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**Acquiescence and Salvation: Colin McDougall's *Execution* and Existential Postwar
Canadian Literature**

A Thesis
in
The Department
of
English

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ABSTRACT

Acquiescence and Salvation: Colin McDougall's *Execution* and Existential Postwar Canadian Literature

Zachary Abram

Since winning the 1958 Governor General's award, Colin McDougall's only novel, *Execution*, has been critically neglected despite the richness of a text that provides ample critical avenues into postwar Canadian literature. This thesis, "Acquiescence and Salvation," will revitalize critical interest in McDougall, an overlooked but deserving Montreal writer, and place his work into the larger context of postwar Canadian literature. In addition, this thesis will examine the complicated relationship the novel has to existentialism, especially as it relates to trauma and how one makes meaning out of experience. McDougall's characterization and explicit allusions to existential writers like Franz Kafka indicate that *Execution* is an existential meditation as well as a war novel. However, this interpretation of *Execution* is complicated by the Christian allegory at its end, which seems out of place in an existential text. The thesis will explore the themes of sacrifice, responsibility, experience and existentialism in the primary text in concert with the writings of Sartre, Conrad, Camus, and Kafka in order to understand the postwar existential context inhabited by McDougall. Søren Kierkegaard's *Fear and Trembling* will be especially important to the thesis since *Execution* synthesizes its distinct Christian existentialism into novel form.

Acknowledgement

This thesis is dedicated to the over 76 000 Canadians who served in the Italian campaign of World War Two. *Amo, Amas, Amat.*

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Introduction:

Since winning the 1958 Governor General's Award, Colin McDougall's only novel, *Execution*, has been critically neglected despite the richness of a text that provides ample critical avenues into postwar Canadian literature. This thesis, "Acquiescence and Salvation," seeks to revitalize critical interest in McDougall, an overlooked but deserving Montreal writer, and place his work into the larger context of postwar Canadian literature. In addition, the thesis will examine the complicated relationship the novel has to existentialism, especially as it relates to trauma and how the individual makes meaning out of experience. McDougall's characterization and explicit allusions to such existential writers as Franz Kafka indicate that *Execution* is an existential meditation as well as a war novel. However, this interpretation of *Execution* is complicated by the Christian allegory at its end, which seems out of place in an existential text. The thesis will explore the themes of sacrifice, responsibility, experience and existentialism in the primary text in concert with the writings of Sartre, Conrad, Camus, and Kafka in order to understand the postwar existential context inhabited by McDougall. Søren Kierkegaard's *Fear and Trembling* will be especially important to the thesis since *Execution* synthesizes its distinct Christian existentialism into novel form.

The novel itself tells the story of a group of young Canadian soldiers during the Italian Campaign of the Second World War. The novel is book ended by two executions. Met with only minimal resistance from the Italian army, the Canadian 2nd Rifles take on two harmless Italian deserters, nicknamed Big Jim and Little Joe, to cook for the Canadian soldiers despite the orders of the platoon's commanding officer, Brigadier

Kildare, that all deserters be shot on sight. When he discovers this insubordination, Kildare orders that the men be executed. The novel's main characters, John Adam and Padre Doorn, have to, in the words of another character, "acquiesce" to the execution. This act prompts both men to question their ontology as they question the ethics of warfare, personal responsibility, Christianity and the very nature of execution. Lieutenant Adam gives himself over to efficiency and competence but is unable to fill the "aching emptiness inside himself" (McDougall 49). Padre Doorn slips further into madness and becomes obsessed with finding pieces of the True Cross in an attempt to return to Christianity. Eventually, a member of the Company, the mentally handicapped but good-hearted Jones is arrested as the scapegoat for the murder of an American soldier and is sentenced to death due to political pressure. Adam and Doorn see this as an opportunity to redeem themselves for the crime of killing the two Italian deserters. Tragically, their attempts to free Jonesy are thwarted by Kildare and Jonesy is executed by his own men. However, in the logic of the novel, this execution somehow atones for the first and moral order is restored.

The essential background resources to this thesis were McDougall's private journals and letters housed in the McGill Rare Book and Special Collections. They provide a wealth of material and unfiltered insight into McDougall's novel writing process. McDougall kept astonishingly detailed notes on plot, character development, and historical accuracy. The journals, which he called "A running record of the battle to produce," reveal a profoundly insecure writer (McDougall 09/04/53). McDougall's journal entries vacillate between the ecstasy and excitement of writing his story of Canadians at war – "Last night, the realization of genius!" (23/08/53) – and the crushing

agony of not being able to synthesize his ideas into novel form: “I must want to do the book or it will never get done” (01/19/56). McDougall’s dual persona in the journal reveals a great deal about *Execution* and the trouble of writing war fiction in general. Eventually, McDougall resigns himself to the despair associated with a sincere attempt to depict men at war accurately: “It points how primitive and universal this work should be, a work of man’s agony and triumph. The realization also that those who live contented, useful lives have long since decided that matter insoluble and dismissed it from their consciousness” (09/04/53). However, McDougall is unable to dismiss these existential questions from his conscience due to his personal experience.

McDougall himself served with Princess Patricia’s Canadian Light Infantry in the Italian Campaign and was awarded the Distinguished Service Order for his service. However, the dashing and heroic McDougall of the Italian campaign is replaced by a hesitant and tortured writer with a compulsion to write his story and represent the unrepresentable. McDougall writes that he decided to keep a journal on the writing of *Execution*, in order to “combat laziness, lack of confidence and despair” (09/04/53). However, the journal, which spans nearly six years, ends up providing a clear glimpse into the fractured psyche and pain required to complete a war novel inspired by personal experience. The journal reveals what a difficult and sometimes dark process it was for McDougall.

Chapter One focuses on McDougall’s process in writing *Execution*. It is particularly concerned with what can be gleaned from McDougall’s detailed and, at times, transparent diary. He approached writing with a near compulsive level of organization. Despite all of his efforts to remain on track, *Execution* was still immensely

difficult for him to complete and sapped him of the desire to continue writing.

McDougall never wrote another novel and except for a fairly standard article on Canadians at Vimy Ridge, never wrote again. This chapter will interrogate what can be revealed about *Execution*'s themes in McDougall's personal papers. In his journal, he discusses the desire to avoid writing a novel about the "indictment of man" over "man's victory and triumph," an attitude consistent with the redemptive nature of literature of the Second World War (26/03/53). The personal papers also feature many artifacts, several drafts of *Execution* and letters of congratulations and encouragement from Farley Mowat, Hugh MacLennan and, even more impressively Saul Bellow and Vera Brittain. The influence of MacLennan, himself a giant of the Canadian war novel and *Execution*'s first editor, will also be of interest to this chapter. For a greater sense of context, McDougall's few other works of fiction, including the short story "The Firing Squad" on which *Execution* is based, will also be discussed.

Chapter Two examines the influence of existentialism on *Execution*. Of particular importance is Kierkegaard's writing on Christian existentialism. Both men attempt to make a place for a transcendental force like God in a world where it is increasingly difficult to do so. However, McDougall explicitly and implicitly references works by other decidedly non-Christian existential writers. This chapter examines this complexity. However, the true intertextual complexity of the novel lies with its problematic Christian ending which seems out of line with the novel's existential underpinning.

It is important to note that existentialism is not a uniform school of thought. It is a prevalent misconception that existentialism is wholly atheist. Existential scholar Walter Kaufmann argues that existentialism is not a philosophy at all, "but a label for several

widely different revolts against traditional philosophy... Existentialism is not a school of thought nor reducible to any set of tenets” (11). Therefore, the contrarian nature of existentialism means that many opposing worldviews can exist under the same umbrella. For instance, the character of Merseault in Albert Camus’s *The Stranger*, a man bereft of remorse or affect, would be out of place in a novel like *Execution*, where nearly every character is imbued with humanity and empathy. It would be hard to reconcile Sartre’s declaration in *No Exit* that “Hell is other people” with McDougall’s representation of his characters as fundamentally good (Sartre 61). Reconciling these two seemingly opposing views that both inhabit the space under existentialism’s wide umbrella is an essential aspect of this project’s theoretical framework. The philosophy of *Execution* is more closely related to existential precursors like Søren Kierkegaard, “a dedicated Christian” (Kaufmann 11). When read in the context of Søren Kierkegaard’s *Fear and Trembling*, the didactic nature of *Execution* becomes clear. *Execution* personifies the Kierkegaardian paradigm of Christian existentialism, a school of thought that predates the atheistic existentialism that has become the orthodoxy. *Execution* synthesizes the major premises of Kierkegaard’s Christian existentialism in an attempt to make meaning out of the chaos of the Canadian campaign in Italy. He does this through his characterization of Padre Doorn and his quest for the True Cross and his representations of the execution of Jones which takes on both New and Old Testament significance. Finally, his didacticism is further exemplified by Major Bunny Bazin, the novel’s most obvious existential character and authorial stand-in.

Chapter Three situates *Execution* in a postwar context and attempts to explain how such a worthy novel can fall through the critical cracks into obscurity. The novel is

not only neglected by critics but by the general reading public despite authors like Farley Mowat, Timothy Findley, Michael Ondaatje, and Pierre Berton whose sustained success in the public sphere indicates a ready and available audience for novels about war. This undertaking required research into the workings of Canadian canonicity. The research led to a vision of the Canadian canon as an ideological institution which adheres to a strict narrative of Canadian literature that privileges a certain type of Canadian cultural nationalism. Canadian canon formation can be attributed largely to a single period and a group of supposedly homogenous actors; Canadian academics of the 1960s who sought to bring “order” and coherence to the narrative of Canadian literature. This desire for unity could explain why *Execution* has been so neglected despite its initial success. Also, McDougall is often unfairly lumped in with writers from an earlier generation like Hugh MacLennan or Ralph Connor. A certain prejudice seems to have emerged in Canadian criticism, spurred on by critics like Linda Hutcheon and Evelyn Cobley, toward war novels that do not fit into a postmodern or post-structuralist paradigm. This prejudice is also the legacy of a very specific critical epoch. This attitude has left worthy writers like Colin McDougall in their own existential No Man’s Land. The following analysis seeks to help correct this oversight.

Chapter One:

The Terrible Touch: Colin McDougall's Process in Writing *Execution* as Revealed by his Private Journals and Correspondences.

Written concurrently with *Execution*, Colin McDougall's diary spans the five to six year time period it took McDougall to complete the novel. Described initially as "a running record of the battle to produce," the journal transforms into a vehicle for McDougall's fears, insecurities and everyday neuroses (16/05/53). Often, McDougall prods himself further with strained encouragement like, "It is necessary to retain confidence, courage, and desire" or simply "must force and compel self on" (09/04/53, 28/04/53). However, McDougall is very hard on himself in the diary as well which sometimes resulted in pained resignation or outright anger at his inability to express what he wanted to about war, scrawling on the page: "Balls! This is petty" (22/04/53). The unpredictable nature of McDougall's entries is in sharp contrast with the diary itself which is organized with military precision. The twin impulse in McDougall to encourage and deride his own writing comes to an interesting and maddening climax when between the late 1954 and early 1956 McDougall stops writing in the journal altogether without explanation. This chapter looks to use McDougall's journal as a window into the process of writing a war novel from a place of trauma. The journal is invaluable for illuminating some of the more complex elements of the novel by explaining particular images, references, and allusions. McDougall's journal ties *Execution* to a particular movement in Canadian postwar literature which, unlike its Great War predecessors, allows for redemption in the face of war's inhumanity. Also, the personal correspondence and letters

McDougall received from members of the international writing community gesture towards important critical and interpretive avenues into the novel, including its connection to Hannah Arendt's concept of the *banality of evil*. Any examination of *Execution* benefits from rigorous critical engagement with his personal papers.

Colin McDougall was born in Montreal in 1917 and, except for his deployment in Italy during the Second World War, lived there for his entire life. Achieving his B.A. from McGill University in 1940, McDougall enrolled in the Princess Patricia's Canadian Light Infantry. While overseas, Major Colin McDougall excelled as a soldier and was recommended for a Distinguished Service Order three times, winning it in 1945 after a strong recommendation from his men; the recommendation for the DSO describes McDougall's heroism this way: "This officer has twice before been recommended for gallantry in operations. He has proved at all times to be a most dashing and fearless officer of great skill and determination. This has been a real inspiration as example to his men, and largely responsible for the success of his company" (Recommendations for Honours and Awards (Army), National Archives 19/01/45). Clearly, his experience in the Canadian campaign in Italy would provide the inspiration for *Execution* in addition to shaping and informing his point of view of the world. After returning to Canada, McDougall took a position at his Alma Mater, McGill University, which would be his place of employment for the rest of his adult life, serving as counselor, registrar and secretary general. His continuing relationship with McGill explains why his journal and personal correspondences are housed in the McGill Rare Books Special Collections Department. *Execution* was his only novel but he did publish several short stories in *Maclean's* and *New Liberty* magazine. One short story, "The Firing Squad." won the

Maclean's fiction contest, the President's Medal from the University of Western Ontario and would provided the basis for *Execution*. The novel was published in 1958 to great acclaim, winning the Governor General's Award.

McDougall received great encouragement from his literary contemporaries including Gregory Clark who wrote, "I cannot help but remind you that trying to put War into a book, as Tolstoy and many another found out, is close to impossible. How then, in 227 pages you have effected the epic and tragic sense I cannot for the life of me figure out" (24/10/58). Farley Mowat heaped the most praise on *Execution*, writing "I am not sure whether to curse or bless [McDougall]" because *Execution* caused him to "suffer from an emotion which is a rarity with me – jealousy of another writer. It is, however, the right kind of jealousy. I simply wish to heaven that I had written the book... *Execution* is the closest approximation of the matter I have encountered" (29/01/60). Citing his own desire to write a war novel, Mowat lamented that "Execution probably makes the novel which has haunted me superfluous – so in a sense you have freed me from my incubus. On the other hand I shall miss my devil" (29/01/60). It was also well received internationally, garnering praise from one of Great Britain's most famous war writers, Vera Brittain, and fellow Quebecer and future Nobel laureate Saul Bellow. Fellow war novelist and personal friend Hugh MacLennan, who served as the de-facto editor of the early drafts of *Execution*, praised the novel as well but like many other readers of *Execution* looked to the future: "Your difficulty, of course it is every writer's difficulty will be with the books you write after this. I'll be fascinated to know what they will be like" (MacLennan 06/10/58). The prolific MacLennan never got to read McDougall's second attempt at a novel because other than a rather pedestrian article on Canadians at

Vimy Ridge, Colin McDougall never wrote for publication again. Despite awards, accolades, and acclaim McDougall would never complete or, according to the available evidence, attempt a second novel. McDougall's journal reveals a possible explanation for his literary silence after the success of *Execution*.

