literature, and he frequently combined these interests in order to show how possible religious perspectives can be elucidated through philosophical engagement with literary works. In this paper, by reflecting critically upon Phillips' use of particular literary examples in his philosophizing about religion, I highlight some important lessons that can be learnt from his work.

The paper comprises three main sections. The first discusses remarks of Phillips' upon Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* and upon a poem by Philip Larkin. I initially show how Phillips uses Beckett's play to illustrate his claim that the possibilities of meaning seen by someone in a work of literature can reveal something about the reader's religious understanding; then I show how Phillips' own reading of Larkin's *Myxomatosis* exhibits the strength with which Phillips himself holds a particular conviction, which is not obviously endorsed in the poem. The second section considers Phillips' interpretation of certain stanzas from Tennyson's *In Memoriam*. Here I argue that, despite his own professedly contemplative hermeneutical approach, Phillips has been too quick to construe Tennyson's poem in crude metaphysical terms. The third section develops the suggestion that Phillips' interpretive approach may be more advocatory than he overtly admits. With reference to his reading of Edith Wharton's short novel *Bunner Sisters*, I bring out the extent to which Phillips is concerned to promote a particular conception of Christian self-renunciation, which is influenced by the later writings of Simone Weil.

The upshot of these reflections is twofold. Firstly, we should note that Phillips' point, that the scope and limitations of one's religious understanding can be disclosed through one's readings of literary works, applies as much to Phillips himself as to anyone else; and hence, while there is much to learn from Phillips' insights into certain works, we should be

alert to occasional biases in his readings. Secondly, these biases expose limitations in the extent to which he was able to carry through his promise of a purely contemplative, and hence non-polemical and non-apologetic, hermeneutics of religion.

**Revealing where and who we are**

In a discussion of Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*, Phillips criticizes the view that the point of the play, along with much of Beckett's other work, is to show that words—our everyday speech and language, and especially our religious forms of language—have no meaning. Phillips finds this view most prominently expressed in Martin Esslin's well-known book *The Theatre of the Absurd* (1977). The view is false, argues Phillips, since the predicament of the two central characters in *Waiting for Godot* "is not that words have no meaning, but that their words have the meaning that they do."[2] Phillips' point here is similar to one made by Stanley Cavell in an essay on Beckett's *Endgame*. "The discovery of *Endgame*," writes Cavell, "both in topic and technique, is not the failure of meaning (if that means the lack of meaning) but its total, even totalitarian, success—our inability *not* to mean what we are given to mean."[3] Part of what is being said here, by both Phillips and Cavell, is that the meanings of our words are not entirely under our control; we cannot simply decide what to mean by them, as Lewis Carroll's Humpty Dumpty supposed he could.[4] The meanings of our words are constituted by the uses to which they are put in particular contexts, and it is the congruence between what *we* do with words and what others do with them, within the

[2] Phillips (2006, p. 81).
[3] Cavell (1976, p. 117).
[4] See Carroll (1982 [1872], p. 184): "'When *I* use a word,' Humpty Dumpty said, in rather a scornful tone, 'it means just what I choose it to mean—neither more nor less.'"

overall context of a shared form of life, that determines whether what we say is or is not meaningful.[5]

What Phillips wants to stress is that the ways in which Beckett's characters use words often appear strange or ridiculous precisely because they try to use them independently of the patterns of communicative life by which they are normally surrounded. As Phillips sees it, the expectation that words can retain their sense outside of their natural linguistic environments pervades the forlorn philosophical enterprise that goes by the name of 'metaphysics.' In this respect, as in many others, Phillips wishes to follow Wittgenstein's advice "to bring words back from their metaphysical to their everyday use";[6] and he holds that one of the valuable services Beckett performs for us is to exemplify the confusions that arise when, in Wittgenstein's memorable phrase, "language *goes on holiday*."[7]

An illustration of what happens to religious words in particular when they are, as Phillips puts it, "dislocated from their familiar contexts" is given in the brief exchange that Vladimir and Estragon have in *Waiting for Godot* concerning repentance.[8] "Suppose we repented," suggests Vladimir. "Repented what?" inquires Estragon, to which Vladimir replies, "Oh … We wouldn't have to go into the details."[9] Phillips observes that "Vladimir has severed repentance from its religious surroundings", disconnecting it from the feelings of sorrow and remorse that accompany genuine expressions of repentance—remorse about specific acts or omissions in our lives.[10] On Phillips' view, the incident does not show that the word 'repentance' has no meaning, or that the activity of repenting is meaningless; it

[5] The same observation has been made by Rowan Williams in his recent book on Dostoevsky: "It is in one sense true that we can say what we like; in another sense, manifestly not true, since we are performing linguistically within a world in which we have to make ourselves recognizable to other speakers, as they are to us' (Williams 2008, p. 11).
[6] Wittgenstein (2001 [1953], sect. 116).
[7] Ibid., sect. 38.
[8] Phillips writes of the dislocation of language in Phillips (1995).
[9] Beckett (1986, p. 13).
[10] Phillips (2006, p. 82).

shows that this word and this activity have their meaning by virtue of their associations with such things as remorse. It also, therefore, exposes the danger that 'repentance' *will* lose its meaning if the activities that constitute its meaning become merely mechanical and devoid of feeling.

