

## THE *CONFESSIONES* OF GARY BRENT MADISON

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It is a joy and a distinct honour to take part in this well-deserved and long overdue tribute to the work of Gary Brent Madison. The first and probably the only difficulty I have is choosing the language in which I will speak of his momentous contribution to philosophy. We have always spoken French with one another, a language he loves and speaks fluently. So my first instinct was to speak French, be it only to represent the French-speaking community that is so indebted to his work. All the French-speakers in attendance, as are all others, are here today because of him since he was the founder and remains the *spiritus rector* of this association he founded in 1985 under the ideal title of a “Canadian Society for Hermeneutics.”

*Il aurait donc été naturel de parler français, la langue du cœur*, but I have decided, after much hesitation, to give English a chance—lest we forget, the dominant languages that were Ancient Greek and Latin are now “dead,” except of course for outstanding philosophers like Gary Madison—since this is the language the majority of you will understand. An admirer of Cicero like Gary Madison will understand better than most that a speaker has to take into account the dispositions of the listeners. So English it will be for today.

The rest will be very easy. All the more so since I am not here to quarrel with Gary Madison about this or that aspect of his wide-ranging philosophical outlook. I do not believe it is the space nor the time to do so—the *kairos* also has its importance for a speaker; but it also happens to be the case—which is perhaps unfortunate for a “debate”—that I find myself in agreement with almost all of what Gary Madison writes and says. I have always learned a great deal from him, constantly finding it to be insightful, important and awesome (in the most original sense of this much abused word, as that which elicits admiration and respect). On all philosophical and life issues we are in basic agreement—Gadamer would speak of a *tragendes Einverständnis* (a supporting mutual understanding)—perhaps because we had the very good fortune of having the same mentors. His latest book, *On Suffering*, a true masterpiece of philosophical wisdom, is dedicated, as is one of his earlier works, to the grateful and loving memory of his teachers Hans-Georg Gadamer and Paul Ricoeur. They have had a profound influence on his philosophi-

cal perspective as they have on mine. I must confess that I cannot read Gary Madison without hearing the voices of Gadamer and Ricoeur with whom he is in perpetual dialogue, a dialogue that he skillfully transmits to his readers.

So please forget about any formal discussion or nitpicking about his philosophy. I am mostly here to be here, in order to give but a very small idea of my heartfelt gratitude for his impressive body of work which I view as a class act. What is “work” in philosophy? A difficult question in and of itself, since our work is mostly defined by what is at work in us, with us, when we engage on the uncertain path of thinking. This working expresses itself in many exterior forms (its *verbum exterius*, as it were): first and foremost, for outsiders, in books that hopefully leave a lasting imprint, in teaching and lecturing, and in the organizational work we happen to do. Gary Madison, as you all know, has excelled in all three areas: since this organization, the Canadian Society for Hermeneutics, as I still like to call it (I am not too fond of the expression “Continental philosophy” because I see in it an unnecessary concession to the dominion of analytic philosophy), is his creation, which now counts a fine journal to its credit, *Symposium*, I don’t believe it is necessary to insist on this chapter of his achievements in the present context. I had the good fortune of having been one of the co-founders of this society some 30 years ago and I can testify that it was all Gary Madison’s inspiration and accomplishment, for which we have had numerous occasions to be grateful, all the more so since it enabled us to see one another, but always, if I can express a slight regret, for too little time. As for his teaching, his students and pupils present here today will be more qualified to speak of this aspect of his virtuosity. But I have witnessed him as a lecturer and in the course of his seminars at McMaster, admiring his scholarship and *esprit de finesse*, and I can assure you that I have seldom experienced such a passionate, even sanguine teacher. He really gave it his all and when he had strong feelings about an issue, and he always did, watch out: his heart and his temper would start boiling and he would enthral the entire audience in the maelstrom of his thought. I would not have liked to have been on the side of his adversaries when that happened! If passion has a family name, it is Madison.