McDougall's "running record of the battle to produce" was initially conceived of as a way to "combat laziness, lack of confidence and (despair)" (09/04/53). However, in the first entry of the journal, the despair McDougall was fighting had already slipped into his consciousness. He wrote, "The despair that came today in the dining room of the Faculty Club when the question rioted to my mind: 'But what can anyone say about man's plight, about life? It is deadening to think that even the greatest works can say so little. Is it worth trying to say anything?" (09/04/53). McDougall's battle to produce became, in the journal, a record of the despair he felt that initial time in the dining room. At first, McDougall rationalizes his despair and tries to see it as a positive for the writing process: "At least [the despair] points to how primitive and universal this work should be, a work of man's agony of triumph" (09/04/53). However, McDougall soon realizes this rationalization is an equivocation and shifts his point of view to one of resignation: "the realization also that those who live contented, useful lives have long since decided the matter insoluble and dismissed it from their immediate consciousness. Anyway, there is nothing to be gained by brooding on the metaphysics of the thing" (09/04/53). The rest of the journal entries reveal this statement to be false resignation. McDougall is never able to shake the despair that causes him to question what one writer can ultimately say about the human condition.

Despite veering between confidence and despair, McDougall is quite clear and explicit about what he wants to achieve with *Execution*. According to the journal, *Execution* was only a working title, with *Amos*, *Amas*, *Amat* and *Men at War* considered as possible “serious titles” (15/05/53). However, from the very beginning through to the completion of the novel’s writing, the concept of execution and its double meaning was always the central theme of the novel that would eventually retain its working title to reflect its significance in the text. In the journal’s section on “Theme,” McDougall states this significance: “The execution is the execution of man. The execution is the evil of the story. In the background there is the daily ‘execution’ of the fighting soldiers; in the foreground this particular execution. This must be so if it is to be true to its title, to trust its unity and its circular storyline” (16/03/53). Yet, it is incongruous for a novel that purports to be about “execution,” in both its forms, as the central evil of war to restore moral order to the world of the novel through an execution. This apparent contradiction is reconciled in McDougall’s journal. It would quite easy to read *Execution* as a sharp indictment of war as an absurd endeavour that robs its participants of their innate humanity. For McDougall, his characters, despite what evil order they executed, are not bereft of humanity. This compassion for the soldiers is evident in the novel: “The trouble was that they *were* men, and being such, they were caught up in the strangling nets which man’s plight cast over them, they could not always act the way their goodness wanted them to” (McDougall 270). For McDougall, it was of the utmost importance that he maintained what he called his passion and compassion for execution and its consequences. He wrote, “Above all, each section must be imbued with my passion, and compassion about execution. My feeling should be a) Passion against execution b)

Compassion for those trapped by it, its victims” (18/03/56). McDougall’s compassion for the soldiers trapped by execution and the mechanisms of war is what keeps the anti-war message of *Execution* from slipping into an indictment of the soldiers or of humanity in general.

In the journal, McDougall expresses his worry that *Execution* might be perceived as an “indictment of man” and he takes measures to prevent such a misconception (27/03/56). For McDougall, the cathartic and unifying final execution of Jonesy does not contradict the central theme of the novel – the evil of execution. He writes that this ending is necessary to bring about change in the main characters of Adam and Padre Doorn: “The curse of the book what the final execution of Jones does to Adam and Padre. (It forces them to Victory, of course)” (19/07/53). McDougall never specifies what he means by “victory” but judging the end of the novel and the reactions of Doorn and Adam, victory is represented by the realization of communion with humanity and the recognition of execution as evil. This cathartic transformation is represented by Adam after the execution of Jonesy: “Today he felt himself to exist at the central suffering of all humanity. He was filled with a huge compassion and love and understanding for every man who had ever lived” (269). For Doorn, “Victory” allows him to return to Christianity after a crisis of faith prompted by several disappointments in the novel’s first two sections: “It seemed to Adam that the Padre looked younger. Why, he looks like a man of God again, Adam thought, one who has been away, and has at last returned” (263). McDougall laboured over the execution of Jones as the ending of the novel for months, unsure whether “Jones as victim would provide sufficient impact” (23/04/53). Originally, another character named Mitchell was to be the victim of the final execution. However,

well into the planning stages of *Execution*, McDougall still had not decided who would be the final victim of execution, the one that would lead the rest of the Canadian soldiers to the victory he envisioned. He wrote, “Big question for story: Who is executed? (And why? Of course)” (20/04/53). McDougall decided against using Mitchell: “At the moment the execution of Mitchell does not seem integral (necessary enough, and even seems contrived). If this can’t be overcome, a new ending will simply have to be devised” (23/04/53). The solution was to make young Jones the victim and the terrain upon which Adam and the Padre could make their way to victory.

The existential Major Bunny Bazin says, “Even recognizing execution as the evil may be victory of sorts; struggling against it may be the closest man ever comes to victory” (115). McDougall was unsure of this ending, worrying whether or not it “would be too strong, but perhaps too stark, without sufficient of Man’s victory and triumph. Still it is a ‘terrible’ touch” (26/05/56). Eventually, McDougall decided on this ending because “it provides the spark of unity I have found missing” (26/03/56). However, he continued to worry that such an ending would distract from the novel’s main focus; man’s victory in the face of execution, “re: the ending above – it is certainly appealing it provides unity etc. – and yet, be careful to avoid an ‘indictment of man’ rather than his victory” (27/03/56). Execution is the target of the novel, not the soldiers who are forced to carry it out. For these men, McDougall felt passion and compassion. However, execution as an abstraction is not the novel’s only target. McDougall does not spare his soldiers critique for acquiescing to a system they know to be absurd. It is the responsibility of the soldiers to make meaning out of the absurdity. The ability to do so is figured as victory. For some

of the soldiers in *Execution*, this victory is achieved through a principled stand against the killing of horses.

The desire to represent victory, as opposed to humanity's malevolence, was one of the central struggles in writing *Execution*. McDougall devoted a great deal of space in his journal to finding a unifying image that would represent his compassion for those who are trapped by the construct of execution. McDougall found it in a holdover from the First World War, horses. The novel begins with Krasnick's impassioned and ironic declaration, "Jesus... I ain't gonna shoot no *horses!*" (3). Krasnick, obviously, has no moral qualms about shooting the enemy but draws the line at killing horses. Krasnick's dilemma is clearly meant to draw attention to the absurd way in which humans draw distinctions about the act of taking a life. Yet, by the end of *Execution*, Krasnick's unwillingness to shoot at cavalry comes to represent a universalizing recognition of the plight of humanity. In the novel's final pages, Krasnick has been killed and his former machine gun runner, Ewart, asks Adam if he remembers how Krasnick refused to shoot horses; Adam responds, "Of course, none of us would" (271). McDougall writes in his initial character sketch of Adam that his name "signifies Man's plight" (15/07/53). Adam, an everyman by design, recognizes the universal condition of men at war and the innate humanity that connects them. The trepidation of all the soldiers over the killing of horses signifies this communion. Refusing to shoot the innocent is the last grasp of the soldiers at the humanity they know is inside them but is constantly in conflict with the evil of execution. Tellingly, it is the execution of two other innocents, Big Jim and Little Joe, that prompts the ontological crises of the main characters that dominates the novel from that point forward.

With his final sacrifice, which somehow atones for the sins of Canadian army in the early stages of *Execution*, the character of Jones takes on Christ-like significance. This allegorical representation of Jones is difficult to reconcile with the existential nature of *Execution* on the whole. The dichotomy will be addressed at length in the second chapter of this project. Despite this conflict, it is clear that McDougall meant for Jones to be read as a Christ figure. Near the end of the journal, after his prolonged hiatus from the novel, McDougall writes, "If Jones is to be 'Christ,' he must be planted and maintained as such throughout (from start)" (01/56). From the beginning of *Execution*, Jones is indeed marked for death. He is figured as a *tabula rasa*, willing to obey any order without thinking. His commanding officer Brigadier Ian Kildare believes that this marks him as a "damn fine soldier" (McDougall 21). However, it is plain to those who serve with him that this trusting, unthinking obedience is not the asset Kildare believes it to be. Warren Cariou argues that "it is patently clear to every other man in the battalion that Jones in anything but a fine soldier, precisely because he obeys every order unthinkingly. He cannot be trusted to think for himself at all, cannot evaluate the orders he is given, and thus he is vulnerable to manipulation by others" (274). The fact that Jones's mind "had simply not ripened at the same rate as his body; he retained the innocence of a child; he trusted everything in the world, and he would do anything he was told" accomplishes what McDougall wanted his characterization of Jones to do: to mark him for doom from the very beginning and open up a Christ parallel (20). In addition to the Jones-Christ allegory, McDougall's journal reveals a number of other, subtler biblical allusions in the text.

The names of characters often take on a symbolic, and specifically Christian significance. The most obvious example is Lieutenant Adam whose name “signifies man’s plight” (15/07/53). In the initial character sketch of Adam from the journal, he is described as “the centre sin” (27/05/53). In this sense, the world of *Execution* in the beginning is Eden, each soldier is sure of his place in the world and the righteousness of their mission, before the executions of the two Italians plunges those involved into Original Sin. Adam, Doorn, and others exist in the liminal space between Sin and Grace until they are saved by the Messianic sacrifice of Jones. The liminality of their being is best represented by Padre Doorn’s descent into madness following the killings in the Sicilian barnyard: “As for Padre Doorn, the man had simply become a graveyard ghoul” (49). For the entirety of the novel’s second section, Padre Doorn occupies a space in between life and death. He is referred to as a ghoul on several separate occasions. Colonel McNabb and the rest of the soldiers begin to resent him: “[Colonel McNabb] had grown to detest this ghoul of a Padre... Why, the man even looked like a ghoul, in that flapping trench coat, flopping around the company positions looking for corpses – happy only when he had a burial service to conduct” (66). The religious significance of the characters names extends beyond the soldiers.

On leave in Bari, Adam has an encounter with a prostitute named Elena who has a profound impact on him by insisting that he tell her that he loves her, “*Ti amo*,” before they have sex. Originally, Elena was to be named Gina but McDougall changed her name fairly early in the writing process. In his notes, McDougall simply wrote “Gina – Elena (Helena)” (15/07/53). The similarity of the names Elena and Helena reveals her allegorical significance. Helena of Constantinople was the mother of Emperor

Constantine the Great and is traditionally credited with recovering the relics of the True Cross, for which she was canonized as Saint Helena. Her son is best known for being the first Christian Roman Emperor. In *Execution*, it is Elena who wakes Adam out of the ontological self negation into which he had reverted after the first execution. Adam is described as thinking, “*Io ti amo...* He knew they meant something of immense significance; at this moment they were the only words in the world that mattered” (McDougall 102). Elena reminds Adam of the existence of love, in both the physical and Christian sense. Of course, the name Helena is also reminiscent of Helen of Troy of Homer’s war epic, *The Iliad*. However, if Helen of Troy had the power to launch a thousand ships and start war then Elena is her opposite. In the pretence of love, Elena shows Adam what is to be gained by abandoning war as an enterprise.

For a long time after the execution of Big Jim and Little Joe, Adam is haunted by a “sick, vulture fear” that he cannot shake. McDougall refers to this image in the journal, “Vulture fear must become symbol of Adam’s whole burden” (14/08/53). The vulture, a scavenger bird that traditionally symbolizes death, implies that Adam is dead, at least symbolically. The image recalls the biblical passage, “Wherever the corpse is, there the vultures will gather” (Matthew 24:28). After Adam’s symbolic death, he “had turned out to be a first rate company commander, the trouble was that he tried to fill the aching emptiness inside himself with competence” (McDougall 49). Adam dedicates himself to his work and his men after his Fall, but this cannot save him. The possibility of love in the form of Elena is what finally allows him to return to life. However, this does not happen entirely until Jones atones for the Original Sin of the killing of the Italian deserters by being executed himself. Yet, this execution is also described using the

language of love. Cariou argues that the final execution of Jones functions in much the same way as the performance of love between Elena and Adam in Bari. The final sacrifice is a “ceremonial performance Adam creates in order to transform the act of execution from the most vicious, pointless slaughter to something else - perhaps something humane and dignified, and perhaps sacramental” (Cariou 277). For Cariou, the execution of Jones mirrors that act of love in Bari: “The execution is really a ritual of love, in which *amo* becomes ammo, and Jones becomes a Christ-like figure who does not die in vain because the ceremony of his death enables the moral salvation of others” (277). It is not a surprise when, after Jones’s execution, Adam observes about the Canadian soldiers that “each of them was changed, in a sense, perhaps, restored to whatever they had been before Sicily” (McDougall 263). The “vulture fear” that had haunted Adam leaves him as well when he observes a “large bird, wings a-whirr, shot from its branch, and went speeding in a tight spiral to the top of the sky; it became a black dot, and then it disappeared. Adam lay watching and thinking” (270). Thanks to Elena and Jones, Adam and the rest of the soldiers are pushed to love, life, victory, and salvation.

Elena’s similarity to Helena of Constantinople is also significant considering her connection to the retrieval of the True Cross. According to legend, Helena was in charge of an excavation journey to Jerusalem to find the physical remnants of the True Cross, which by Christian tradition are believed to be from the actual literal cross upon which Christ was crucified. In Jerusalem, Helena discovered three different crosses, one used in the execution of Jesus and two others used to crucify Dismas and Gestas, two thieves. A miracle revealed which was the True Cross which Helena then brought back to

Constantinople. Helena's affiliation with the True Cross echoes the obsession of Padre Doorn to find pieces of the True Cross in the second book of *Execution*. In an attempt to atone for his own hypocrisy and restore righteousness to the Canadian mission in Italy, Padre Doorn becomes a zealot for the True Cross. As he approaches the chapel of St. Agatha, which he believes houses a portion of the True Cross, Padre Doorn appears to be in a sort of religious trance: "The Padre's eyes were on fire. His gaze at the gleaming reliquary was devouring, consuming, as though in glance he celebrated visual Mass" (McDougall 107). He is in this state because the chapel contains what he believes he needs to save himself and, indeed, all of Christianity, "That reliquary held doom and salvation, life and death - everything... Inside the case was the object marking the end of his search... He walked into the blaze of sacramental light" (107). However, Doorn's quest falls short when God fails to respond to his call to end execution even though he holds a piece of what he believes to be the True Cross: "No - there must be no more execution!" (145). It would take more than pieces of Helena's True Cross to stop the execution. Ironically, moral order would be restored by yet another execution.

The overtly Christian, optimistic, redemptive ending of *Execution* is indicative also of a shift in tone in Canadian literature of the Second World War, as compared to literature of the Great War. As compared to literature of the First World War, which was often characterized by outrage and cynicism, Canadian novels about the Second World War are, according to critic Dagmar Novak, "curiously detached" (95). Certainly, as is the case with *Execution*, novels of World War II do not lack passion or genuine anguish but there is a strong case to be made that they do not have the same violent outrage expressed by the likes of Charles Yale Harrison in his Great War novel, *Generals Die in*

Bed (1930). Harrison saw the Great War as the nullification of the individual: “Out on rest we behaved like human beings; here we are merely soldiers” (49). There is little possibility for redemption: “We do not know what day it is. We have lost count. It makes no difference whether it is Sunday or Monday. It is merely another day – a day on which one may die” (14). *Execution*, on the other hand, is congruous with a thematic trend in Canadian literature, that of the “little man” (96). The trope is named for another war novel written by a veteran who won the Governor General’s award, *Little Man* by G. Herbert Sallans. Like the “cannon fodder” of *Generals Die in Bed*, the soldiers of Canadian World War II fiction see themselves as insignificant “little men” trapped in a cycle of mechanized violence that they have no control over or method of escape. Novak writes that, in these novels, a “constant tension exists within the individual’s consciousness as he attempts to come to terms with his role as a soldier” (97). This tension results in an increasing isolation both from “the cause for which he is fighting and from his own moral identity” (97). This tension and moral ambiguity is what McDougall is trying to express in *Execution*. During a bout of writer’s block, McDougall records his objective in writing a novel of his own experience; he writes that he wants to “settle on all the unbearably sad, aching, tender things I want to say about war, men at war, and write them down” (11/04/53). For McDougall, his “little man” was Adam and he expresses, in the journal, a desire to understand his alienation, isolation, and psychology: “General feel reverts more to Adam’s viewpoint. Enter in Adam, be Adam, and then write (and plan) accordingly” (23/04/53). This tendency away from representing soldiers as a mass of “cannon fodder” or “pawns” and towards personal redemption and

individual suffering was prompted by an interwar change in military policy regarding the psychology of soldiers.