Phillips acknowledges that different people may hear different meanings, or different possibilities of meaning, within the same text. This is why he asserts that "the words in our lives and the life in our words reveal where and who we are."[11] His point is that certain features of our character, including ethical and religious features, will show up in the sense that we are able to make of forms of linguistic expression, both within works of literature and in life in general.[12] In this way, literature can reveal important truths about ourselves. Phillips makes the point with reference to how different people may interpret the language of Vladimir and Estragon:

> Some will see the tramps as partly trapped by the language of childish illusions and as partly seeing through this language, but these readers will have no conception of anything else religious language could be. Others see the tramps as victims of what their language has become, a language of vulgar prudence. Among these readers, some may be able to contrast this with a deeper conception of religious faith. Others, including perhaps Beckett himself, will find in the vulgarised language echoes of something else it once was, without being able to make this 'something else' explicit. For others, and they are many, the tramps are lost souls who do not see what is in their interests; who do not see that it pays to worship God.[13]

[11] Ibid., p. 88.
[12] A similar thought is expressed by Peter Winch, though not with direct reference to our understanding of literature: "What a man finds it possible or impossible to say, the difficulty or ease with which he can combine diverse ideas, are important indications of the kind of man he is" (Winch 1987, p. 138).
[13] Phillips (2006, p. 88).

One way of describing the philosophical project that Phillips pursues through his engagement with literature is to say that it consists in a sustained attempt to make the 'something else' explicit. Against the charges of religious revisionism or reductionism that are often pressed by his critics, Phillips conceives of himself as "not reforming anything, not going anywhere, but contemplating an old, old story and seeing what gets in the way of telling it today."[14] It is this 'old, old story' that Phillips takes to be the 'something else' that is frequently obscured or ignored in the accounts of religious belief purveyed by many contemporary theologians and philosophers of religion. The story in question is one that, unlike 'vulgar' or 'shabby' misconceptions of Christian faith, does not construe belief in God as involving an expectation that everything will turn out "all right in the end."[15] Instead, it emphasizes that a recognition of the will of God involves accepting that, "in nature, and in our dealings with each other, rain falls on the just and the unjust … that nothing is ours by right, and that we are all dependent on grace."[16]

The acknowledgement of this conception of the Christian message is bound up, for Phillips, with a relinquishment of the impulse towards explanation that is found in much philosophy of religion, an impulse that manifests in various forms. One form that it takes is the search for explanations of why human beings hold religious beliefs at all. Some philosophers will argue that it is because the beliefs are true, or at least that there are good reasons for holding them to be true, whereas others will argue that there are certain facts about human beings, perhaps psychological or sociological facts, that make us prone to develop religious beliefs, even though such beliefs are not themselves true. Each of these philosophical tendencies, which are versions of religious realism and non-realism

[14] Phillips (1999, p. 165).
[15] Phillips (2006, p. 51).
[16] Ibid., p. xi.

respectively, involves the desire to explain the phenomenon of religious belief. Another form that the impulse towards explanation takes occurs specifically in the context of arguments concerning the theological problem of evil. Many theologians and philosophers of religion participate in the business of theodicy, which is the attempt to explain how the evil and suffering that is so evident in the world around us can be compatible with the existence of an all-loving and all-powerful God.

Phillips rejects both of these explanatory enterprises. He maintains that theologians and philosophers go in search of a chimera when they try to find a general explanation of why human beings hold religious beliefs. Such putative explanations cannot achieve what they aspire to achieve because religious beliefs are not founded on anything more basic than themselves: the beliefs are partially constitutive of forms of life, and forms of life are, on a Wittgensteinian view, "[w]hat has to be accepted, the given".[17] The philosopher's task, if anything, is to describe these forms of life in order that their workings may be better understood, but not to explain them.[18] This is not to say that we cannot come to a deeper understanding of the place that religious beliefs have in particular people's lives; but coming to a deeper understanding must, on Phillips view, be distinguished from *explaining*.

With regard to explanations of the theodical type, Phillips sees these as being rooted in the sorts of 'shabby' conceptions of religion that I mentioned briefly above. On these conceptions, God is assigned the role of divine compensator, repaying those who have suffered pain or hardship in this life and doling out rewards and punishments in accordance with individuals' moral or immoral behaviour. God, as Marilyn McCord Adams has recently put it, must be "capable of making good on the many and various horrors that

[17] Wittgenstein (2001 [1953], p. 192e).
[18] Cf. Wittgenstein, ibid., sect. 109: "We must do away with all *explanation*, and description alone must take its place."

human beings perpetrate every day on one another"; only by believing in such a God, she maintains, can an optimistic attitude to life be rationally justified.[19] Phillips argues forcefully in several places that such a conception inevitably turns God into a monster, not least because it portrays him as deliberately allowing the most abhorrent of evils to occur, making a calculation that such evils will all turn out to have been worthwhile in the end.[20]

There is much more that could be said about Phillips' reasons for rejecting explanatory strategies in the philosophy of religion, but my purpose here is not to establish whether the rejection is sound. Rather, my purpose is the far more modest one of giving an example of where this rejection appears to guide Phillips' appreciation of a particular literary work in such a way as to reveal, or emphasize, 'where and who' Phillips is. Since many readers are liable, upon reflection, to find Phillips' interpretation of the work in question implausible, the example serves both to weaken the credibility of Phillips' reading while at the same time adding support to his broader claim concerning how our interpretations of literary works expose something about ourselves. The work in question is Larkin's poem *Myxomatosis*, and I will come to this shortly. First, however, it is worth saying something about the affinity that Phillips feels with the atheistic sensibility that comes through in Larkin's poetry more generally.