The part of his work that most stands out and that matters most in philosophy are his great books. I have always read them with utmost profit and enjoyment. All have withstood the hard test of time since they were seminal in the truest sense of the term. That is obvious in the case of his first book and doctoral thesis, initially written in French, which was nothing less than the pioneering work

of Merleau-Ponty scholarship.<sup>1</sup> Gary Madison owes a great deal to the author we often just call Merleau, but Merleau also owes a lot to him in return. Gary Madison's book has launched and maintained Merleau-Ponty's attractive form of phenomenology in the philosophical discussion. His phenomenology is less focused on mathematical forms of knowledge than Husserl's and way more attentive to our bodily, historic, and linguistic presence to the world. In short it is more hermeneutical. This hermeneutical form of phenomenology, which has been developed by authors such as Heidegger, Ricoeur, and Gadamer, comes to fruition in Gary Madison's grandiose treatise *Understanding*.<sup>2</sup> It succeeds skillfully in correlating hermeneutic phenomenology with the strand of pragmatism, which is familiar to his American roots. Gary Madison is quintessentially Canadian with his bilingualism, his sense of tradition and his penchant for maples (*Les Érables...*), but he was born and raised in America (Illinois, to be more precise, the land of Lincoln). This has affected his political and economical outlook, very much in evidence in his masterful book on *The Logic of Liberty*.<sup>3</sup> It is a book from which I have learned immensely, so much so that it has freed me from writing on politics or economics (a subject about which I am not very knowledgeable). He convincingly showed that hermeneutical phenomenology did have political implications. After this powerful defense of liberty, and liberalism in its original sense, the consummate polemist in Gary Madison engaged in a passionate discussion with the postmodernists. He spoke here of his "applied hermeneutics," but for me this application of hermeneutics had already taken place in his *Logic of Liberty*. He of course did apply all his insights in his confrontation with the "Postmodernists" who often avail themselves of hermeneutics. In this regard, I might recall that, somewhat to my chagrin, the ancient Canadian Society for Hermeneutics was for some time called the "Society for Hermeneutics and Postmodern Thought." I was never too pleased with that (even if it made sense in the political-philosophical landscape of the time), and Gary Madison showed through his work that it was perhaps an unhappy marriage (mind

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<sup>1</sup> Gary Madison: *La phénoménologie de Merleau-Ponty: Une recherche des limites de la conscience* (Paris: Éditions Klincksieck, 1973), tr. as *The Phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty: A Search for the Limits of Consciousness* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1981).

<sup>2</sup> Gary Madison, *Understanding: A Phenomenological-Pragmatic Analysis* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1982).

<sup>3</sup> Gary Madison, *The Logic of Liberty* (New York: Greenwood, 1986).

you, not all unhappy marriages have to end in divorce). For all this work one can only be very grateful.

But on this occasion I would especially like to express my admiring gratitude for and call attention to his outstanding book *On Suffering*, first published in 2009.<sup>4</sup> It is truly a book of wisdom that corresponds to one's ideal of philosophy as the love of wisdom. One should also read it as such: as a book out of which judgment and prudence for the conduct of one's life and thinking can be gained from one who has *experience* in the Gadamerian sense of the term. It is a very special book: it is at the same time very learned (as are all treatises of Gary Madison) and very personal. Every line of the book is deeply felt and if in some other books of his I could also hear the voice of Ricoeur or Gadamer, in this book one hears Gary Madison's trembling voice at every turn. In the middle of developments on the idea of consciousness in phenomenology, he will quote the words he uttered at his mother's funeral, praise the courageous attitude of his father towards death, just as he will also relate his experiences with taxi drivers in South America and speak with mourning of his beloved dogs, our "companions and partners in life since the dawn of civilization" whose short life-span makes them the "hermeneuts, messengers of Chronos, old Father Time." (OS, 38) He does so all the while quoting profusely not only from the philosophical literature, but also from soulmates like Seneca, Cicero and the authors of Scripture (and the sacred scriptures are by no means limited to Christianity and Judaism for Gary Madison, who also draws extensively on Buddha and Confucius). His book marks the felicitous meeting of Husserl and Marcus Aurelius, of phenomenology and the too often forgotten tradition of philosophy as a source of wisdom practiced by the ancient Romans, which Gary Madison is fond of quoting in the irreplaceable Latin (he certainly loves it as much as French).

It is indeed the lasting contribution of this intelligent and clearly written book to rejuvenate the strand of philosophy that understood itself as an answer to the inescapable predicament of human suffering. As he recalls in the first page of his book, "the original purpose of philosophy was to enable individuals to successfully confront their sufferings so as to live well and die well." (OS, 1) This is a type of philosophy Gary Madison practices masterfully, on a reflective as well as on a practical level since he applies it to health care (in which he rightly sees a philosophical and not only a techno-scientific skill).