Military strategists in the First World War operated under the assumption that if a recruit was physically able bodied, he was fit to fight at the front (Novak 97). There was little consideration of mental fitness. The accepted term for Shell Shock or its variants was “the war neuroses” and was seen and treated as a sign of weakness or, worse, cowardice (Morton 56). There was a definite paradigm shift in the Second World War as psychological testing became integrated into the selection process for new recruits and enlisted men (Novak 97). In 1941, the Department of National Defence appointed two prominent Ontario psychologists, George Brock Chisholm and William Line, to oversee a new Directorate of Personnel Selection (97). An objective of the committee was to expand the qualifications for new recruits to include a psychological test. In a memorandum, Chisholm outlined the reasoning behind this integration: “the evaluation of personality and the testing, psychologically, of personnel entering into and already enlisted in the Canadian Army, with a view to guiding personnel into position for which they are best suited, as well as advising in the selecting of officers and other ranks to fill the varied types of Army appointments” (Copp and McAndrew 11). In a paper delivered to the American Psychiatric Association, Chisholm attempted to debunk the masculine myth that soldiers need only be able bodied: “Good mental health is essential for the good soldier... In order for this to be possible he must be relatively free of internal conflicts, guilts and fears which are not relevant to the military situation” (Novak 98). This revolutionary shift in policy had an untold impact on military selection and on the

national literature, helping to shift focus away from the horde to the individual “little man.”

This shift in tone and focus is evident in *Execution*, especially when it is read in concert with McDougall’s journal. The false connection between the physical fitness and competence of a soldier is personified in the character of Jones. Fit and obedient, though he may be, he is by no means the “damn fine soldier” Kildare considers him to be (McDougall 21). Alienation, accompanied by a compulsive quest to put an end to execution in all its form, turns Padre Doorn into a “graveyard ghoul” (49). It is clear that Doorn suffers from a sort of post-traumatic stress and eventually a nervous breakdown. In the journal’s character sketch of Doorn, McDougall describes his belief in God as “his dearest possession” (18/07/53). Doorn loves God implicitly and is sure of the righteousness of the war, but the mechanized ritual of senseless death in which he has been co-opted manifests itself in madness because of the “constant tension” within his “consciousness as he attempts to come to terms with his role as a soldier” (Novak 97).

John Adam, whose character is described in the journal as “semi-autobiographical,” senses a similar tension (17/04/53). In his initial character sketch, McDougall describes Adam as being “not yet formed... the story completes his character. He is searching for himself” (17/04/53). Like so many protagonists of Canadian World War II literature, his story is one of personal, psychological development and ultimately redemption. Adam is the “centre sin,” who “signifies man’s plight,” an everyman and the ultimate “little man.” After the first execution, Adam’s psychological state drifts into nihilism; life and the war become “a series of grayish nightmares through which he moves like an automaton” (McDougall 50). His illusions about war are shattered as well.

Adam realizes that although modern war may provide men with the opportunity to live at the extremity of experience and occasionally releases the heroic and compassionate in its participants, it is fundamentally a blasphemy against the human spirit: “execution is the ultimate injustice, the ultimate degradation of man” (115). However, his encounter with Elena in Bari reminds Adam that people have the ability to regain their psychological balance and help others regain it as well. In battle, when Adam hears the screams of an Italian woman whose husband and child have been killed, he responds by trying to mend her psychological condition by giving of himself in the same way he did with Elena, he shouts to her, “*Ti amo – Io ti amo*” (178). The wife and mother appreciates the gesture, “*Something happened in her eyes – there was some response or acknowledgement. Her body went limp, she stopped crying*” (178). Imbued with the ability to comprehend psychology and the nature of trauma, the “little men” of *Execution* are well on the road to redemption which is metaphorically referred to numerous times in McDougall’s journal as “the drive up north with calm of mind (catharsis)” (25/04/53).

In the journal, McDougall vacillates between the redemptive ending of *Execution* and a more traditionally uplifting one. In his original conception of the ending, the novel certainly loses its signature “terrible touch” (26/05/56). McDougall preferred a more traditional, happy ending for Jones: “New ending sounds better: Padre saves Jones by retracting his evidence. They drive up north together” (15/05/53). This potential ending would have robbed *Execution* of its more interesting, existential underpinnings. Also, without Jones’s sacrifice, the sins of the Canadian military in Italy are never absolved, and moral order is not restored to the novel. Jones’s final words before his execution are, “Please don’t worry about me. I am not afraid” (McDougall 259). In these words, Jones

provides what one critic calls “the vital pretense” by which those who witness his senseless and bureaucratic execution are able to achieve some sort of victory (Sutherland 28). Removing the execution of Jones also removes the only moment that comes close to approaching catharsis in the novel; as Novak writes, “For Adam and the Padre, Jonesy’s response to his execution acts as a catharsis... Jonesy’s love for them, as well as his own unexpected strength renews their own faith” (117). Thankfully, after his unexplained hiatus from writing *Execution* in between September 1954 and January 1956, McDougall returned to the task with renewed creative energy: “Tomorrow I will be 39. And it is all to be concluded before I am 40” (12/07/56). That may not have been the case but gone were any attempts to sanitize *Execution* through happy twist endings. The more existential ending of *Execution* differs interestingly from the short story from which *Execution* emerged, “The Firing Squad.”

In “The Firing Squad,” it is Jones again who stands to be executed. Like in *Execution*, Jones has unwittingly taken up with a band of deserters who murder a military policeman. Adam is present as well, this time as a soldier who “had cracked wide open; he had cried his fear and panic to the world; he had run screaming from the battle through the ranks of his white faced men” (McDougall “The Firing Squad” 28). In order to recoup his old status and manhood, Adam agrees to serve as Jones’s executioner. However, he is so touched by Jones’s natural innocence and naïveté that he cannot carry out his orders and execute Jones. At the end of “The Firing Squad,” Jonesy is alive and Adam is taken into custody. In *Execution*, Jones’s guilt is ambiguous; he did not commit the murder of which he is accused and his simple nature raises the question of his being responsible for his actions. In the final draft of *Execution*, no character is completely absolved of guilt or

responsibility – there is no doubt as to Adam’s participating or, as Bazin puts it, acquiescence to the killings of Big Jim and Little Joe and Jones certainly played a part in the murder of the American soldier. However, their ultimate responsibility is complicated by the machinery of war and death that surrounds them. The act of killing is no longer morally black and white; Lieutenant de Rougement, commander of the firing squad, presumably no stranger to killing ultimately cannot execute Jones: “Lieutenant de Rougement was seeing himself. For the first time in his life he was face to face with himself, and he discovered in that moment that he was not willing to pay the price for his passage home. After another few seconds he solved the problem, or had it solved for him, by fainting” (McDougall 261). Whether it is horses, prisoners, or soldiers, it is always an execution of one kind or another.

McDougall does not devote a great deal of space in the journal to the idea of style. He writes that he wants *Execution* to be “as tightly organized as a good short story” (16/05/53). What McDougall was reading at the time can be gleaned from scattered notes like “Remember F. Mowat!” or references to Evelyn Waugh’s *Men at Arms*, Tolstoy’s *War and Peace* or his admiration for William Faulkner. McDougall, however, does not mention the author to whom his style would most often be compared in contemporary reviews or his personal correspondences, Ernest Hemingway. In the *Sunderland Echo*, the reviewer writes how McDougall subverts the normal expectations of a war novel: “The reader goes to war with Evelyn Waugh only – suddenly, shockingly – to find himself in Hemingway country, and eventually on unrecognizable literary ground” (K.L). The reviewer accurately points to how McDougall, at every opportunity, questions and undermines the conventions and clichés of the war novel. This is particularly evident in

his characterization of Brigadier Ian Kildare whose name even evokes Waugh and his ilk. The reviewer writes, “There was never a more Waugh-like figure than Brigadier Ian Kildare... Yet, it is Kildare who, by ordering the men of one of his units to execute two Italian deserters ends the Waugh like phase and begins the moral disintegration of two of the main characters, Lt. John Adam and Padre Philip Doorn” (K.L.).

This reviewer was not the only one to notice the stylistic and thematic affinity between McDougall and Hemingway. *Execution*'s first reader, Hugh MacLennan, also remarked upon their similarities. However, there were subtle but important differences between the writers. In a letter to McDougall, MacLennan wrote that *Execution* differed from Hemingway in that it was a quintessential World War II novel: “The Somme, Verdun, and Passchendaele were so utterly monstrous that only blind rage emerged in the writers who handled them truly. Hemingway saw war only as a theatrical series of set pieces, and used it as a vehicle for his descriptive powers” (06/10/58). On the other hand, McDougall was, according to MacLennan, able to “penetrate all the way down to the sources of Original Sin in every human being” (06/10/58). MacLennan contrasted the way in which McDougall was able to keep his stylistic prowess from dominating the novel; he wrote, “Hemingway’s style sticks out all over the place. Yours is something one is entirely unconscious of. Yet description after description, phrase after phrase, stick like glue” (06/10/58). Perhaps, as MacLennan points out, McDougall was able to differentiate himself from other novelists that adopted Hemingway’s prose style due to his subtlety and the natural differences in writing from trauma about World War II and World War I. While World War I writing meant the sound and fury of Charles Yale Harrison and Ernest Hemingway, the literature of World War II allowed for the potential

redemption of the “little man” helplessly caught in war’s machinery on the terrain of “unrecognizable literary ground” (K.L.).

Saul Bellow wrote to McDougall in 1974, professing to have read the book in one sitting. Bellow enjoyed it so much because, as he wrote, *Execution* possessed “something essential under the surface, something of real power, a terrible question: How much execution puts out our human light? What can we endure?” (Bellow 05/01/74). The letters of praise McDougall received sheds some light on certain critical aspects of the novel. If Bellow saw *Execution* as an existential meditation on just how much execution the human spirit can take, Ralph Allen, editor of *Maclean’s* magazine, saw it as a straightforward adventure story: “Almost every night since I was six years old... I have read myself to sleep. Not more than a dozen times in those years have I read myself awake... *Execution* is a most exciting book” (Allen 31/10/58). Others saw the novel as a much deeper representation of concepts that would come to define war criticism in the coming decades. Everett C. Hughes saw *Execution* as sharing a certain kinship with or perhaps anticipating Hannah Arendt’s concept of *the banality of evil*. He wrote, “It is a hard book to bear, but one does bear it. One has some feelings of anger that come when reading the accounts of SS camps, but it is anger at not any one person, or any special group of people. It is consequently a harder kind of anger and dismay to deal with! Perhaps because the agents of injustice are not fanatics but are like any of us” (Hughes 14/06/65).

In her seminal book *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil*, Arendt coined the term the *banality of evil* in order to explain the indifferent, mechanized death that characterized the Holocaust. For Arendt, the Holocaust was certainly a “radical

evil” and a “massive moral failure” but what was more shocking was that the Final Solution depended on the “loyalty of virtually an entire nation to a regime that made its invention and operation of a ‘killing machine’ possible” (Bergen xi, 1-2). So bureaucratic was the killing that it verged on, in her words, *banality*. In her report on the trial of Nazi party member and so called “architect of the Holocaust” Adolf Eichmann, Arendt reports on the shock of those associated with the trial at Eichmann’s relative “normality” (25). Arendt writes, “Half a dozen psychiatrists had certified him as ‘normal’ – ‘More normal, at any rate, than I am after having examined him’ one of them was said to exclaim” (25). One psychiatrist even went as far to describe Eichmann as “not only normal but most desirable” (26). Eichmann was not insane and did not represent the traditional notion of evil. Eichmann was, according to Arendt, the “perfect ‘idealist,’ and had personal feelings and emotions, but he would never let them interfere with his actions if they came into conflict with the ‘idea’” (42) For Arendt, this meant that his actions in the name of an idea are even more unsettling because it points to the very nature of human morality. The horrors of the first half of the twentieth century could not be explained away by abstract concepts like evil or madness. Arendt’s concept of banal evil serves as a reconfiguration of Kant’s notion of “radical evil.” The banality of evil depends largely on continued acquiescence and execution.

Using terms like *banality* to describe the Holocaust was certainly controversial. However, Arendt’s use of the word *banal* did not refer to the genocide itself. Instead, Arendt’s work pointed to the very way in which individuals define themselves, as Arendt scholar Bernard Bergen writes: “Arendt had already invented a phrase whose foundation she had already laid in terms of the fragility of individuals thinking of themselves as

individuals” (xiv). For Arendt, the individual could be found in “the fragile banalities of who we think we are and what we think we are doing” (xv). This existential dichotomy is ever-present in *Execution*. However, in terms Arendt’s theory on the *banality of evil*, recognized by Everett Hughes, the main conflict of *Execution* rest on the line between who we think we are and who we actually are. Padre Doorn in the first section of *Execution* believes implicitly in the righteousness of the Canadian cause in Italy: “He believed he knew these men well: he was not being at all fanciful when he thought of them as crusaders” (McDougall 25). Padre is vastly different in the novel’s second section where he is described as a “graveyard ghoul” after witnessing the first execution. When the righteousness of the Canadian mission is revealed to be fictive, Doorn’s ontology is destroyed.

Adam’s reaction to the execution of the two Italian deserters also fits Arendt’s paradigm. The events in the Sicilian barnyard haunt Adam from that point until the end of novel. Adam has only one recourse: ontological self nullification. In the novel’s second section “More,” the reader sees the toll the double execution has had on him. Major Bunny Bazin notices that “Adam had turned out to be a first rate company commander, the trouble was that he tried to fill the aching emptiness inside himself with competence” (49). For some time, Adam takes solace in the banality of the violence that surrounds him. This suppression of moral engagement with one’s action is similar to Arendt’s theory on totalitarianism and its “peculiar moral obtuseness” (Bergen 4). Following Arendt’s theory, what is shocking and totalitarian about Adam’s concerted effort to avoid ethical introspection is not “the use of violence per se, not even on an unprecedented scale, but that ‘totalitarian indifference’ to moral considerations is actually based on a

reversal of all our legal and moral concepts, which ultimately rest on the commandment, 'Thou shalt not kill.' Against this, totalitarian 'morals' preaches openly that precept: 'Thou shalt kill!' (Friedrich 78). Eichmann, as an "idealist," does not engage with the ethical moral questions surrounding execution; he has no recourse but to be loyal to beliefs by performing his duty. Adam and Doorn, though they may try, cannot shake off their own morality in the name of an idea or totalitarian bureaucracy. Adam is ultimately snapped out of his ontological dead-space by Elena in Bari but McDougall represents for the reader, disturbingly, that there is a "reason and logic, however perverse, behind the terror and murder of totalitarian regimes that waits to be understood" (Bergen 4). *Execution* makes no real attempt to understand this totalitarian impulse. The novel focuses on the impact this impulse has on those who are asked to carry it out.