What Phillips identifies with in Larkin's work is precisely the denial of any compensation beyond this life. Following Simone Weil, Phillips recognizes that the desire for compensation is deeply ingrained in the human mind. "Every time that we put forth some effort and the equivalent of this effort does not come back to us in the form of some visible fruit," writes Weil, "we have a sense of false balance and emptiness which makes us

[19] McCord Adams (2009).
[20] For his most sustained treatment of this issue, see Phillips (2004, part 1).

think that we have been cheated."[21] Phillips echoes this thought when he writes that "We feel that something *must* turn up, to rectify matters, to balance the books."[22] This feeling gives rise to what Phillips calls the 'transcendental superstition' that "someday, somehow, everything will be all right."[23] Here it might be suggested that Phillips is himself offering a psychological explanation of a certain kind of religious belief, albeit a kind of belief that he regards as shallow and naïve. But let us leave that consideration aside for now. The salient point to note is that Phillips sees in Larkin, and also in Wallace Stevens, a poet who flatly refuses to fall for the transcendental superstition, and thus someone who is, to that extent, an ally in the struggle against shabby dogmas of compensation. Phillips recognizes this aversion to superstition in Larkin's poem *Next Please*, which ends by declaring that "Only one ship is seeking us, a black- | Sailed unfamiliar, towing at her back | A huge and birdless silence. In her wake | No waters breed or break."[24] As Phillips puts the point: "Death is the only boat that awaits us, but it has no compensating cargo."[25]

Beyond this rejection of any notion of post-mortem survival, Phillips also finds in Larkin a resistance to grandiose explanations of suffering, and it is in this connection that he cites Larkin's poem *Myxomatosis*. The poem tells of an incident where the narrator encounters a rabbit caught in a trap. He imagines the rabbit asking "*What trap is this? Where are its teeth concealed?*" "I make a sharp reply", the poem's narrator continues, the implication being that he has swiftly killed the rabbit,

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[21] Weil (1951, p. 150). This passage is quoted by Phillips in several places, including Phillips (1970, p. 52); (2004, p. 195); and (2006, p. 194). Cf. Weil (1951, p. 150): "All the circumstances of the past which have wounded our personality appear to us to be disturbances of balance which should infallibly be made up for one day or another by phenomena having a contrary effect." This latter passage is quoted in, for example, Phillips (1970, p. 53) and (1982, p. 75).
[22] Phillips (2006, p. 51).
[23] Ibid.
[24] Larkin, quoted in Phillips (2006, p. 51).
[25] Phillips (2006, p. 51).

Then clean my stick. I'm glad I can't explain

Just in what jaws you were to suppurate:

You may have thought things would come right again

If you could only keep quite still and wait.[26]

Picking up on the narrator's gladness at being unable to explain, Phillips reads this as "the mark of Larkin's honesty, not only about the plight of animals, but about the traps that lie in wait for human beings too. … Notice, he is *glad* that he cannot explain. To think there is an explanation, a remedy, is to indulge in a lie and a deception."[27] Phillips is almost certainly making too much of the poem's point here; or rather, is obscuring the point that the poem is making. Crucially, in both the first and second editions of the book in which Phillips' essay appears, Larkin's poem is printed with its seventh line—"Just in what jaws you were to suppurate"—missing, an oversight which may have contributed to the waywardness of Phillips' reading. Phillips takes Larkin to be exclaiming that he's glad not to be able to devise pompous explanations to account for the suffering of animals or humans. But a more natural reading, especially in the light of the line that Phillips' essay omits, would attribute the narrator's gladness to the impossibility of his being called upon to explain to the rabbit why someone set a trap that would inevitably result in its slow and painful death. Among those who interpret the poem in this way is the theologian Robert Fisher, who notes that he can identify with Larkin's sentiment: "It would be embarrassing to explain to an animal just exactly what human beings get up to. I'd be ashamed to explain

[26] *Myxomatosis*, in Larkin (1977, p. 31).
[27] Phillips (2006, pp. 54, 55).

to an animal that we have the ability to sit down and think about the construction and design of a trap."[28]

Of course, poems characteristically lend themselves to multiple interpretations, and Phillips' reading of *Myxomatosis* may not be stretching the range of possible construals too far. Yet by quickly assuming it to be the most obvious interpretation, Phillips reveals something about himself. In allowing his own resistance to theodicies and other forms of over-inflated explanation to colour his receptivity to the poem, Phillips inadvertently demonstrates how cool contemplation of someone's words can be thwarted by the momentum of a theoretical (or, in this case, anti-theoretical) agenda. Perhaps we also see evidence here for another of Phillips' claims, that although "the words in our lives reveal who we are", "[o]ne of the most difficult things is to see ourselves."[29]

### *In Memoriam* and defective vision

As we have seen already, one of the chief tasks that Phillips sets himself in his writings on literature is to disclose possibilities of religious meaning beyond the shallow or distorted accounts purveyed by many contemporary philosophers and theologians. These latter accounts are shallow, according to Phillips, in as much as they misconstrue religious belief as being motivated by the desire for compensation, and they are distorted in so far as they make unwarranted assumptions about the objects of religious beliefs; they typically assume, for example, 'eternal life' to mean temporal existence without end and 'God' to denote a kind of entity among other entities. If religious belief amounted to no more than what these assumptions suggest, then Phillips would prefer atheism. This is why he feels an affinity with the likes of Larkin and Wallace Stevens, for he takes himself to be rejecting the sort of

[28] Fisher (2003, p. 35).
[29] Phillips (2006, p. 89).

puerile religion that they too reject. Where he differs, of course, is in his insistence that religion—and Christianity in particular—need not be like that.