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<sup>4</sup> Gary Madison, *On Suffering: Philosophical Reflections on What It Means To Be Human* (Hamilton: Les Érables, 2013). Hereafter referred to parenthetically in the text as OS.

He still presents it as an existential-phenomenological and hermeneutical endeavor (pragmatism, it would seem, is now less important in his definition of philosophy though he remains very fond of James), but his true allies are Socrates, Michel de Montaigne, Boethius (with his idea of philosophy as consolation), the ever-present Latin authors, Seneca, Cicero, and Augustine. Its basic insight is that philosophy, true philosophy arises as a thinking response to the experience of suffering, and one understand when one reads his book that he is also speaking out of his own experience of suffering. This bestows upon his last work a tinge of sadness, especially for those who know him personally, but which renders it all the more poignant. Yet Gary Madison is not one to dwell on his own suffering: pain and suffering are spared to no one, he recalls, they are part of the *conditio humana*, and he rightly derides our culture of “crybabies” that endlessly complains of its endless but often imaginary ills, which it attempts to alleviate through all sorts of pharmaceutical means. (OS, 316f.) This self-pity is not the suffering philosophy has to address according to him. The truly human suffering is the one we face when confronted with our mortality, the brevity of human life and the disappearance as well as suffering of our loved ones (and yes, this can include dogs).

So what are we to do in light of this fundamental suffering of our nature? Gary Madison has courageous answers to provide, even if they are at the same time very ancient, since he relies heavily on the Ancient tradition of philosophy as *consolatio*. The first lesson (and by no means the last) he learns is from the Stoics, that of serene and willing acceptance: we have to recognize that our life situation is one of suffering, that we are mortals and only here for a ridiculously short time. This puts in perspective our other petty preoccupations, worries, and pseudo-sufferings. But this acceptance should not take on the form of resignation, as it too often did for the Stoics—the Stoics, he pointedly writes, are too stoic! (OS, 149) The acceptance of our fate should instead lead us to a renewed awareness of our condition and openness to the mystery of Being. This is a notion that Gary Madison takes up less from Heidegger than from Gabriel Marcel, who was also very important for Paul Ricoeur. What is a mystery? It is not a “problem” which can be solved by rational or mathematical means, it is an open question of which we are part, as Augustine emphasized (*quaestio mihi factus sum [I have become a question to myself]*). Gary Madison’s approach recalls, with Marcel and Merleau-Ponty, that we can only “know” ourselves as a mystery for which there are no easy solutions, and which can only be explored meditatively. This meditation is of course philosophy and this is why the Ancients, as does

Gary Madison, held it in such high esteem. It is the thinking answer to the mystery of life and thus the way to wisdom and happiness.

Gary Madison discounts with good reason what he calls the “Hollywood view of happiness” (OS, 11), “the life of the thrill-seeker and the pleasure-seeking lotus-eater.” Happiness, the Ancients knew, has to do with *phronesis* and our outlook on the mystery of life in light of the suffering that we cannot avoid, but which has to be rediscovered as the *via regia* to grasp and appreciate the meaning of life. Gary Madison is one of the rare and brave philosophers to reflect on this basic issue of the meaning of life. His basic answer is profound: “to inquire, patiently and persistently, into what the meaning of life might be is, in fact, the true meaning of life.” (OS, 113) Renewing this insight helps philosophy to realize that it is indeed the love of wisdom and not wisdom itself. Beware those who claim to know the truth, Gary Madison constantly warns us.

In the unending quest of wisdom impressed upon us by the mystery of being, Gary Madison magnificently heralds the experience of wonder, but also that of cheerful humor and irony (at which he is himself a master!). How can we take ourselves too seriously knowing how insignificant we are in the grand scheme of things? But at the same time, how can we not be amazed by the marvel of marvels that the world is and that we are part of it? We should thus learn to be grateful for this breath-taking gift of life instead of bemoaning endlessly our many false micro-problems. The wonderment at the mystery of life doesn’t lead to despair or anguish, but to the forgotten virtue of gratitude for having the chance to exist and for what Gary Madison calls, as a matter of course, “the glory of God’s creation.” (OS, 143, 233ff.) In his very personal book, he has no qualms whatsoever about speaking openly about the religious experience of life, and even that of prayer (OS, 289), which gives multifold expression to this gratitude. He even endorses without further ado the anthropic principle, *i.e.* “the idea that the universe was from the outset finely-tuned in such a way as to allow for the development of intelligent life,” boldly rejecting the “lazy” view, as he terms it, that the world sprang up out of happenstance as “vacuous” and “a favorite ploy ever since the Greek Atomists.” (OS, 137) The universe should rather be seen and celebrated as a “wondrous arrangement or poiesis of divine hieroglyphics.” (OS, 234) One can thus read this book as the *Confessions* of Gary Madison, but also as his *Itinerarium mentis in Deum* (the journey of the mind to God), given his debt to Bonaventure and his