Like many writers who engaged with the horrors of the twentieth century, McDougall quibbled over the very language used to describe them. When Major Bazin tries to console Adam by saying that he "stood by and acquiesced to the execution," Adam responds in anger: "Acquiesced? Hell, I *killed* them!" (McDougall 115). In understanding such tragedy, words cannot help but fail. What significance can we assign these events if the suffering associated with them is so overwhelming that it clouds any understanding? For McDougall, there was clearly a glimmer of hope and optimism in the potential for redemption and personal regeneration. Or perhaps, as he indicates in his journal, he simply willed himself to believe this in order to have some semblance of a contented life: "those who lead useful, contented lives have long since decided the matter insoluble and dismissed it from their immediate consciousness" (09/04/53). Most twentieth century thinkers who, like McDougall, wrote from a place of trauma, they

cannot dismiss the sense of despair that comes with witnessing the *banality of evil*. It haunts them like Adam's vulture fear, except that for them there is no salvation through sacrifice. As Berel Lang points out, "The Nazi genocide against the Jews had none of the properties of a sacrifice except for its willful destruction: no intentionality on the part of those sacrificing, no sense of loss or of giving by those 'offering' the sacrifice, no evocation of a good to be redeemed by the act itself" (xxi). Or, as Elie Wiesel puts it, "the executioner killed for nothing, the victim died for nothing. No God ordered one to prepare the stake, nor the other to mount it" (Rosenfeld 35). At the end of *Execution*, Adam is overcome by a sense of communion with humanity: "Today, he possessed a slow, sad certainty of knowledge. The mystery of man and his plight lay revealed before him. He knew this because he *was* man. Today he felt himself to exist at the central suffering core of all humanity" (McDougall 269). This epiphany is brought on by sacrifice, specifically Jones's sacrifice. This redemptive, optimistic ending conflicts with the notions of Lang, Wiesel, and others who see the horrors of the twentieth century as unknowable. Certainly, the central suffering core of all humanity would be far too much for one man, even Adam, to bear.

In 1953, at the very beginning of the journal, after he resolves not to dwell on the metaphysics of his despair, McDougall wonders, "would every novel require the same time and consideration...? A sobering thought" (23/04/53). The laudatory review of *Execution* in the *Sunderland Echo* ends by saying, "we can only hope to see more of his work soon" (K.L.). McDougall, however, would never write another novel. He would barely produce anything after the success of *Execution*. Perhaps, he only ever had one story to tell. Or maybe, he could no longer justify his belief in redemption and salvation

through sacrifice. MacLennan observed about McDougall, "I marvel that you live as efficiently and calmly as you do with those not gone where you have been" (06/10/58). Perhaps McDougall got tired of trying to explain war to those who could not know. Vera Brittain, author of the famous autobiography *Testament of Youth* (1933) which chronicled her own experience in the First World War, wrote to McDougall that "the Second World War will go down to history as the last example of this comradeship and this heightened sense of living, and your book will have an enhanced value as one of the few war books that really convey it" (17/02/59). It is hard to believe that McDougall intended *Execution* to be a chronicle of the excitement of war. All we have of McDougall is *Execution*, "The Firing Squad," and some lesser short stories written for pay. However, given the trauma from which he was writing, any creative expression at all is an accomplishment. As the Italian writer Primo Levi wrote about his own difficulty representing the violence of the twentieth century, "This is an uncomfortable notion which I have gradually come to accept by reading what other survivors have written, including myself, when I re-read my writings after a lapse of years. We, the survivors, are not only a tiny but also an anomalous minority. We are those who, through prevarication, skill or luck, never touched bottom. Those who have, and who have seen the face of the Gorgon, did not return, or returned wordless" (Hobsbawm 1). McDougall was not struck wordless, but saying anything at all took all of him. After *Execution* wordlessness set in, in spite of his obvious promise and interest in writing more.

Chapter Two:

Sacrifice: Existentialism and Christian Existentialism in *Execution*

In Colin McDougall's *Execution*, Padre Doorn comes face to face with an existential realization. Walking onto the battlefield, "The Padre stood waiting, his gaze fixed on the sky, the True Cross thrust demandingly at heaven. The Padre stared unremittingly at the sky, waiting for the parley to open – and nothing happened. Nothing except air burst" (McDougall 145). McDougall's characterization and explicit allusions to existentialists like Franz Kafka indicates that *Execution* is, at its core, an existential novel. However, this interpretation of *Execution* is complicated by its ending. Typically, existentialism postulates that the absence of a transcendent force in the universe, such as God, results in absolute freedom because the individual is entirely responsible for their own actions (Warnock 55). It is the responsibility of the individual to create his or her own ethos outside of societal or religious constructs (55). Yet, *Execution* ends with the Christ-like sacrifice of the innocent Jonesy. Why does *Execution*, an existential novel seemingly marked by the absence of God, end with a de-facto crucifixion?

When read in the context of Søren Kierkegaard's *Fear and Trembling*, the didactic nature of *Execution* becomes clear. *Execution* personifies the Kierkegaardian paradigm of Christian Existentialism; a school of thought that predates the atheistic existentialism that has become the dominant strain of existentialism. This chapter will argue that *Execution* synthesizes the major premises of Kierkegaard's Christian existentialism in an attempt to make meaning out of the chaos of the Canadian campaign in Italy. He does this through his characterization of Padre Doorn and his quest for the

True Cross, and his representations of the execution of Jones which takes on both New and Old Testament significance. Finally, his didacticism is further brought to the fore by Major Bunny Bazin, the novel's most obvious existential character.

Execution poses serious questions about guilt and personal responsibility. These questions are best represented through the development of John Adam. Adam is described as possessing the qualities of a man from the very beginning. Padre Doorn remarks, "Like young John Adam now- in every respect John Adam was a man" (McDougall 10). Adam is shown to be a superior soldier and leader. However, his sense of individualism is deeply disturbed when he, in the words of Major Bazin, "acquiesce to the execution" of Big Jim and Little Joe (115). The events in the Sicilian barnyard haunt Adam from that point until the end of the novel. In the novel's second section, "More," the reader sees the toll the double execution has had on him which has manifested itself in a regression of sorts. Major Bunny Bazin notices that "Adam had turned out to be a first rate company commander, the trouble was that he tried to fill the aching emptiness inside himself with competence" (49). Disillusioned by the military system and bureaucracy he had once believed in, Adam embarks on the distinctly existential quest to create meaning and essence out of his experience, as only the individual can according to existential thought. Major Bazin makes this quest explicit when he remarks, "We are all searching for ourselves" (112). This quotation echoes the biblical passage that Kierkegaard took for the title of his treatise on Christian existentialism, "Wherefore, my beloved, as ye have always obeyed, not as in my presence only, but now much more in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling" (King James Bible, Philippians 2:12). It is the responsibility of every character in *Execution* to work out his

or her own salvation, a prospect that, in the fog of war, is impossible to do without fear and trembling.

In order to convey its impact on *Execution* it is important to understand the major premises of Kierkegaard's Christian Existentialism. Existentialism is sometimes described as humanity's search for meaning in a world without God (Wahl 5). However, this view is a modern one that emerged out of the French existentialist school of the 1940s and 1950s, characterized by Jean Paul Sartre, Albert Camus, and Simone de Beauvoir (32). It is much more difficult to establish a link between *Execution* and this school of thought than it is to see its similarities with the earlier work of Kierkegaard. This dichotomy is due to the profoundly complex and even contrarian nature of existentialism. Existential scholar Walter Kaufmann argues that existentialism is not a philosophy at all, "but a label for several widely different revolts against traditional philosophy... Existentialism is not a school of thought nor reducible to any set of tenets" (11). Therefore, the contrarian nature of existentialism means that many opposing worldviews can exist under the same umbrella. For instance, the character of Merseault in Albert Camus's *The Stranger*, a man bereft of remorse or affect, would be out of place in a novel like *Execution*, where every character is imbued with humanity and empathy with the exception of the unseen Germans. It would also be hard to reconcile Sartre's declaration in *No Exit* that "Hell is other people" with McDougall's representation of his characters as fundamentally good (Sartre 61). McDougall writes, in decidedly non-Sartreian terms, "The trouble was that they *were* men, and being such, they were caught up in the strangling nets which man's plight cast over them, they could not always act the way their goodness wanted them to" (270). The innately good nature of McDougall's

characters marks a decided departure from what has become the orthodox existentialism of Sartre, Camus, and Beauvoir. However, what exactly is this Christian existentialism espoused by Kierkegaard? The fundamental difference between Kierkegaard's existentialism and the now dominant form of existentialism is the inclusion of a transcendental force to the fundamental questions of selfhood, essence, experience and personal responsibility.

Kierkegaard's Christian existentialism relies heavily on three assumptions. First, that the universe is fundamentally paradoxical; the greatest paradox being the union of man and God in the figure of Christ. Second, Kierkegaard believed that a personal relationship with God was more important than any social or religious structure and that adherence to any social convention was essentially an aesthetic choice (Sontag 14). Third, Kierkegaard argues that people live on three plains of existence, the aesthetic (living for one's self), the ethical (living for others), and the religious (living for God) (*Fear and Trembling* 78). These three assumptions give way to the three major premises of Christian existentialism. The first being Kierkegaard's calling of the masses back to a more genuine form of Christianity. For Kierkegaard, the type of Christianity that existed in the decades following the crucifixion of Jesus Christ was the most pure and unadulterated time for the religion. However, by his own time, Kierkegaard believed that the New Testament concept of love had been perverted. The second premise equates God and Love. According to *Fear and Trembling*, the act of loving is approach to the divine. The final premise of Christian existentialism involves the undoing of evil acts. Evil acts can only be judged in the face of God; holding oneself up to Divine scrutiny is the only way to judge one's actions. This is a declaration for personal responsibility because the

choice for goodness can only be made by the individual. McDougall's *Execution* is illuminated when read in concert with the assumptions and premises of Kierkegaard's *Fear and Trembling*. In fact, McDougall reflects Kierkegaard's philosophy in novel form.

Kierkegaard's desire to see Christianity revert back to the decades immediately after Christ's crucifixion is evident in Padre Doorn's quest for pieces of the True Cross. At the outset of the novel, Padre Doorn firmly believes in the holy nature of war and that the Canadian soldiers he served with and had grown to love and respect were truly doing God's work. Padre Doorn says in the first book, "It was sacrilege to think that those strong young bodies, created in God's image, might be smashed or maimed, flung lifeless on a Sicilian beach. In the whites of their eyes tonight he had seen their closeness to God; these were dedicated men, these were crusaders" (McDougall 10). Obviously, Padre Doorn is unable to reconcile this early naïve vision of the war with the horrific scene he witnesses in the barnyard where these "crusaders" kill two innocents. This causes a crisis of faith for Padre Doorn but also, like Adam, a crisis of self as well. Major Bazin is the first to notice a change in the Padre: "As for Padre Doorn, the man had simply become a graveyard ghoul" (49). For the entirety of the novel's second section, Padre Doorn occupies a liminal space in between life and death. He is referred to as a ghoul on several separate occasions. Colonel McNabb and the rest of the soldiers begin to resent him: "[Colonel McNabb] had grown to detest this ghoul of a Padre... Why, the man even looked like a ghoul, in that flapping trench coat, flopping around the company positions looking for corpses – happy only when he had a burial service to conduct" (66). This morbid ghoul like figure contrasts sharply with the optimist of the beginning of the novel. He is forced to re-evaluate his entire ontology and this pushes him to the brink of

madness and his own existential moment. As a way of coping with what he witnessed in the barnyard, Padre Doorn sets out on a quest, accompanied by Jonesy, to find pieces of the True Cross.

McDougall uses Padre Doorn to represent the perversion of Christianity to serve war's purpose. War and violence are cloaked in the rhetoric of Christ. It takes the execution of Big Jim and Little Joe for Doorn to realize his own hypocrisy. Kierkegaard touches on the hypocrisy in the clerical profession in his text, *Attack Upon Christendom*. He writes, "For Christ's judgment is surely decisive, inopportune as it must seem to the clerical gang of swindlers who have taken forcible possession of the firm "Jesus Christ" and done a flourishing business under the name of Christianity" (117). Kierkegaard argues that establishment Christianity has perverted Christ's teaching to suit its own cause. Tellingly, chapter four of John Gates's analysis of Kierkegaard's Christianity is entitled "*Ministers are Hypocrites*," after Kierkegaard's common refrain (Gates 53). In his journals, Kierkegaard criticizes the clergy in several ways; he states quite plainly that "men enter the ministry with self seeking motives – motives that are far removed from seeking first the Kingdom of God" (55). He also claims that there was little sacrifice involved in the life of the average minister yet "the gospel he is required to proclaim is one of sacrifice and voluntary suffering... [The minister] makes a good living by preaching a gospel he doesn't practice" (55). He closes his attack upon the ministry by claiming that "the whole pattern of life in church and society obligates a minister to divided loyalties, and makes it impossible for him to find any honorable escape from the patent hypocrisies of his situation" (55). Major Bazin sums up ministers in a very Kierkegaardian way when describing Padre Doorn: "He is still a chaplain in good

standing – if there ever was such a thing” (152). Padre Doorn discovers he has no honourable escape from his own hypocrisies; he has preached a life of sacrifice and voluntary suffering to the soldiers in his care for selfish ideals of glory and empire. This realization strikes Doorn unexpectedly and wakes him from the ghoul-like state to which he had reverted: “The Padre was seized by an emotion he had not known for months. He felt pity; his soul began to ache and grieve with compassion. This human feeling forced his mind to voyage outside itself; for a moment it jostled his insanity aside; and he saw the plight and the end of plight of those he had once called friends” (McDougall 144). For Kierkegaard, the solution to these hypocrisies in the Church was to return to an earlier form of Christianity. Padre Doorn eventually draws the same conclusion.

To rectify his own hypocrisy, Padre Doorn becomes a zealot for the True Cross as the only way to restore his own faith and return Christianity to its former glory. As he approaches the chapel of St. Agatha, Padre Doorn appears to be in a sort of religious trance: “The Padre’s eyes were on fire. His gaze at the gleaming reliquary was devouring, consuming, as though in glance he celebrated visual Mass” (McDougall 107). He is in this state because the chapel contains what he believes he needs to save himself and, indeed, all of Christianity: “That reliquary held doom and salvation, life and death - everything... Inside the case was the object marking the end of his search... He walked into the blaze of sacramental light” (107). Yet, his mission accomplished, Doorn is still met with a suffocating nothingness as he thrusts the True Cross demandingly at the sky and God. This failure to restore moral order to the world devastates Padre Doorn: “The Padre’s right hand dropped, his gaze came to the horizontal, then below. The piece of the True Cross fell to the dirt at his feet. A moment later the Padre himself sagged to the

ground... Padre Doorn lay among the dead soldiers on the track, weeping” (145). It is no coincidence that Doorn brings Jonesy on his quest for the True Cross as Jonesy will figure prominently in the restoration of faith in Christianity for Doorn and others by the novel’s end. Unfortunately, Jonesy represents the final piece of the puzzle for Doorn to restore Christianity to its earlier, purer form. As he walks to the battlefield, the Padre makes an impassioned declaration: “No – there must be no more execution!” (144). However, this is not the case; there will be more execution. To meet the requirements of the Kierkegaardian view of Christian existentialism, another thing is required beyond the return to early Christianity signified by the True Cross – that final requirement is sacrifice.