In order to illustrate alternative poetic visions, one of the contrasts that Phillips sets up is between Stevens and Tennyson. He describes Stevens as "a poet of acceptance", who perceives the ephemerality of life as among its natural qualities and not as something to be regretted or railed against. Tennyson, meanwhile, is a troubled soul who "sees life as incomplete, existence as a riddle."[30] In *In Memoriam* in particular Tennyson wavers between hopelessness and a version of religious belief hardly deserving of the name, unable to find the words to express the faith he yearns for. This reading of Tennyson's great elegy on the death of his dear friend Arthur Hallam is, however, highly questionable. While the poem undoubtedly embodies the poet's unsettled relationship with faith, this is arguably its greatest strength as opposed to a deficiency. And by attributing to Tennyson a paucity of spiritual imagination Phillips again reveals something about himself; in this instance, an inability to see more than insipid metaphysical speculations where evulsive emotional self-exploration is present. I will elaborate this criticism below.

Taking his cue from certain remarks in T. S. Eliot's essay on *In Memoriam*,[31] Phillips regards the poem's articulations of despair and doubt as being superior to its allusions to immortality, the latter amounting to little more than attempts by the author "to convince himself … that his friend has survived death, and is now living in some other realm, in some heaven."[32] Among the stanzas selected by Phillips for harshest criticism is one in which Tennyson urges someone—presumably Hallam, or the spirit thereof—to "Descend, and touch and enter; hear | The wish too strong for words to name; | That in the blindness of

[30] Ibid., p. 29.
[31] Eliot (1951 [1936]).
[32] Phillips (2006, p. 25).

the frame | My Ghost may feel that thine is near."[33] Phillips says of these lines that they express Tennyson's wish for his friend to somehow "get in touch with him" and that they "smack more of a séance than of spirituality", adding that, from the standpoint of Wallace Stevens, "this is an attempt to turn Hallam into an ethereal being; into an angel, almost. We have lost sight of Hallam as he really was."[34] At some level Tennyson is indeed expressing a longing for contact, yet to suggest that his words should put us in mind of a séance is obtuse. In this verse, as in many others, Tennyson strives to capture something of the mood stirred by the loss of the friend he loved and still loves. *Pace* Phillips, we are not forced to read the term 'Ghost' here—or similar terms such as 'Spirit' and 'Soul' elsewhere in the poem—as implying a belief in the sorts of 'ethereal beings' with whom Spiritualist mediums claim to commune, just as, in other contexts, we are not forced to read, say, talk of the third person of the Trinity in that way. When Tennyson wishes that his ghost may feel the ghost of his friend, he is wishing that the connection with Hallam may remain in place, that death may not diminish the love between them. To feel the nearness of someone, of someone's spirit, need not be construed in terms of spatial proximity, and we need not imagine the descent of Hallam's ghost as resembling a diaphanous being descending from the sky. Yet even if an image of this kind *is* what Tennyson's words evoke in one's imagination, it does not follow that the image is somehow what the words *mean*—for the image itself may mean, or express, something that eludes translation into merely descriptive language.

I am thinking here of Wittgenstein's discussion of religious pictures in his Lectures on Religious Belief. By 'pictures', Wittgenstein means a broader category than mere visual representations; he includes expressions that might take either visual or verbal form.

[33] From Canto 42, quoted in Phillips (2006, p. 26).
[34] Phillips (2006, p. 26).

Reminding us not to treat pictures expressive of religious beliefs too simplistically, he indicates the possibility of a middle course between trying to take them literally (in which case it becomes hard to see any sense in them) and taking them to be merely figurative ways of expressing some emotion or sentiment. Wittgenstein is reported to have asked his students during one of the lectures to "Suppose someone, before going to China, when he might never see me again, said to me: 'We might see one another after death'—would I necessarily say that I don't understand him? I might say [want to say] simply, 'Yes. I *understand* him entirely.'" When Wittgenstein's student Casimir Lewy proposes that "In this case, you might only mean that he expressed a certain attitude", Wittgenstein replies: "I would say 'No, it isn't the same as saying "I'm very fond of you"'—and it may not be the same as saying anything else. It says what it says. Why should you be able to substitute anything else?"[35]

A lesson that I take from these remarks of Wittgenstein's for our present topic is that, when contemplating the meaning of Tennyson's words in *In Memoriam*, we are not obliged to ascribe to Tennyson either a crude realism or a crude expressivism. We can resist ascribing to him the belief that he and Hallam will, or may, meet up after death much as two living people might meet up at the pub after work, and so too can we resist reducing Tennyson's words to the expressions of attitudes that might, in principle, be just as well expressed in other, purely secular terms. Of course, it would hardly be satisfactory for us to simply shrug our shoulders and settle for the fact that Tennyson's words say what they say. But, as Phillips well knows, Wittgenstein's point is not that, in the case of religious expressions, you either understand them or you don't and there's nothing more to be said. Rather, when we consider Wittgenstein's later approach to philosophy more generally, we

[35] Wittgenstein (1966, pp. 70–71).

see that his central point is that one cannot understand the meaning of an expression in isolation from the context, the form of life, in which it has its place.