Platonic view of the universe as a *vestigium Dei* (trace of God).<sup>5</sup> The author should be commended for his courage as well as his most refreshing candour.

But he remains a philosopher, a phenomenologist and hermeneut, and he is well aware that a religious outlook offers no certitude in the scientific sense of the term. A confession as an affirmation or proclamation (*confiteor*) of one's faith is not a demonstration or a scientific proof. But it is nevertheless a hope without which humans can hardly live. In this he agrees with the notion expressed by our common master Gadamer in the last years of his life that man cannot live without hope. According to Gary Madison, it is this notion of hope that was missing in the Stoic and Pyrrhonist authors he is so fond of quoting. It is the merit of Judaism and Christianity to have developed it.

Gary Madison's hope is that human suffering is not entirely meaningless (a *passion inutile*, according to Sartre). It is also this hope that was at the root of Ancient metaphysics and of which Plato so eloquently spoke in his *Phaedo* (*megalè elpis*, 114c), where Socrates explained that he could not but believe that the sensible world was penetrated by an overriding and mysterious rationality, however difficult it is for us mortals to grasp it, we that are comprehended by it. This is why my only, very tiny difference with Gary Madison—and it is probably only a *Wortstreit, une querelle de mots*—would be about metaphysics, the convenient bugbear of so many phenomenologists and positivists alike. Throughout his book he shows that he is the inheritor of phenomenology's allergy to metaphysical reflection. This hostility rests on the Kantian identification of metaphysics with groundless speculation.<sup>6</sup> But who says that metaphysics is groundless? As Plato and Aristotle argued (indeed!) the idea of an ultimate reason can rely on the experience of beauty, wonder (a Madisonian virtue, if there is one) and finality we cannot but witness when confronted with the mystery of being. Even if Kant dismissed metaphysical speculation, he engaged in it with passion: not only did he publish a *Metaphysics of morals and of nature*, he founded the metaphysical hopes of humankind (and thus the answer to the question

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<sup>5</sup> Indeed the divine signature in the world is so obvious to Gary Madison that he finds the "metaphysical question as to whether a 'supernatural' entity called 'God' exists somewhere 'out there'" "irrelevant and of no importance." "Rather than asking if God exists," he argues, "one could just as well ask how God could possibly not exist." (OS, 289) In both instances however, as I will argue, one is willy-nilly engaging in metaphysics. Not necessarily a bad thing for a philosopher.

<sup>6</sup> See for example, OS, 86, 103, 128, 152ff.

“what may I hope”?) on the finality of practical reason. Gary Madison does something similar. To be sure, any reader of his great books is familiar with his rants about idle “metaphysical follies,” against which phenomenology would guard us, but when he accepts as at least credible the anthropic principle and reflects so penetratingly on the meaning of human life, buttressed by the beauty of the world, he testifies to the inescapability of metaphysical reflection<sup>7</sup> and practices it with the passion for which he is rightly famous. It is true, as Descartes (himself a great metaphysician) said, that one should not devote more than a few hours a day to metaphysics (we cannot think for very long, Aristotle also said), but to avoid it completely or to claim that one could do so in the quest for wisdom, is not possible either, especially if one wishes, in the wake of Gary Madison’s masterpiece, to lead “a meaningful, harmonious life, a life open to the Transcendent, the joy of living, and the mystery of Being.” (OS, 168) I am not sure I can convince Gary Madison that it is a splendid metaphysics he is unfolding, or relying on, but most of all I would like to express my “delight and gratitude for having had the marvelous chance of knowing that person’s love and friendship.” (OS, 143) All the best, Gary, for your admirable *cursum et merci pour tout*.

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<sup>7</sup> On the inescapability of metaphysics, see my recent *Du sens des choses. L'idée de la métaphysique* (Paris: PUF, 2013).