When read allegorically, the sacrifice of Jonesy takes on both New and Old Testament significance. Most obviously, Jones stands in as a Christ figure that must die for the sins of the Canadian army in Italy. It is no coincidence that General Ian Kildare is ultimately responsible for both executions by ordering the first execution and acquiescing to the second due to political pressure. In the beginning of the novel, the braggart soldier Kildare seems to be the sole bastion of individuality with his personal charisma and Balmoral cap, which is strictly against regulation. However, Kildare is revealed to be an ambitious bureaucrat and a poor judge of character. He also becomes a de-facto Judas figure in the Christian allegory. In a Kierkegaardian sense, the braggart soldier Kildare represents life led on the aesthetic plain. After all, a major assumption of *Fear and Trembling* is that adherence to any social convention and self interest was essentially an aesthetic choice (Sontag 14). When he meets Jonesy, a man who aesthetically looks like the ideal soldier and does exactly as he is told, Kildare laughs and says, “See that? A

damn fine soldier” (McDougall 21). Warren Cariou points out Kildare’s false equation in the afterword to the New Canadian Library edition of *Execution*: “Jones is anything but a fine soldier, precisely because he obeys every order unthinkingly” (274). Jones’s total lack of self awareness means he is one of the only characters in the novel not suffering an existential crisis despite being in one of the most existential situations. Bazin’s allusions to Kafka recall the novel *The Trial*, which represents a situation scarily similar to Jones’s. In *The Trial*, Josef K., for reasons never revealed, is arrested and subjected to the judicial process for an unspecified crime. Eventually Josef K. laments, “You may object that this is not a trial at all; you are quite right, for it is only a trial if I recognize it as such” (Kafka 50). This quotation applies to this novel as well since it is not a trial or at least not one with any ethical substance; it is only “execution,” as Bazin would call it.

The Trial is not the only Kafka work with which *Execution* shares a philosophical kinship. Tellingly, McDougall explicitly alludes to Kafka’s short story “In the Penal Colony” through the character of Major Bazin. Realizing that due to his reputation as a cynic and a nihilist he is unlikely to advance much higher in military rank, Bazin takes a position as a military prison guard. Adam describes Bazin as being “grotesquely misemployed” in this endeavour. Bazin seems to agree with Adam as he describes the prison, in a letter to Adam, as being “purest Kafka” (McDougall 152). He continues: “To myself I call it *Der Strafekolonie* (sic), and I recognize, of course, that I am the principal prisoner... I have at last, you see, found my vocation in life: I am commandant of a Field Punishment Camp. I have a Sergeant descended from Captain Bligh, and an Adjutant straight out of Stendhal” (152). The reference to Kafka is particularly revelatory as it serves as another example of the connection between

Execution and Fear and Trembling. Kafka's "In the Penal Colony" is a story about the last use of an elaborate torture and execution device that carves a sentence onto the prisoner's arm before letting him die. The entire process takes twelve hours, half of which is devoted to a religious epiphany on the part of the prisoner. There are only four characters: The Officer, The Condemned, The Soldier and The Traveler. The device has fallen out of favour with the new Commandant of the penal colony who has banned the machine and its absolutist form of justice which always instantly found the accused guilty. In the case of The Condemned, he failed to salute the old Commandant's door hourly and was sentenced to death. Much like Jonesy at his own execution, he will not know reason he is being executed. The Officer, who like many of the characters in *The Trial* is a devoted but ultimately ignorant social operative, is nostalgic for the old brand of justice delivered by the machine and asks The Traveler to lobby the new Commandant to reverse his decision and reinstate the machine. When The Traveler refuses, The Officer replaces The Condemned in the machine with himself, with the words "Be Just" to be carved into his skin. However, the machine malfunctions and impales The Officer.

The Officer of "In the Penal Colony" represents what Kierkegaard would call life led on the aesthetic plain. The way in which The Officer describes the physical appearance of the machine clearly indicates that his affinity for it has as much to do with aesthetics as ideology. Danielle Allen writes: "The officer's gestures establish a context for judging his beloved Commandant's apparatus: it should be viewed, or read, as a work of art" (327). The technological allure and absolutism of the torture device overrides even the most basic forms of human decency. The Officer trusts it and obeys it implicitly. "In the Penal Colony" and *Execution* both synthesize the Kierkegaardian philosophy

espoused in *Fear and Trembling*. Both stories present characters who represent Kierkegaard's three plains of existence; the aesthetic, the ethical, and the religious. It is known, through his correspondence with Max Brod, that Kafka had read *Fear and Trembling* before having written "In the Penal Colony" (Heidsieck 135). Arnold Heidsieck writes: "Kafka felt that Kierkegaard's writing deepened his own understanding of ethical individualism" (134). So, it is certainly possible that some Kierkegaard's philosophy could be woven into Kafka's own work. Obviously, The Officer's devotion to the apparatus as a work of art indicates that he represents the aesthetic plain. In *Execution*, the aesthetic plain is represented by most of the characters before the first execution in the Sicilian barnyard. After the initial tragedy, the aesthetic plain comes to be represented by Ian Kildare, whose individualism is only skin deep and twice shows that he is not strong enough to make the ethical choice. Kierkegaard's second plain of existence, the ethical, is embodied by a "tragic hero." The tragic hero becomes so by forsaking individuality and moving towards "infinite resignation" (Daniel 87). The move of infinite resignation, concisely, is a shedding of all things held dear, coupled with a feeling of reconciliation with the suffering caused by that loss. It is an acquiescence to existence. By dismissing the torture apparatus, The Traveler makes the ethical choice for the greater universal good and assumes the role of tragic hero. John Adam assumes this role in *Execution*. He strips himself of his comforting assumptions about war and his ideology. His blind devotion to efficiency after the killing of Big Jim and Little Joe indicates the reconciliation and sense of loss for those things he held dear. He is brought back from the abyss to the realm of the ethical through the pretence of love with Elena in Bari. Of course, he makes the ethical choice by recognizing his own acquiescence and

comforting Jonesy in his final hours. Kierkegaard's third and highest plain of existence is a religious one, embodied by a Knight of Faith. This role is spread among several characters in Kafka's short story but it is represented most strongly by Padre Doorn in *Execution*. His chivalric quest for the True Cross is akin to the search for the Holy Grail. It represents not only a quest for an aesthetic object, but also a return to faith.

Kafka's Officer does not even have to "acquiesce" to execution because he believes it to "be just" every time. The Canadian troops in Italy do not have this luxury because they cannot fully give themselves over to the mechanisms of the military. The fact that they were executing an order is of little comfort to them as evidenced by the ontological crisis experienced by Adam and Doorn after they carry out their own execution of Big Jim and Little Joe. Bazin may be the Commandant of a prison but he is nothing like The Officer: "This *Strafekolonie*... is a minor beach-head of hell" (153). It is no coincidence that Brigadier Ian Kildare, like The Officer, another inhabitant of the aesthetic plain, is also the Area Commander of this new prison. Bazin recognizes the superficiality of Kildare's identity: "Jan Kildare, recovered from his wounds, and now apparently the darling of Canada since the newspapers told of his gallant charge to the bagpipes" (153). The reader knows that Kildare's heroism at the Hitler Line was pure performance. His bagpiper was not actually named Fergus, but a Jew named Cohen. He played the part of a Scot for Kildare: "Both men were actors. They had created a rare character role between: that of laird and gillie; and now Brigadier Kildare wanted to see if Fergus would play his part to the end" (137). Reading Bazin's letter, Adam wonders to himself, "What would happen to Jonesy in a Field Punishment Camp?" (153). Unfortunately, Adam does not have to wait long, thanks to men like Kildare, before

Jonesy must confront his own execution without knowing why; he asks Adam, “Sir, why are they going to shoot me?” (252). Kafka’s “In The Penal Colony” portrays the forming of a close relationship between The Soldier and The Condemned man he is meant to guard. A similar relationship forms between Jonesy and the Sergeant assigned to guard him. Again, the Sergeant is unable to reconcile the double meaning of execution with the nature of killing in war. He calls it “the sour incongruity of the thing. Up north, men were being killed every day; there life was regarded as precious; every effort was made to preserve each life – but back here this band of soldiers was assembled for the sole purpose of killing one of their number. Like all the others he could not help feeling it was wrong, in some basic, indefinable way” (226). However, Jones is executed by these men who object because men like Kildare and The Officer force them to adhere to the aesthetic plain of military convention and refuse to transition to the ethical or religious plain.

The scenes in the Field Punishment Camp and the double meaning of the word “execution” anticipate some of the concepts discussed in Michel Foucault’s history of the modern penal system, *Discipline and Punish*. The eighteenth century saw many reforms to how criminals were punished. For Foucault, these reforms were not motivated by the desire to make punishment more humane or a concern for the welfare of prisoners. Rather, the reformers of eighteenth century punishment wanted to change the dynamics of power and responsibility that were entrenched in the *discipline* of the time. In the pre-reform era, punishment and execution were directed at the prisoner’s body in a ritualistic and ceremonial way that established the authority and power of the King. As a secondary result, the King took responsibility and bore the burden and guilt of executions or

tortures; punishment “require[d] that the king take revenge for an affront to his very person. The right to punish, therefore, is an aspect of the sovereign’s right to make war on his enemies” (Foucault 48). The objective of the King’s punishment was “not so much to re-establish a balance as to bring into play, at its extreme point, the dissymmetry between the subject who has dared to violate the law and the all-powerful sovereign who displays his strength” (Foucault 48-49). With the birth of the new prison and modern justice, responsibility was spread out over a mass of people – such as a jury of peers. Therefore, the burden of responsibility for punitive justice falls onto the individual. This burden is evident after the double executions of the Italian deserters, ordered by Ian Kildare. Although the authority to order the execution comes from Kildare, he does not bear that burden the same way the King might have. As one contemporary review put it, “It is Kildare who orders the killing, It is Adam and Padre Doorn who feel the crushing responsibility for it” (K.L. 17/10/58).

At the Field Punishment Camp under Bazin’s command, the modern prison verges on the absurd. According to Foucault, discipline is a series of techniques by which the body can be controlled. Discipline coerces and controls an individual’s movements and their relationship to space and time. The new prison “was then being formed as a policy of coercions that act upon the body, a calculated manipulation of its elements, its gestures, its behaviour. The human body was entering a machinery of power that explores it, breaks it down and rearranges it” (Foucault 138). This level of coercive control is achieved through mechanisms like timetables, exercise, and military drills. In wartime, these methods of control take on an added level of irony. At Bazin’s *Strafekolonie*, Adam observes a prisoner/soldier forced to exercise and banned from looking another officer in

the eye: “A soldier came scurrying round a corner, weighted down with a bucket in each hand. He seemed close to the limit of exhaustion but the instant he caught sight of Adam and the jeep he spun himself round and jumped to quivering attention with his nose pressed flat to the stone wall” (McDougall 155). Adam recognizes that the same devotion to execution present in the mainstream military extends to its prison system. Both branches of the military apparatus seek to control and suppress the individual through rote repetition. Adam is unable to reconcile this view with his own sense of individualism and solicitude for the men in his command. He thinks: “Once you were there there was nothing the least amusing about a Field Punishment Camp. Most of the prisoners came from field units, and whatever they had done to merit their sentences one could not forget that they had first come to this alien country as volunteers” (156). This form of punishment does not take on the religious significance of Jones’s execution.

Jones’s ultimate sacrifice is congruous with the Kierkegaardian paradigm. Kierkegaard called for a return to the “early Christianity” of the decades immediately following Christ’s death on the cross. Padre Doorn’s attempts to find pieces of the True Cross fall short because the cross is just a hollow aesthetic gesture making the sacrifice of the innocent Jones necessary to restore Christianity to its early glory. As a result, *Execution*, a seemingly existential novel bereft of any transcendental force like God, restores moral order through a Christ-like sacrifice. As Kierkegaard could have predicted, the time immediately after the sacrifice of Jones is one of contemplation and restored faith. After Jones is killed Adam says, “I don’t know why but I feel alright now. And yet, I thought – I believed – when the execution was over everything would be over” (260). The death of Jones has changed something in Adam and restored his faith in humanity

after having to acquiesce to the execution of the two Italians in Sicily. Adam is described as being one with humanity: "Today he felt himself to exist at the central suffering of all humanity. He was filled with a huge compassion and love and understanding for every man who had ever lived" (269). Having failed to see Him on the battlefield with the True Cross, Padre Doorn even returns to God cured of the selfish hypocrisy that plagued him and, indeed, his entire profession early in the novel. His friend Adam notices the change in him first: "It seemed to Adam that the Padre looked younger. Why, he looks like a man of God again, Adam thought, one who has been away, and has at last returned" (263). This restoration of faith in God for Doorn and personal regeneration for Adam is the gift Jones has given them through sacrifice. In Kierkegaard's Christian existentialism, it is only sacrifice that can bring about the return to the "early Christianity" he so craves in *Fear and Trembling*. Book three of *Execution* synthesizes that desire.

The sacrifice of Jones also mirrors another biblical sacrifice besides the crucifixion of Christ which closely associates *Execution* with the work of Kierkegaard. *Fear and Trembling* examines four different retellings of the story of Abraham and Isaac. Jones could be interpreted as an Isaac figure in this reading and the descriptions of his golden hair and lamb-like features certainly indicate that this is a possibility. Kierkegaard uses his retellings of the story of Abraham and Isaac, in which God asks Isaac to kill his only son to prove his faith: "Take now your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love so greatly, and go to the land of Moriah, and there on a mountain that I will show you, offer him for a burnt-offering to me" (Genesis xxii: 1). However, an angel intervenes before Abraham is able to kill his son because he has proven his loyalty, and, unlike false idols, a Christian God does not want human sacrifice.

Kierkegaard uses the story of Abraham and Isaac in *Fear and Trembling* to examine the ethical and the religious aspects of sacrifice. Paradoxically, Kierkegaard makes the claim that, in deciding to kill his son for God, Abraham acted ethically wrong but religiously right. Abraham did not act under the belief that God must always be obeyed but rather under the assumption that God would not ask Abraham to do something unethical. Kierkegaard uses this tension between ethics and religion to argue for the “teleological suspension of the ethical” (41). This suspension is, in essence, a leap of faith. Kierkegaard argues that Abraham must sacrifice Isaac “for God’s sake, and (in complete identity with this) for his own sake” (41). For Kierkegaard, the individual must surpass the “universal” ethic. Existential scholar George Price writes that “what is at stake in the book is Abraham’s self, his struggle *to be*, to exist as the individual he knows he ought to be... His is therefore the paradigm for every individual who finds himself at the frontier of ethics” (192). Adam, Doorn, and the rest of the Canadian company in Italy find themselves on just such a frontier.