A remark complementary to this last suggestion is found in Eliot's essay on *In Memoriam*, where he describes the poem as "the concentrated diary of a man confessing himself", adding that "It is a diary of which we have to read every word."[36] The suggestion here is that our understanding of certain lines and stanzas will be shaped and nuanced by their contextualization within the poem as a whole. We do it a disservice when we pluck stanzas out of context and impute to them a coarse metaphysical or quasi-empirical sense, for this sense becomes far more subtle and emotionally textured when interwoven with the overall tapestry of the poem. We see the meanings of the words by virtue of their positions and roles within the whole, just as we see the meanings of words in general by virtue of the place that they have in our lives. And nor should we forget the vital contributions of rhythm and rhyme to the poem's sense, its spirit of self-interrogation and religious exploration being poignantly evoked through its rhythmic "undulations to and fro" (Canto 62)—the *a–b–b–a* rhyme scheme ensuring that, as Seamus Perry eloquently observes, "whatever the sense of purpose with which it sets out," each verse "ends acoustically haunted by the thought with which it began."[37]

In a review of Phillips' *From Fantasy to Faith*, Colin Lyas credits Phillips with having exposed *In Memoriam*'s "emotional and conceptual shortcomings" and "defective vision of heaven."[38] Yet it is difficult to see where these shortcomings lie or why Tennyson's vision of heaven should be judged defective. Indeed, it is not clear to me what this latter judgement amounts to. While Tennyson certainly lacks confidence in the religious

[36] Eliot (1951 [1936], p. 334).
[37] Perry (2002, p. 119).
[38] Lyas (1992, pp. 187, 186).

vocabulary that he deploys, it is precisely this openly acknowledged lack that marks the sincerity of his religious ruminations. When someone deems a spanner or a light bulb to be defective, it is clear what is meant: the item in question does not work, fails to fulfil the function for which it was intended. But by what criteria are we to deem a vision of heaven defective? Presumably, such a vision is one that Phillips himself, and perhaps Lyas too, finds spiritually unappealing. Neither Phillips nor Lyas can be criticized for this. But we should notice here a tension between the readiness of Phillips and Lyas to pass judgement on Tennyson's religious vision on the one hand, and, on the other hand, the non-evaluative standpoint that Phillips professes his own contemplative mode of hermeneutics to adopt. In a posthumously published essay, in which he is replying to various points raised by Stephen Mulhall, Phillips tries to distance his own contemplative approach to philosophy from what he sees as the engaged advocacy evinced by Stanley Cavell among others. At one point Phillips asks rhetorically, "But how can Cavell's advocacy of specific values relating to ethics, religion and philosophy be rendered compatible with contemplation of the variety of values to be found in these contexts?"[39] The suggestion is clearly that Phillips' own approach eschews such advocacy. Yet in Phillips' remarks on *In Memoriam* we see more than a mere "contemplation of the variety of values to be found in [the poem]"; on the contrary, we see sharp criticisms of a form that values can take.

Thus there are at least two important lessons to be learnt from Phillips' treatment of Tennyson's poem. Firstly, we learn how easy it is to miss the depth and subtlety expressed by a literary work, especially when one construes imaginative depictions of emotional and spiritual feelings as primarily embodying speculations concerning the post-mortem survival of disembodied beings. Secondly, we learn something of the difficulty—perhaps

[39] Phillips (2007, p. 33).

impossibility—of keeping contemplation and critical evaluation apart in the context of reflection upon a religious point of view. As in the case of Phillips' reading of Larkin's *Myxomatosis*, his remarks on *In Memoriam* reveal something of where and who he is; and hence again they support his contention that where and who we are becomes manifest in the possibilities of meaning that we can see in works of literature.

**Conceptions of self-sacrifice**

There is, then, a very thin line, and perhaps at certain places no discernable line at all, between bringing to light what one considers to be an overlooked conception of religious faith on the one hand, and positively advocating that conception on the other. We have seen the critical aspect of this endeavour illustrated in Phillips' and Lyas's characterization of Tennyson's vision of heaven as in some way 'defective'; and I now turn to an instance in which Phillips draws upon a work of literature to elucidate what he sees as a more edifying conception of faith, the work in question being a short novel by Edith Wharton entitled *Bunner Sisters*. Phillips takes issue with readings of this story according to which its principal objective is, as Marilyn French puts it, to strip "the 'virtue' of self-sacrifice" of "whatever moral exaltation, nobility, or grandeur it possesses",[40] the implication of such interpretations being that Wharton had seen through to the fact that the self-sacrificing attitude of nineteenth-century women was more a product of misogynistic social conditioning than a genuine manifestation of virtue. Against those who take this view of the self-sacrificing behaviour of the novella's central character, Ann Eliza Bunner, Phillips maintains that her behaviour does in fact derive from a sincere and valuable religious attitude, albeit one that is ultimately crushed in Ann Eliza herself. While acknowledging