The teleological suspension of ethics is the crux of a great deal of war literature, including *Execution*. The thin line between killing and murder is at the heart of the existential crises experienced by many characters in war novels such as *Generals Die in Bed* by Charles Yale Harrison. When is killing another human being justified? *Execution* alludes to this difficult question from the very beginning with Krasnick’s impassioned declaration: “I ain’t gonna shoot no horses!” (McDougall 3). Krasnick does not express any ethical qualms about killing Germans but he draws the line at shooting horses. In other war novels, soldiers express a certain pleasure in the uniqueness of killing another human being. For instance, in the film adaptation of James Jones’s novel *The Thin Red*

Line, one character is near gleeful at the opportunity: “I did it. I killed a man. I did the worst thing you can ever do and no one can touch me for it” (Mallick). Certainly, Jones’s novel is a great deal more nihilistic than McDougall’s, as evidenced by the decidedly ironic dedication to *The Thin Red Line*: “This book is dedicated to those greatest and most heroic of all human endeavours WAR and WARFARE; may they never cease to give us the pleasure, excitement and adrenal stimulation that we need, or provide us with the heroes, the presidents and leaders, the monuments and museums which we erect in the name of PEACE” (Jones viii). Both novels, despite their difference in tone, rely heavily on the Kierkegaardian “suspension of the ethical” to make meaning out of the war experience. For McDougall, however, this suspension takes on the religious significance Kierkegaard imagined.

In one of Kierkegaard’s readings of the story of Abraham and Isaac, Abraham had enough faith to trust that God would not really make him kill his son, although he was prepared to do so: “And Abraham stretched forth his hand, and took the knife to slay his son” (Genesis 22). In *Execution*, the characters also have their faith tested. Padre Doorn has his religious faith tested while Adam’s faith in the structure of the military is also tested. Adam teleologically suspends his ethical code when he decides to give up his quest to free Jones in order to provide comfort to him in his final hours: “The first glimpse of Jonesy’s face had pulled him back to reality, and washed his mind of cooling drafts of reason. He saw that there was only one possible course of action: and that was to stay with Jonesy until the end, and envelop him with a cocoon of protection” (McDougall 251). Major Bazin says, “Perhaps it is man’s plight to acquiesce” (115). The entire concept of acquiescence in *Execution* directly reflects Kierkegaard’s concept of the leap

of faith. Bazin concludes that recognizing your own acquiescence is enough to save your soul: “even recognizing execution as the evil may be victory of sorts; struggling against it may be the closest man ever comes to victory” (115). Unlike with Isaac, no angel interferes on behalf of Jonesy. He must die because it is not enough, as Bazin argues, to simply recognize your own compromises. In the world of Kierkegaard and McDougall, a sacrifice is essential for a restoration of faith and regeneration.

An important concession that must be made is that there are no explicit references to Kierkegaard in *Execution* or in his private journals, but the philosophical outlook of both authors was fundamentally similar. However, there are intertextual references to other existential authors like Franz Kafka and Joseph Conrad. There is also an interesting kinship between McDougall and William Faulkner. It seems as though McDougall wanted to write the epic of Canada at war in the same way Faulkner wrote about the southern United States. The character of Jonesy is very similar to Faulkner’s Benjy in *The Sound and the Fury*. Both are mentally handicapped and both take on allegorical Christ-like significance. Benjy dies at the age of 33; the same age as Christ when he was crucified. The view of both authors on the nature of warfare also reveals a link between the two texts. Faulkner’s declaration in *The Sound and the Fury* that “No battle is ever won... They are not even fought. The field only reveals to man his own folly and despair, and victory is an illusion of philosophers and fools” mirrors McDougall’s reticent belief that everything is just execution (93).

Execution also shares existential thematic ties with Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*. The only way Adam is able to cope with the events in the Sicilian barnyard and escape his conscience is through efficiency. This devotion to competence is a deliberate negation

of self on the part of Adam. He simply does not attempt to make meaning out of his experience, preferring to plunge himself deeper into the abyss than to try to dig himself out. His decision to nullify his own objections to what surrounds him mirrors that of Conrad's protagonist, Marlow; when faced with the horrific reality of imperialism feels "the growing regrets, the longing to escape, the powerless disgust, the surrender, the hate" just like Adam after the barnyard executions (10). Like Adam, Marlow finds his salvation in a mindless commitment to work; he says: "Mind, none of us would feel exactly like this. What saves us is efficiency--the devotion to efficiency... They were conquerors, and for that you want only brute force--nothing to boast of, when you have it, since your strength is just an accident arising from the weakness of others" (10). In *Execution*, Adam's attempt to "fill the aching emptiness inside himself with nothing but efficiency" falls short of providing the solace he needs (McDougall 49).

In the cases of both Marlow and Adam, neither one is able to give himself fully over to "the horror" of nihilism like Kurtz or even Bazin because they are unable to negate their ontology entirely. As Dostoevsky phrases it in *The Brothers Karamazov*, "There is nothing more alluring to man than his freedom of conscience and nothing more tormenting either" (67). Marlow makes it to the edge of the abyss and peeps over before he is "permitted to draw back [his] hesitating foot" (Conrad 69). Like McDougall, Conrad was interested in representing what Arturo Follico called "the nihilism, the vacuity, the despair, and deathly mechanization and depersonification of the existing man in our time" (130). Conrad and McDougall are kindred spirits in that they both attempt to use fiction as a way to make meaning out of their own experience. Both authors represent the quest for selfhood in their fiction. *Execution*'s most Kurtzian figure is Major Bunny

Bazin. Bazin gives in to the madness around him by the “embracing of a profound and terrifying freedom of the kind Kurtz experienced once he had ‘kicked himself loose of the earth’” (Bohlmann 53). Both Kurtz and Bazin are so traumatized by their experience that both, in a sense, give in to the “darkness” and the freedom it allows. For Sartre, “it is necessary that we *make ourselves* what we are” (*Being and Nothingness* 59). Kurtz and Bazin do that by ostensibly removing themselves from the mechanisms of power that they see as subjugating them. Granted, Kurtz’s reaction is much more horrifying but both represent a break from the mechanized violence for which they feel complicit. For both characters, their ontological removal from the machinations of military life is a statement against and for individual responsibility. This break from the masses would be an important one for Kierkegaard, who wrote in his journals that “To battle against princes and popes is easy compared with struggling against the masses, the tyranny of equality” (502). Kurtz and Bazin create their own selves in the face of “the tyranny of equality” and what Nietzsche would call the “leveling of humanity” (358). As existential counterparts, Kurtz and Bazin attempt to make meaning out of experience by clinging to individualism and personal responsibility.

The parallels between *Execution* and *Fear and Trembling* and other existential texts indicate a clear kinship between the two works. When Adam meets Elena in Bari, the similarities between McDougall’s novel and Kierkegaard’s view of Christian existentialism becomes even more evident. After Adam reverts to a near child-like level of ethical curiosity, the next step in his existential journey is his sexual awakening. Adam repeats “*Io Ti amo*” to the prostitute Elena in order to prevent her from feeling like a commodity, but these words have a significant impact on him as well. He says, “It was

pretence, but he had given her something; and, oddly, he felt better at once as though he had also given something to himself” (McDougall 102). He continues, “*Io ti amo* ... He knew they meant something of immense significance; at this moment they were the only words in the world that mattered” (102). Essentially, his encounter with Elena shocks Adam out of the cycle of denial and efficiency that had become his way of life since the double execution in the Sicilian barnyard. This shock leads to an unprecedented period of introspection for Adam. McDougall describes his post-Elena state in this way: “There was only one difference in his state before and after Bari. Now he was aware of the emptiness inside him: and he knew that not all his competence, nor all his passion of concern for the men of his Company would ever suffice to fill it” (108). Certainly, Adam’s display in Bari is pure performance, the performance of love, but it has a profound impact on him. In this episode, McDougall represents Pascal’s formula for belief: “Kneel down, move your lips in prayer, and you will believe” (Althusser 114). Ideologies are lived, as much as they are known (Smith 129). By sincerely carrying out the performative ritual of love, it is able to have a genuine effect on Adam and Elena. Love insinuates itself into his identity through pretence and performance. Adam’s gift to Elena serves a third purpose by demonstrating the second premise of Kierkegaard’s Christian existentialism.

The key word in the exchange between Elena and Adam is “*amo*” – love. According to Kierkegaard, the act of loving was the closest any individual could get to the divine. He believed that modern ministers and Christianity had perverted the New Testament idea of love. Therefore, while Padre Doorn attempts to approach God by retrieving the True Cross, Adam has more success through even the illusion or pretence

of love. Major Bunny Bazin recognizes the power of love even if it is too late to save himself: “There was less in him to change: he had lost his saints when he was very young; long ago he had made his compromises” (50). Despite giving in to what he considers to be man’s plight, acquiescence, Bazin cynically conjugates the verb to love as he fires at the enemy: “‘Amo’ said Major Bunny Bazin, snapping the bolt of his rifle closed. ‘I love.’ ... ‘Amas,’ ... ‘You love’” (109). He asks Adam, “Tell me, do you know any better way of passing the afternoon than to lie at ease sniping at the enemy, while conjugating the verb ‘to love,’ and drinking the best issue Egyptian rum? Hell, it’s the vocation I’ve been searching for all my life” (110). Bazin has been through much the same experience as Adam but has arrived at a different conclusion, again: “Even recognizing execution as the evil may be victory of sorts; struggling against it may be the closest man ever comes to victory” (115). However, Bazin ends his existential tutoring of Adam on a note of optimism; he encourages Adam: “Maybe you found something in Bari – something stronger than the other thing. Whatever it was, hang on to it – *believe* in it” (116). This statement is Bazin’s tacit confession that his way of coping with the random brutality of war may not be the only way. Love may be another way. Thanks to Adam, even Bazin is optimistic, “*Amabo, amabis, amabit...* We’ll love in all the future inflexions too” (109). Kierkegaard would certainly approve.

Padre Doom’s search for the True Cross and Adam’s declaration of love fulfill the first two major premises of Kierkegaard’s Christian existentialism. Why, then, does Jonesy have to be killed? The execution of Jones confirms Kierkegaard’s third major premise, *the undoing of bad acts*. Jones’s sacrifice is a symbolic atonement for the execution of Big Jim and Little Joe earlier in the novel. Kierkegaard claimed that once an

action has been completed, it should be held up for Divine scrutiny because that is the only way to judge one's actions. Actions came down to free will for Kierkegaard; the choice for goodness was up to each individual. However, Kierkegaard believed that most people did not choose, opting instead to live on the plain of the aesthetic. This is what Major Bazin means by acquiescence. The war has robbed the individual of its ability to choose. When Adam laments that he killed Big Jim and Little Joe, Bazin corrects him: "No... That part was a mere act of mercy. It was the acquiescing that mattered" (115). Nevertheless, in Kierkegaard's framework, there are still consequences for acquiescing and Jonesy unfairly bears most of the burden. Similar to Christ on the cross, Jones dies for the sins of the Canadian army and undoes the evil act of the first book, restoring moral order to the novel and absolving the guilt of the protagonists who do not have to answer for their acquiescence in the same horrific fashion.

Execution follows the structure of a typical war novel. However, the obvious parallels between the novel and existential texts as well as explicit references to existential figures indicate the didactic message in *Execution*. Camus famously wrote that "If you want to be a philosopher, write novels" (Bohlmann xiii). McDougall uses his novel to synthesize the philosophy of Christian existentialism in Kierkegaard's *Fear and Trembling*. McDougall represents each of Kierkegaard's three major premises of Christian Existentialism. He even does so in order. First, Padre Doorn's hunt for the True Cross demonstrates Kierkegaard's desire for a re-evaluation of the role of the minister and a return to a form of "early Christianity." Padre Doorn's attempt to get closer to God materializes after he witnesses his own de-facto crucifixion, the execution of Jones. Kierkegaard's second premise, that God is love and to love is to approach the Divine, is

personified in the relationship between Elena and Adam which rests on the illusion of love but ultimately becomes real. Even a cynic like Major Bazin is forced to admit love's overarching power. Third, the undoing of evil acts is represented by the execution of Jones who pays the ultimate price for the disavowal of free will on the part of the Canadian soldiers. For Adam, it is impossible to "fill the aching emptiness inside himself with competence" (49). One cannot be saved by efficiency as both Adam and Marlow hope because, as Kierkegaard argues, everything is judged in the face of God. There is no easy respite from individual responsibility, only action and acquiescence, sacrifice and execution, fear and trembling.

Chapter Three:

Canon Fodder: The Marginalization of *Execution* in Canadian Criticism

Even before the publication of *Execution*, Colin McDougall accepted the fact that critical reception and the novel's place on the Canadian literary landscape was out of his hands. After a long hiatus from writing, McDougall returned to the novel with a more resigned attitude with regard to the novel's eventual reception and legacy, writing in his journal that "it comes with a kind of satisfaction to realize that there can really be no outside judgment. It is up to me. I must find, develop and prove the book's validity – until it satisfies me... I must be my own criterion, and that is the best way – the book is me at my best" (18/02/09). Despite McDougall's desire to establish his own personal criterion, the novel was acclaimed immediately after its publication, winning several awards including the Governor General's Award. In his congratulatory letter to McDougall, Farley Mowat cannot contain his enthusiasm for the novel; he writes, "I wish you what you deserve, a place in the roster of war novelists – hell, of novelists, period – high in the light of the long sun" (13/10/58). Contemporary critic of Canadian war literature Dagmar Novak praises *Execution* as "arguably the best Canadian novel about the Second World War" (112). However, the level of indifference and skepticism towards *Execution* among contemporary critics indicates that Novak's opinion is in the minority.

This examination attributes the relegation of *Execution* to two distinct factors: a politicized process of canonicity and a postmodern critical prejudice. In the decades following *Execution*'s initial success, another criterion emerged in literary criticism that was not as receptive to *Execution*. Certain trends in criticism, in terms of form and

content, ensured that *Execution* would be relegated to what is best described as a literary No Man's Land. *Execution*'s unjust neglect is the result of a prejudice that has emerged in Canadian criticism, brought on by the work of Linda Hutcheon and Evelyn Cobley, toward war novels that cannot be interrogated through the lens of post-modernism, post-structuralism, or historiographic metafiction. This prejudice is only exacerbated by the context in which the Canadian canon was established which, ironically, harkens back to several themes explored by McDougall in *Execution*, specifically war fatigue and totalitarian bureaucracy. The Canadian canon was conceived of and constructed with unparalleled rapidity in the 1960s and 70s. Therefore, it was very much a product of its time and place. The criteria for inclusion in the canon are unclear and rely a great deal on the pseudomysticism of bureaucracy described by Hannah Arendt. Also, publication records suggest that the relative ease with which war novels written by veterans could be published in the post-war years resulted in market saturation and a kind of war fatigue among Canadian readers and critics. This fatigue happened just as the Canadian canon was being established. Any interrogation into the critical neglect of *Execution* will show that McDougall's only novel was the right book for the wrong time.