[40] French (1984, p. xiv).

this character's eventual loss of faith, Phillips emphasizes that it is due only to the initial depth of that faith that "the story of its demise [has such] arresting power."[41]

Again Simone Weil needs to be mentioned here, for it is the conception of Christian virtue that Phillips finds most eloquently expressed in her writings that chiefly informs his reading of Wharton's novella. On the basis of Weil's notes, Phillips formulates a threefold analysis of the levels of expectation that must be overcome if a pure spirit of self-renunciation is to be cultivated. The first, and grossest, level is that which is characteristic of the compensatory form of faith against which we have already witnessed Phillips raising objections; it is the expectation that, if one's good deeds are not rewarded and one's hardships compensated for in this life, then they must surely be in some future life. From the standpoint that Phillips wishes to articulate, such expectations are delusory attempts to evade the fact that rain falls indiscriminately on the just and the unjust.[42] The second level of expectation to be renounced is that according to which one's own beneficent acts are expected to issue, if not in actual rewards, then at least in expressions of gratitude, and wrongdoings committed against oneself are expected to be followed by apologies. While admitting the difficulty of relinquishing expectations of these ordinary moral courtesies, Phillips follows Weil in maintaining that "a pure love of the eternal" does indeed require such relinquishment.[43] The third level is that of expecting neither some reward for oneself nor any pronouncement of gratitude from others, but merely expecting that one's acts of love or kindness should at least be *effective*, that they should at least benefit those for whom they are intended. It is the surrendering of even this basic and ostensibly altruistic impulse that Phillips regards as placing the severest demand upon the Christian; for if one's

[41] Phillips (2006, p. 197).
[42] Cf. the Gospel of Matthew 5:45.
[43] See Phillips (2004, p. 196).

benevolence fails to reach its target, or results in some unintended ill-consequence for the recipient, the Christian cannot simply brush it off by saying "Well, I played *my* part. I sacrificed"—

> … for if indeed he loves the neighbour, his concern will not be focused on his own endeavours, but on the effects they have had on his neighbour. If misery and wretchedness ensue, he may feel that the sacrifice is mocked by the outcome.[44]

It is the challenge that such circumstances pose for a Christian's faith that, on Phillips' reading, is perceptively explored in *Bunner Sisters*.

The object of Ann Eliza's self-denying actions is her younger sister Evelina. Ann Eliza gladly foregoes material comforts in order to purchase a gift for her sister's birthday, and turns down a proposal of marriage in part because she knows that her sister is also attracted to the same man. This results in the man, Hermann Ramy, redirecting his marital ambitions towards Evelina; and when he marries her, they move away from New York, leaving Ann Eliza poor and lonely. Yet still she places her sister's well-being above her own; and thus, when the sister's marriage breaks up, Ann Eliza again looks after her younger sibling despite occasional outbursts of cruel ingratitude on Evelina's part. It is when Ann Eliza learns from Evelina the extent of the misfortune that ensued from the brief and ill-fated marriage that Ann Eliza faces "the awful problem of the inutility of self-sacrifice."[45] The story's narrator describes this demoralizing revelation in the following terms:

[44] Phillips (2006, p. 195).
[45] Wharton (1984 [1916], p. 303).

> Self-effacement for the good of others had always seemed to her both natural and necessary; but then she had taken it for granted that it implied the securing of that good. Now she perceived that to refuse the gifts of life does not ensure their transmission to those for whom they have been surrendered; and her familiar heaven was unpeopled. She felt she could no longer trust in the goodness of God, and that if he was not good he was not God, and there was only a black abyss above the roof of Bunner Sisters.[46]

The story ends with Evelina having died and Ann Eliza venturing out to seek employment beyond the confines of the small shop that has been her home and business throughout her adult life. There is an air of new possibilities, but her religious faith is consigned to the past.

While acknowledging that Ann Eliza's loss of faith betrays a weakness in her conception of God, Phillips does not judge her to have believed in a God of compensation. Although she had indeed expected that God would guarantee "that the fruits of self-sacrifice" be transmitted "to their intended beneficiary",[47] Ann Eliza had not expected any reward for herself or compensation for her own sufferings. Yet Phillips perceives her to have missed an alternative form that Christian faith may take, which gives full weight to the identification of God with love. Since "love always involves the possibility of its rejection",[48] a God who *is* love cannot legitimately be blamed when such rejection occurs. This emphasis on love is central to the 'old, old story' of Christianity that Phillips thinks has been so disastrously neglected in recent times, especially by philosophers of religion. It is this conception of God, according to which "the only omnipotence God has is the

[46] Ibid. (The phrase "the roof of Bunner Sisters" alludes to the roof of the shop, called 'Bunner Sisters', owned by the sisters. But of course the darkness has been cast over the lives of the sisters themselves.)
[47] Phillips (2006, p. 201).
[48] Ibid.

omnipotence of love",[49] that Phillips holds to be capable of reorienting the believer away from fallacious speculations about a calculating God who permits atrocities in order to achieve some supposedly greater good.[50]