War Literature Fatigue:

The process of Canadian canonicity is both unique and mysterious. It is unique in the sense of its self-consciousness. The Canadian canon did not emerge organically as the product of centuries of scholarship. It was engineered at the behest of a government insecure about the lack of Canadian literature being taught as a separate subject in Canadian schools. This insecurity was a direct result of the Second World War and the emergence of the United States as the world's premier superpower. This development

brought on unprecedented state intervention into Canadian cultural affairs to guard against American ascendancy. The 1951 Massey report on Canadian cultural achievements and shortcomings led to the establishment of the Canada Council for the Arts in 1957, which provided funds for writers and publishers. Thanks to official government intervention and the deliberate shift in school curriculums, the publishing climate of the time was highly politicized. Malcolm Ross responded by helping Jack McClelland engineer a paperback revolution in 1958, the same year *Execution* was published, with the establishment of the *New Canadian Library* (Friskney 234). A reverberation of the Massey commission, the *New Canadian Library* held market potential for an education sector thirsty for Canadian classics to teach on their new syllabuses. The NCL “proved invaluable to an emergent group of scholars who were eager to make Canadian literature a substantial part of their teaching and research careers” (234). The establishment of the Canadian canon was necessary in order to continue the post-war project of cultural protectionism.

Prior to World War Two, the predominant perception of Canadian literature was that there was no real canon to speak of: “At the end of World War II, Canadian literature was not taught as an independent subject in Canadian schools. There was no canon” (Davey 673). Northrop Frye described the possibility of a Canadian Canon as but “a gleam in a paternal critic’s eye” (319). As a result of the desire to institute a separate curriculum for Canadian literature in schools, the canon had to be formed in a remarkably fast period of time. As one Canadian critic puts it; “It is startling to realize that Canadian literature was canonized in fewer than twenty years... [It was] canonization run rampant” (Lecker 656-57). This rampant canonization, then, can be attributed to a single period and

a group of largely homogenous actors – Canadian academics of the 1960s and 70’s. Canadian canon-forming did not truly begin until the establishment of the trade paperback series, the *New Canadian Library*, continued in 1965 with the publishing of *Literary History of Canada*. These measures were supported by numerous academic conferences before reaching near consensus in the 1978 University of Calgary conference on the Canadian novel which cemented its agenda by creating a list of the one hundred “most important” Canadian novels (673). Yet, determining the criteria for inclusion in the newly formed Canadian canon is much more difficult. It is especially complicated using *Execution* as a case study.

Critic Robert Lecker attempts to determine the criteria of Canadian canonicity which he argues was inherently flawed and narrow-minded. He writes that the early founders of the Canadian canon got “what they have always wanted: an image of themselves and their values” (657). Lecker describes the values that he sees as propping up the new canon as being easy to identify:

a pre-occupation with history and historical placement; an interest in topicality, mimesis, verisimilitude, a documentary presentation; a bias in favour of the native over the cosmopolitan; a concern with traditional over innovative forms; a pursuit of the created over the uncreated, the named before the unnamed; an expression of national self consciousness; a valorization of the cautious, democratic, moral imagination before the liberal, inventive one; a hegemonic identification with texts that are ordered, orderable, and safe. (657-658)

Yet, this supposed criterion for inclusion in the canon does not hold water when it comes to determining why *Execution*, a novel worthy of canonicity, has been critically neglected for decades. *Execution* is a novel that resists easy interpretation; it is anything but “ordered, orderable, and safe” (658). However, the novel does seem to fit these supposedly rigid criteria more than it breaks from it. As a novel, *Execution* is very much concerned with history, historical placement and their accurate representation through verisimilitude and documentary presentation. McDougall’s journal reveals a near compulsive attention to detail when it came to accurately representing the Battle of Ortona. McDougall kept rigorous notes on troop levels, military strategy, and even the Italian language. *Execution* is, in many ways, a realist novel. Novak even writes that “the novel’s strength lies in its authoritative detail and stark realism. The mood is more about the pity of war than about its horror, and it tackles the question of what war does to those who wage it” (112). It is not experimental in form nor is it particularly cosmopolitan. This is especially evident when comparing *Execution* to other more immediately canonical texts like Leonard Cohen’s *Beautiful Losers* or A.M. Klein’s *The Second Scroll*, both of which are far better known than *Execution* despite not adhering to the “values” of the early canon founders. Determining the factors that contributed to *Execution*’s exclusion from the canon are complex and, indeed, mysterious. Gaining entry into the Canadian canon was not, as Lecker suggests, simply a matter of meeting a certain criteria of cultural nationalism and verisimilitude.

Execution embodies so many of the supposed values of the founders of the new Canadian canon. However, it remains largely unknown and on the outside of mainstream Canadian critical discourse. Appropriately enough for *Execution*, Hannah Arendt

provides an entry point into understanding the discrepancy between value and canonical recognition. The new Canadian canon, given its connections to official government efforts like the Massey Report or post-war education reforms, adopted many of the same features as a bureaucracy. The canon is an institution unto itself. Institutions have a mandate to which they must adhere if they wish to continue getting government funding. The canon is no different. After all, the core meaning of the Greek word *kanon*, the etymological root for the English term, is “rule” or “measure” and then, but only by extrapolation, “correct” or “authoritative.” For Arendt, bureaucracy functions as the administrative arm of the government and for a bureaucracy to be truly effective it must cloak its mechanisms and operations in a sort of “pseudomysticism” (*Totalitarianism* 245). According to Arendt, maintaining a certain degree of pseudomysticism is essential for the success of a bureaucracy:

Pseudomysticism [...] is the stamp of bureaucracy when it becomes a form of government. Since the people it dominates never really know why something is happening, and a rational interpretation of laws does not exist, there remains only one thing that counts, the brutal naked event itself. What happens to one then becomes subject to an interpretation whose possibilities are unlimited by reason and unhampered by knowledge. (245)

Critics who seek to understand Canadian canonicity and the criteria that goes into selecting which works are admitted and which ones are not assume there to be logic and order to the process when there is not. Arendt’s description of how mysticism functions

in a bureaucracy is analogous to the formation of a canon: why one book is included at the expense of another is nearly impossible to determine absolutely. Indeed, that is the very point of a bureaucracy and how it is able to maintain power. Once again, a novel like *Execution* finds itself in the world of Franz Kafka. Just as Josef K. can never know of what he is accused in *The Trial*, McDougall cannot know where his novel is deficient in the eyes of critics and the agents of canon formation. Josef K. asks his supposed accusers; “Given the senselessness of the whole affair, how could the bureaucracy avoid becoming entirely corrupt? It would be impossible, even the highest judges couldn’t manage it, even with himself” (50). Ultimately, K. cannot escape the totalitarian bureaucracy of *The Trial* because he is incapable of completely recognizing its absurdity and his attempts to understand the pseudomystic elements behind its operation only lend legitimacy to their authority. Inquiring into canon formation, as it relates to an unjustly excluded work like *Execution*, operates in much the same way. Trying to match novels with a set of canonical criteria is reductive because no such criteria exist and to search for one fails to recognize the importance of pseudomysticism to a bureaucracy. In fact, like Josef K. in *The Trial*, such attempts only shore up the legitimacy of the institution. While some texts may have gained admittance to the canon by adhering to these supposedly rigid criteria, others were admitted for less obvious reasons. For instance, *Anne of Green Gables* by Lucy Maud Montgomery would warrant admission based on popularity alone. A historical and contextual approach to *Execution* is a more productive way towards understanding its canonical neglect.

Between 1915 and 1977, there were approximately eighty-three novels published about the two world wars (Novak 167-69). This time period of literary production is

bookmarked by Helen Stirling's *A Soldier of the King* and *The Wars* by Timothy Findley. The war and post-war period were characterized by an unprecedented boom in the publication of war novels. There was a ready-made readership market eager to read about the trauma of the world wars. Between 1940 and 1960, thirty-three novels, including *Execution*, benefited from this seemingly insatiable market (168-69). These novels were also successful critically and on the awards circuit. *Little Man* (1943) by G.H. Sallans, *Remember Me* (1946) by Edward Meade, and *Execution* were all received remarkably well. However, after 1960, the publication of Canadian war novels dropped off dramatically. In fact, in the first seven years of the 1970s, only one war novel, Findley's *The Wars* (1977), was published. There may be no accounting for the taste of the reading public. However, it is possible that the publishing industry saturated the market with war novels written by veterans. To paraphrase the terminology of military psychology, the reading and critical public began to suffer from warlit fatigue. The favourable climate for war novels in the forties and fifties meant that second rate works like *Little Man* and *Remember Me* could not only be published but could be successful. *Execution*, a more aesthetically sophisticated novel as evidenced by the praise McDougall received from his fellow writers, has been unfairly lumped in with the innumerable war novels published during the war novel's bull market. *Execution* was the victim of bad timing as the moment that war novels began to fall out of favour was the precise era of Canadian canon formation. Therefore, as the National Conference on the Canadian novel met in Calgary twenty years after the publication of *Execution*, McDougall's time "high in the light of the long sun," promised to him by Farley Mowat, had long since passed (13/10/58).

The 1978 conference on the novel is typically criticized in two ways. First, it is criticized by Lecker and others and as an overly self-conscious attempt to create literary consensus based on cultural nationalism. Second, it is viewed as a crass marketing stunt in order to promote McClelland and Stewart's *New Canadian Library*, which had been founded by the controversial conference organizer Malcolm Ross and at that point had one hundred and fifty so called "classics" in its paperback catalogue. Certainly, both these criticisms have their merit; Ross would go on to describe the conference as "the most painful experience of my life" (Adams 01/07/08). Ross spent the duration of the conference deflecting accusations that the entire endeavour was engineered in order to afford legitimacy to the works selected for the NCL during a period of economic stagnation for the publishing industry (Friskney 235). One observer of the Calgary conference dismissed the process out of hand: "We know that literary reputations are not built and perpetuated by any lists" (Adams). It would be easy to assign all the blame for the flawed nature of Canadian canon formation at the feet of Malcolm Ross and there have been those who have. However, these criticisms do not adequately comprehend how the canon inevitably represents the zeitgeist of the time in which it was created. This is particularly true in Canada where the canon was established in less than twenty years. McDougall's *Execution* illuminates the subconscious mirroring between the canon and the epoch in which it is established.

The canonical exclusion and subsequent neglect of *Execution* was not the product of a vast critical conspiracy against realist war novels. It is more likely that the historical and political climate did not allow the point of view espoused by *Execution* to prosper in mainstream discourse. Shortly after the publication of *Execution*, diplomat Lester B.

Pearson was elected Prime Minister of Canada. Pearson's election and regime marked a distinct departure from the Canadian values of the war and post-war era. This shift was cemented semiotically by the changing of the Canadian flag in 1965. In his famous essay, "The Implications of a Free Society," Pearson lays out his political ideology represented by the metaphor of "walking in the middle of the road" (90). Pearson elaborates on his concept of the middle path: "The Middle Way, unlike extremism in political doctrine, has positive faith in the good will and common sense of most people in most circumstances. It relies on the intelligence, their will to cooperate, and their sense of justice" (91). Pearson attempted to guide Canada to the middle of the road throughout his time as Prime Minister. This is significant because it was under Pearson, a man known as a peacekeeper and a recipient of the Nobel Peace Prize, that Canada began to identify itself as the "Peaceable Kingdom" and point to its five thousand mile undefended border as a point of pride (Novak 4). This is significant since the engines of Canadian canonicity, like the *New Canadian Library*, depend a great deal on grants from government arms like the Canada Council for the Arts (Friskney 235). Due to its intimate connection to Canadian education and cultural protectionism, Canadian canonicity has always been a political endeavour. Political realities helped to contribute to *Execution's* long, slow path to obscurity. McDougall's novel does not walk in the middle of the road; it takes a stand and risks unpopularity.

The vaunted middle path as a political ideology was anticipated by Hugh MacLennan in his most famous war novel *Barometer Rising*, (1941). Neil Macrae, a soldier returning to Halifax has an epiphany: "For almost the first time in his life, he fully realized what being a Canadian meant... this nation undiscovered by the rest of the world

and unknown to itself, these people neither American nor English, nor even sure what they wanted to be, this unborn mightiness, this question mark, this future for himself, and for God knew how many millions of mankind!" (102). However, these metaphors of peace and reconciliation are inappropriate given Canada's violent early years. They are also inappropriate for a novel like *Execution*. Canada's pre-confederation history is one of conquest, wars, invasions, and border raids. In other words, the middle of the road was not a viable option and the instability of the time is reflected in early Canadian literature like John Richardson's *Wacousta: or, The Prophecy* (1832) or *The Seats of the Mighty* (1896) by Sir Gilbert Parker. *Execution* does not fit very well with the idea of Canada as a "Peaceable Kingdom" on the middle path of peacekeeping. The soldiers of *Execution*, despite their humanity and sensitivity, are skilled and effective soldiers. In fact, what saves them, at least in part, is the devotion to competence and duty. Adam is described as a "first rate company commander" (McDougall 49). Brigadier Kildare's leadership ability was "unquestioned, unmistakable" (10). They do kill. Historically, Canadian troops were known for their ability in combat gaining the nickname, "Stormtroopers" from their German counterparts in the Great War. However, this form of a more militant Canadian nationalism was replaced, at least in official discourse, by Pearson's middle path. Peacekeeping is now engrained into Canadian ontology. This gradual shift in nationalistic tendencies occurs in the 1960s and 70s just as the Canadian canon is being formed. *Execution*, published in 1958 just before this way of thinking truly begins to take hold, is unfairly ignored as the harbinger of bygone era. This occurs despite its depiction of execution as the "ultimate injustice, the degradation of man" (115).

Stephen Greenblatt writes that those who form the canon have the power to “impose fictions upon the world and... enforce the acceptance of fictions that are known to be fictions” (141). However, Greenblatt may be overstating the tendency of critics to consciously try to represent “an image of themselves and their values” (Lecker 657). In all likelihood, canon formation is not so conspiratorial. The canon is the subconscious product of the time in which it was created. Any inquiry into Canadian canonicity must equally inquire into what effect the political, social, economic, and historical climate had on its selection process. Of course, it is particularly important in Canada since canon formation can be attributed to a single period and a group of largely homogenous actors, Canadian academics of the 1960s and 70s. Any attempt to determine an autonomous set of prejudicial criteria to which each canonical text must adhere is reductive because it does not comprehend how the canon functions as a bureaucracy, with its inevitable dependence on pseudomysticism to maintain power. This is why *Execution*, a novel not unlike many other novels in the canon, is excluded despite its commitment to the supposedly preferable criteria of verisimilitude, documentary, historical placement and realism. *Execution* also suffered from bad timing on several levels. First, it was published during the tail-end of the war novel’s most profitable point. Although McDougall was able to take advantage of a sympathetic publishing climate, he also had to endure the genre’s declining favour with critics and with the public. Publication records indicate market saturation precipitated the end of the war novel trend. A generation that wanted to remember was replaced by generations who wanted to forget. A new political climate which shifted Canadian nationalism to the proverbial middle of the road also made for an unwelcoming environment for *Execution*, a novel that does not depict so much the

horrors of war as the pity of war. As a result, the political environment of the Pearson/Trudeau era ensured that *Execution* could not walk the mainstream middle path but would remain, instead, on the fringe.

Critical Neglect of *Execution*:

Robert Lecker's absolutist description of Canadian canonicity depicts the agents of canon formation as picking and choosing texts based whether or not they adhere to a certain narrative of Canadian history that praises cultural nationalism and the inseparable mimetic connection between art and life. This connection, or lack thereof, would become very important to critics of war literature in the late twentieth century. Foremost among them is Linda Hutcheon. To describe emerging postmodern texts, Hutcheon coined the term *historiographic metafiction*: "those novels that, by definition, are self referential or autorepresentative – suggest that the mimetic connection between art and life (by which we still seem to want to define the novel genre) has changed" (*Canadian Postmodern* 62). Therefore, historiographic metafiction is literary texts that are aware and self-reflexive of their constructions of the past, constantly questioning how their own biases or prejudices have influenced their own version of the truth. According to Hutcheon, these metafiction, through constant negotiation with the process of writing history, offer a unique avenue through which the reader can engage with and speak constructively about the past that acknowledges the writing of history, fiction or otherwise, as an inherently flawed endeavour. Hutcheon hopes that historiographic metafiction will rescue literature from the natural impulse to write *history* and not *histories*. However, in terms of *Execution*, the effect is, inadvertently, less than liberating. Hutcheon's paradigm became so popular and ubiquitous that novels that did not adhere to the tenets set out by *The*

Canadian Postmodern became secondary as their defenders in the old guard of criticism began to lose power. Again, *Execution* finds itself on the outs of mainstream criticism – first not modern enough to satisfy the founders of the Canadian canon and then not postmodern enough either.

In *A Poetics of Postmodernism*, Hutcheon refers to historiographic metafiction as “those well-known and popular novels that are both intensely self-reflexive and yet paradoxically also lay claim to historical events and personages” (*Poetics* 17). Common Canadian examples of historiographic metafiction include Michael Ondaatje’s *In the Skin of a Lion* (1988), Daphne Marlatt’s *Ana Historic* (1990) and Timothy Findley’s *The Wars*. These novels are set in recognizable historical time periods and even feature real life personages, but they complicate these elements through irony, self-reflection, and fictionalization in order to question and undermine the very idea that history is even knowable. Continuing Roland Barthes’s work in “The Death of the Author,” Hutcheon argues that historiographic metafiction is a “work of art that presupposes the viewer’s presence and then plays ironically with it; it includes a representation of the producer at work” (*Canadian Postmodern* 63). This irony is partially achieved through parody, the subversion of what the reader has come to expect from a work of art: “Through a double process of installing and ironizing, parody signals how present representations come from past ones and what ideological consequences derive from both continuity and difference” (*Politics* 101). In these novels, the process of reading is as important as the process of writing.

Therefore, there is little, if any, demarcation between author and reader in a postmodern novel. As George Bowering puts it in *Burning Water*. “If you are to identify

with anyone it is likely to be the author who may lay his cards on the table & ask your opinion or help in finishing the book” (30). In the epilogue to Findley’s *The Wars*, the archivist with whom the reader has learned of the protagonist Robert Ross’s time in the First World War thinks to herself: “Then you remember something written long after Robert Ross was dead. It was written during another war – in 1943 – by the Irish essayist and critic Nicholas Fagan. This is what he wrote: *‘the space between the perceiver and perceived can... be closed with a shout of recognition. One form of a shout is a shot. Nothing so completely verifies our perception of a thing as our killing of it.’* THE ARCHIVIST CLOSSES HER BOOK” (197-198). The reader is exposed to several forms of history and perception in this passage alone. Fagan, the purported Irish essayist, does not exist. Narrativization, after all, is the central mode of human comprehension (*Canadian Postmodern* 66). Or, as Robert Harlow asserts, “there is no such thing as history. There is only individual consciousness expanding” (87). Hutcheon makes the impossibility of writing just one history abundantly clear: “to write history (or historical fiction) is (equally) to narrate, to re-present by means of selection and interpretation. History (like realist fiction) is *made* by its writer” (*Canadian Postmodern* 66). Findley, again, fictionalizes this very impulse in *The Wars* and Dennis Duffy notes that the archivist’s presence in the novel gestures toward the notion that stories “do not tell themselves. They do not come to us with beginnings, middles, and ends waiting to be bevelled neatly against each other. They come from scraps and tags, and we order them according to our notions of meaning rather than out of a certainty that it had to have been this way” (190). Historiographic metafiction, like a high school student on a math test, must show its work.

On the surface, *Execution* feels a world away from historiographic metafiction. The novel and McDougall's personal papers reveal a compulsive commitment to historical accuracy and verisimilitude. McDougall was clearly writing one history of Canada at war and not many histories. A lengthy section of McDougall's journal is devoted to the history of the Battle of Ortona and the Canadian campaign in Italy. McDougall's meticulous notes on geography and troop levels indicate his adherence to the idea of history as something to be strived for not feared or approached with skepticism. In part, McDougall succeeded. Vera Brittain, who attempted to avoid the trappings of writing a fictionalized account of war by writing an autobiography, complimented McDougall on his commitment to facticity. She writes that she recognizes in his characters the "the authentic citizen soldier whom I once knew so well, with his characteristic mixture of self-dedication and the cynical realism which accepts death as it comes and cannot endure the way it is sentimentalized by civilians" (17/02/59). McDougall's anxiety over writing about war is evident, however. The periods of dark introspection or the "despair" to which McDougall alludes in the journal stem from his recognition that representing war, as he knew it, to a reading audience that could never see what he had seen, was impossible. However, he was determined to try and "settle on all the unbearably sad, aching, tender things I want to say about war, men at war, and write them down" (11/04/53). McDougall describes his ideal reader of *Execution* as a man named "Denis Hendricks." Little can be found about who this man was to McDougall, but perhaps he was one of the McDougall's comrades in arms and his desire to impress him with *Execution* affirms the sense of responsibility he had to his fellow soldiers to tell their story as accurately as he could, with passion and compassion. Or, if

Hendricks were a layman, McDougall may be expressing the desire to tell the story of *Execution* in a clear and accessible fashion.

Execution does not include any self-reflexive characters or other elements that indicate to the reader any potential biases or prejudices. It is a realist novel. It is a sincere account of war and the men who fight it, not an ironic one with a sense of play about reader and writer. When McDougall writes, “What it’s about, of course, is execution... execution is the ultimate injustice, the ultimate degradation of man,” he is asserting that statement as a truth not as a plural series of truths (115).

Execution was congruous with a lot of World War II literature because it allowed for the redemption of the so called “little man.” This shift from Great War nihilism to the optimism of Second World War literature has been problematic for many critics. The reservations that critics hold about these texts have been yet another factor in the marginalization of *Execution*. In her seminal book, *Representing War: Form and Ideology in First World War Narratives*, Evelyn Cobley investigates that way in which “modes of representation generate critiques of the war which nevertheless remain complicitous with the Enlightenment values which the experience of war can do nothing to undermine” (3). Cobley lays the blame for the horrors of the first half of the twentieth century at the feet of the Enlightenment: “The Enlightenment project of infinite social progress through rational organization has increasingly shown itself to have fallen short of its promises... the horrors of this war graphically illustrated that the Enlightenment project had lost currency” (4). Cobley is clearly influenced by Paul Fussell’s acclaimed critical study of war literature, *The Great War and Modern Memory*. For Fussell, war literature is complicit in the way in which the “drift of modern history domesticates the

fantastic and normalizes the unspeakable. And the catastrophe that begins it is the Great War” (74). For Cobley, the Great War represented a “crisis in consciousness which accelerated the shift from modernity to postmodernity” (3). Although Cobley believes this attitude to be “generally acknowledged,” novels like *Execution* problematize and undercut this narrative. *Execution* is concerned with existential and modern issues but it is not an outright indictment of the Enlightenment or any other system. Its Christian allegory and difficult ending also proves difficult to reconcile for critics with the “generally acknowledged” way in which the traumatic world wars ushered the world into postmodernity.

The first two books of *Execution* are congruous with a typical anti-war novel. McDougall vividly demonstrates how war robs its participants of their innate humanity, plunging them into an existential and ontological crisis. However, the characters are redeemed by the Christ-like sacrifice of Jonesy who atones for the sins committed by the Canadian military, specifically Adam’s execution of two innocent Italian deserters. The execution of another innocent somehow restores the faith of the characters in humanity. This ending is a perfect example of what Cobley laments as “these apparently antiwar narratives [which] are often complicit with war; critical commentaries overlook such complicities because their thematic approach ignores the ideological implication of formal strategies” (5). The incongruous “happy” ending is problematic for critics like Cobley because it presupposes that writing war can be ordered and expressed as an autonomous idea.

Cobley is skeptical of the desire of writers who fictionalize their own war experience to “set the record straight, to tell it as it had been” (6). She would describe the

ending of *Execution* as approaching *deus ex machina*, the product of “distortion.”

According to this line of thought, McDougall felt such a sense of compassion, guilt, and responsibility to his fellow soldiers that his desire to represent war as accurately as possible was clouded. Cobley characterizes the schism between experience and eventual text as enormous and insurmountable: “The impulse to ‘set down what can be remembered’ is complicated not only by the recognition that the horrors of mass slaughter were ultimately beyond words... the opposition between experience and text looms as an absolute division, allowing for no translation that is not also a distortion” (6). Therefore, McDougall’s attempts, through historical verisimilitude, to represent the war experience accurately were bound to fall short due to the nature of memory, comradeship, and the notion that, according to Cobley, war is fundamentally unrepresentable. The desire of many war writers to pay tribute to their brothers in arms becomes invalid; “the commemorative gesture thus finds itself compelled to name the unnameable again and again” (9). As evidence of the distorting power of the desire to commemorate the dead, Cobley points to the number of dedicatory prefaces to war novels that express a desire to honour the dead and tell their story as accurately as possible. The most famous of these is probably Remarque’s *All Quiet on the Western Front*, which opens with the commemorative epigraph, “This book is meant to be neither an accusation nor a confession. It simply constitutes an attempt to report about a generation which was destroyed by the war – even when it escaped its grenades” (i). The first edition of *Execution* included a different dedication, simply “For Diana” – McDougall’s wife. Cobley would view a novel like *Execution* as complicit with the Enlightenment project that was ultimately responsible for the outbreak of the two world wars because their form

ignores the inherent impossibility of representing war. The prevalence of this view, spurred on by Hutcheon, Fussell, and Copley, laid the critical groundwork in the late twentieth century for *Execution*'s marginalization as a realist novel that shies away from engaging with the difficulties of the mimetic connection between experience and art and refuses to adopt an utterly cynical point of view.

Though Hutcheon, Fussell, and Copley never address McDougall directly and may have never read *Execution*, to categorize *Execution* as complicit in the symbolic logic of war would be unjust. McDougall does not shy away from confronting the Enlightenment values that made the two World Wars possible. Adam's failed attempt at ontological nullification through a dogged devotion to competence indicates that *Execution* is engaged with the dubious legacy of Enlightenment values in the twentieth century. Adam's failure to make meaning out of his trauma by giving himself over to "infinite social progress through rational organization" synthesizes the false promise of the Enlightenment. Critics like Copley might view *Execution*'s positive ending as forced and too neatly constructed to be truly representative of the age of mass slaughter it depicts. However, as was discussed in Chapter Two, Jones's execution represents the final step toward fulfilling Kierkegaardian existentialism. Kierkegaard was perhaps the harshest critic of Enlightenment values and the Hegelianism that provided its philosophical underpinning. Kierkegaard saw Hegelianism and the broader Enlightenment project as empty formalities, the ultimate representation of the choice to live life on the lowest aesthetic plain. For Kierkegaard, the attempt by the likes of Hume and Kant to create an enlightened world was a failure because it posited reason above

morality. The reclamation of morality, either through love, religion, or existentialism by the soldiers of *Execution* is a clear indictment of Enlightenment values.

The skepticism of mainstream critics toward *Execution* and other novels like it is also strongly limited by their adherence to the text itself. A cursory examination of McDougall's journal would show that he was painfully aware of the difficulties in representing the unrepresentable. What McDougall asks himself as he begins the novel in 1953 certainly bears this out: "But what can anyone say about Man's plight, about life? It is deadening to think that even the greatest works can say so little. Is it worth trying to say anything?" (09/04/53). From the content of the novel to his journal entries, it is evident that McDougall was aware of wide gap between experience and textual representation. Far from being complicit in what gave birth to what William Golding called "the most violent century in human history" (Hobsbawm 1), McDougall issued a philosophical attack against the rationalism and empty detachment of the Enlightenment project. Theodor Adorno's statement that "poetry after Auschwitz was barbaric," was not meant to be taken literally. To do so, as contemporary critics have, would be to deny the cathartic power of art to evoke an emotional truth.

Conclusion:

After *Execution*'s initial success, Colin McDougall returned to his post as registrar of McGill University, and silence set in. The desire expressed in his journal to write more novels was never realized. Hugh MacLennan's astonishment at McDougall's ability to "live as efficiently and calmly as you do with those not gone where you have gone" proved prophetic and McDougall never again attempted to represent his experience for the reading public (06/10/58). However, *Execution* is a sufficient representation of McDougall as soldier and human being. In 1953, as he began to write *Execution*, McDougall implored himself to "Never do a passage as a duty!" (25/04/53). Yet, duty is evidently important to McDougall and the soldiers of *Execution*. The duty McDougall felt to his fellow soldiers to represent their story as accurately and compassionately as possible mirrors Adam's sense of responsibility for Jonesy after he is sentenced to death: "To the Canadian army, as such, Rifleman Jones was no more than an expendable six figure number. But at one point in every army, as in any human organization there must be one person to whom the number emerges as an individual, and who will to greater or lesser extent accept responsibility for him" (212). The British philosopher Isaiah Berlin said of the twentieth century, "I have lived through most of the twentieth century without, I must add, suffering personal hardship. I remember it only as the most terrible century in Western history" (Hobsbawm 1). McDougall saw something more than just violence and terror in the massive moral failures of the international system. He saw the unique ability of the human spirit to endure.

The most of violent of centuries could have numbed him but, like his protagonist Adam, McDougall *grasps for humanity*. Although this optimism and belief in humanity

may have sentenced McDougall's novel to obscurity, *Execution* stands as a representation of the existential necessity to make meaning out of a world that is inherently absurd. The novel warns that the moment the individual shirks that responsibility, execution sets in and acquiescing to execution is the ultimate degradation of humanity. Major Bazin is wrong, it is not humanity's plight to acquiesce; it is their duty to struggle against acquiescence to a personal and redemptive victory. Unfortunately, due to factors beyond McDougall's control, this human victory is reserved for only the most ardent readers of Canadian war fiction. *Execution* remains unjustifiably obscure despite its authenticity and the profundity of its message that remains as relevant today as it has ever been. The universe still provides the individual with little to make meaning out of their experience. Like the Canadian soldiers of *Execution*, it is up to individuals to work out their own salvation with fear, trembling, and, if they are lucky, love.

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