Whether Ann Eliza's erstwhile faith was really as deep and genuine as Phillips surmises is, however, open to question. The motivations behind her ostensibly self-effacing behaviour are, to say the least, mixed. While a desire for her sister's happiness is undoubtedly among those motivations, it is contaminated by a "passionate motherliness" which borders on obsession.[51] She lives vicariously through Evelina, lacking any internal source of well-being or sense of pleasure in life. Her attachment is such that, when Evelina moves away, Ann Eliza is engulfed by her own loneliness: "Every one of her thoughts had hitherto turned to Evelina and shaped itself in homely easy words; of the mighty speech of silence she knew not the earliest syllable."[52] Her sister's absence hits her like an overwhelming grief, exposing the neediness and insecurity out of which her self-denial had grown. This clinging emotional dependency can hardly exemplify the spirit of self-sacrifice that Phillips finds in authors such as Weil; or, if it did exemplify that spirit, it would reveal in it something disturbing and unattractive.

In this context it is worth mentioning that Weil's own conception of self-sacrifice has been criticized by certain interpreters of Christian morality, who argue that Weil moves so far in the direction of self-abnegation that she fails to do justice to the commandment to love one's neighbour *as oneself*. Recent proponents of this criticism include Ruth

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[49] Ibid., p. xi.
[50] Peter Winch has discussed the connection between God, love, and power in terms similar to those of Phillips. See, for example, remarks such as the following: "God's power is not simply combined with his love" and "To think that 'God is Love' and at the same time to think of him as 'all-powerful' is not to *conjoin* the thoughts of someone as both loving and powerful, as we might in thinking of some benevolent human despot …" (Winch 1987, pp. 121, 127). Winch was, like Phillips, much influenced by Weil in his contemplations on Christian faith.
[51] Cf. Wharton (1984 [1916], p. 272).
[52] Ibid., p. 278.

Groenhout and John Lippitt, each of whom cites the following passage from Weil's *Gravity and Grace* as especially troubling:

> I cannot conceive of the necessity for God to love me, when I feel so clearly that even with human beings affection for me can only be a mistake. But I can easily imagine that he loves that perspective of creation which can only be seen from the point where I am … I must withdraw so that he can see it. I must withdraw so that God may make contact with the beings whom chance places in my path and whom he loves. … It is as though I were placed between two lovers or two friends. I am not the maiden who awaits her betrothed, but the unwelcome third who is with two betrothed lovers and ought to go away so that they can really be together.[53]

"We are confronted here", writes Groenhout, "with a woman who understands herself as deeply unlovable. The only thing she has to offer is to disappear, to go away, and thus to leave the Creator alone with the Creation."[54] Lippitt endorses this assessment, and adds that, in "present[ing] herself as intrinsically unlovable", Weil "fails to pay attention to the 'as yourself' of the second love commandment. The view of herself as merely an obstacle to God's being able to be alone with his creation fails to recognize herself as a unique *part* of that creation."[55] Whether this reading is fair to Weil's overall conception of self-renunciation is doubtful. What Groenhout and Lippitt seem to miss is Weil's emphasis, in passages very close in spirit to this one, not on complete disappearance but on an emptying out of personal desires and ambitions, thereby facilitating the channelling of pure love—the love of Christ—through the vessel of the finite human being.[56] Rather than the destruction

[53] Weil (1952, pp. 88–89), quoted by Groenhout (2006, pp. 301–2) and by Lippitt (2009, p. 131).
[54] Groenhout (2006, p. 302).
[55] Lippitt (2009, p. 131).
[56] See, e.g., Weil (1952, p. 93): "May the self disappear in such a way that Christ can help our neighbor through the medium of our soul and body."

of her body and soul, Weil seeks their 'appropriation' by God;[57] and this aspiration for surrendering one's whole self to God or Christ is by no means something peculiar to Weil within Christian traditions.[58]

But my purpose here is not to get embroiled in exegesis of Simone Weil; it is to highlight a way in which a certain form of putatively Christian self-sacrifice can be criticized from a perspective that is itself Christian. Groenhout and Lippitt do not wish to downplay the importance of self-sacrifice in Christianity. Rather, they want to draw our attention to the need for a balance in the life of a Christian between serving others and acknowledging one's own intrinsic worth. Regardless of whether their criticisms are well-targeted at Weil, they do seem to have some force against the sort of sacrificial attitude exhibited by Ann Eliza Bunner. While the image of being an unwelcome third party who comes between God and his creation is used figuratively by Weil, in the case of the Bunner sisters this image takes on a more literal sense. Ann Eliza sees herself as an obstacle between Evelina and Hermann Ramy, and wishes to withdraw so that they can be together. Yet by withdrawing she does not become a pure vessel through which the love of Christ may operate in the world; she retains her cloying neediness, and hence finds herself emotionally torn: desiring her sister's happiness, and yet, at the same time, desiring that her sister remain with her in order that it be she, Ann Eliza, who slavishly furnishes that happiness. The point that Groenhout and Lippitt are making is, in part, that one's love and respect for others cannot be genuine in the absence of due love and respect for oneself: love for self and neighbour must, for the Christian, go hand in hand. It is hard to see anything but a travesty of that equilibrium in Ann Eliza's attachment to Evelina.

[57] Cf. Weil, quoted in Rhees (2000, p. 109).
[58] Of course, this is not to say that the aspiration is easy to fulfil. As C. S. Lewis puts it, for example: "The terrible thing, the almost impossible thing, is to hand over your whole self—all your wishes and precautions—to Christ" (Lewis 1952, p. 154).

To be fair to Phillips, it should be noted that he partially anticipates the sorts of points that I am making about the character of Ann Eliza Bunner. "No doubt," he writes, "strong arguments can be advanced to show that Ann Eliza spoiled Evelina; that her early sacrifices did more harm than good; that Ann Eliza had a perfect right to a life of her own and lacked proper self-respect."—"Yet," he adds, "given these limitations, within them, surely, a rare self-sacrificial love is found, a love of such a kind that one reader, at least, would feel he had no right to judge Ann Eliza—no right at all."[59] Here Phillips is clearly speaking for himself: he sees in Ann Eliza something deeply admirable despite the limitations of her self-sacrificial attitude and faith in the love of God. In effect, Phillips is acknowledging that what he finds to be religiously valuable is disclosed through his interpretation of the story.

While Phillips is right to stress that Wharton's novella does not constitute an attack on self-sacrifice *tout court*, his assessment that the story's "arresting power" derives from the "depth and genuineness of the faith" that is eventually lost by its central character strikes me as dubious. Phillips' reading has, it appears, been skewed by a desire to project the self-effacing spirit articulated in Simone Weil's writings onto the character of Ann Eliza. A more contemplative assessment—that is, an assessment that is less emphatically spurred by the urge to promote a particular conception of Christian ethics—would note that the problem with Ann Eliza's sacrifices is not just that they have tended to spoil Evelina; it is that they are based on emotional attachment as opposed to spiritual strength. It seems plausible to say that Ann Eliza's loss of faith reveals not its former depth, but the shallow and confused nature of its foundations.

[59] Phillips (2006, p. 200).

**Conclusion**

My purpose in this paper has not been simply to raise objections to Phillips' readings of particular works of literature. Rather, by engaging critically with those readings, I have sought to bring out some important lessons that Phillips' work has to teach us about the use of literature as a source for philosophizing on religious meaning. Phillips openly admits the personal dimension of literary interpretation: he asserts that the range of possible meanings that we find in a work of literature reveals something about 'where and who we are.' We need not take Phillips to mean by this that literary interpretation is a purely subjective matter or that anyone's interpretation is as good as any other; far from it. The possibility of alternative construals does not entail the abandonment of interpretive constraints, although it may well imply that those constraints cannot be assumed to be permanently fixed.

One of the most interesting lessons to be learnt from Phillips' work in this area derives from the tension between his avowedly 'contemplative' approach to philosophy of religion on the one hand, and the evident sympathy that he retains for a particular form of Christian spirituality on the other. Despite repeated reassurances that he is merely bringing out possibilities of sense that have tended to be obscured by prevalent prejudices and presuppositions, there is no disguising the preference that Phillips has for the kind of spirituality voiced by Simone Weil, and also by Søren Kierkegaard and others, over that which he sees articulated in most contemporary philosophy of religion. And this preference is not a purely philosophical one, as though he considered Weil and Kierkegaard to have been more successful than others at describing the grammar of Christian discourse; it is, over and above this, a religious preference, which manifests in moments of passionate polemic amidst the rhetoric of contemplation.

Sometimes Phillips' own philosophical and religious predilections interfere with his contemplation of a literary work. We see this in differing ways in his readings of Larkin's *Myxomatosis*, Tennyson's *In Memoriam*, and Wharton's *Bunner Sisters*. Phillips' eagerness to find in Larkin an ally who rejects grandiose explanations for the suffering of all sentient beings causes him to miss the more down-to-earth point made by the narrator of *Myxomatosis*, that he is glad not to have to explain to the ensnared rabbit why such a nasty trap had been set. In the case of *In Memoriam*, Phillips' aversion to conceptions of immortality that construe it in temporal and compensatory terms numbs him to the emotional depth embodied in both the haunting words and sombre rhythms of Tennyson's poem. And in his reading of *Bunner Sisters* we see Phillips' desire to find in the faith of a character a sincerity that echoes that of Simone Weil, whose own spirituality provides a paradigmatic refrain which reverberates throughout Phillips' writings on religion; we thus also see a tendency to quickly gloss over features which place that faith's sincerity in question.

These thoughts concerning Phillips' reflections on literature bring to light the difficulty of remaining true to a hermeneutics of contemplation in the philosophy of religion. They might even suggest that such a hermeneutics is more an ideal by which to be guided than a practically achievable philosophical method. Above all, they remind us of the difficulty, and importance, of bringing to our studies and enjoyment of literary texts an ongoing inquiry into the human subject who is reading those texts (namely, ourselves). With these considerations in mind, there is much for the philosopher of religion to gain from the contemplation of literature, and from the contemplations of D. Z. Phillips thereon.[60]

[60] An abridged version of this paper was presented at the Third Annual Postgraduate Conference in Continental Philosophy of Religion at the University of Oxford, September 19, 2009. I am grateful to those participants who subsequently engaged me in discussion or correspondence. An anonymous reviewer for this journal also provided helpful comments on the penultimate version.

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