

## 'It was suddenly hard winter': John Burnside's Crossings

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### Abstract (English)

John Burnside's poetry and fiction presents the reader with an awkward, uncanny sense of Being. It achieves this through forcing on the reader moments of suspension—epoché in the sense given this word by German phenomenologist Edmund Husserl—which both present and enact shifts in perception of the relationship between self and other, subject and world, memory and the past, which discomforts in its suspension of narrative time as it opens up a phenomenological apperception of Being through the multiple figure of the act of crossing—between past and present, self and other, memory and forgetfulness. In each example there is an irreversible transformation of human understanding that foregrounds the condition of Being in its materiality.

### Abstract (French)

La poésie et la fiction de John Burnside confrontent le lecteur à des modalités complexes et étranges de l'Être. Le lecteur se voit imposer des moments de suspens — *epoché* selon le terme que le phénoménologue allemand donne à ce terme — qui présentent et produisent des effets de basculement dans la relation liant le moi et l'autre, le sujet et le monde, la mémoire et le passé. Ces moments de basculement déconcertent par la manière dont ils perturbent et suspendent le temps narratif tout en l'ouvrant à une apperception de l'Être de nature phénoménologique, prise dans les figures multiples de la traversée en acte — entre passé et présent, le moi et l'autre, la mémoire et l'oubli. À chaque fois, a lieu une transformation irréversible de l'entendement humain qui rend tangible l'Être dans toute sa matérialité.

### Keywords :

Burnside (John), crossings, deconstruction, epoché, otherness, phenomenology, poetics, revenance

1 First, an index; or consider this perhaps, a somewhat and as yet undelineated map, marks for a topography still to be plotted:

To cross out, cross over; to become cross; a cross breed, a cross to bear, a right cross; a mark comprising two intersecting lines, a mark to indicate an incorrect response, a sideways movement or pass; to cross off the list or delete, to draw a line through; two paths cross the field; he attempted to cross the border; at cross purposes; to cross one's fingers, to cross the floor; it crossed my mind; to get one's wires crossed; to get to the crux of the matter; our paths crossed; X marks the spot; crosswords, rather than cross words; to cross swords; a particular point of difficulty (crux; cruces); cross my heart and...; to get one's point across. Have I done this?

Second, a quotation:

Not quite autumn, perhaps, but sweet, nevertheless, sweet and soft, almost transparent, like molten butter. Now, as I left, crossing the next field by way of a footpath that skimmed the hedged, plowed space, it was suddenly hard winter. It must have been late afternoon, but the horizon and the spaces between the trees and hedges were already beginning to darken; overhead, the flat, celadon sky was cloudless. I walked on quickly up the long gentle slope of the field that would take me, according to my best guess, to within ten miles of the coast . [...] The deer bolted, as if they had picked up my mood, or perhaps they had sensed something that I had not, some shadow, some scent, some rumour crossing the field toward them, or toward me, some rushing, predatory thing that, as I turned, seemed almost upon me, a swift, merciless presence sweeping into my face. For a moment I was lost; for a moment, I did what I had always wanted to do: I thought of nothing [...] total abandonment. It was the finger of a god scraping the inside of my skull. (Burnside 2007, 200-201)

2 Have you ever noticed, no, has it ever *crossed* your mind the extent to which, in trying to get something across to you, John Burnside marks his writing with the motions of a cross, of crossings? If you have not, this is probably a tribute to his ability to put something across, under the radar as it were, to smuggle in, through a door, at a window, across a border, or to traverse some ill-defined liminal space between text and reader, in that act of crossing called writing, and with that, its sibling, reading. Burnside comes across as someone who expresses himself directly, without guile, without affectation, in order to get his tale, his images across. It is though, when you come to realise the extent to which you have become inhabited, that you perceive belatedly how something has crossed the threshold between yourself and the world of John Burnside's writing, and settled in as a hitherto unnoticed guest. Burnside crosses over, getting underneath your skin, infiltrating your perceptions, your apprehensions. To begin to read John Burnside—I will not say 'to have read John Burnside', I do not believe anyone can claim to have read John Burnside, finally, definitively—; to begin to read Burnside is to undertake an act of traversal. It is to gather yourself for a passage, in which you are transported across the borders that hedge convention, habit and an everyday perspective on the world, to find yourself having crossed, in a moment and almost imperceptibly, over into a world that, though not dissimilar to your own, nevertheless is transformed. To begin to read John Burnside is to begin to travel, to begin a travail, a work of crossing, to a place where, suddenly, there is 'hard winter' as that beautifully stark line from *The Devil's Footprints* has it, and this is where you find yourself. Here, Burnside's writing seems to say, is winter. You may look across the border just crossed to see Spring, to see Summer or Autumn, 'soft, almost transparent, like molten butter', but you will find that, having crossed, you will always see the more generous, less austere seasons and their worlds from the side of winter.

3 To begin to read John Burnside, again and again, I always find that sense of having to cross over, if only so as to realise where I have been all along, and it took Burnside to hold up a mirror, to show me what I have left behind, when looking back through the mirror from its other side. It is not that I am looking in a mirror, though this may be the case of course, for in reading Burnside I do not see the author, but find myself occupying the place of 'I', uncannily; no, it is that a transport has been effected, a boundary stepped beyond. But always a boundary that has to be crossed repeatedly. For having stepped, I find I have not gone anywhere, it is merely—merely!—a matter of perceptions having been 'translated'. So a step, and no step at all.

## Let's Begin Again

4 Has it ever crossed your mind how much John Burnside's writing is informed, cross-hatched if you will, with figures of crosses, and crossing, of lines being crossed, and necessarily of borders, boundaries, liminal sites, horizons, apertures, thresholds, frames, and so forth? As the good reader will have noticed, turning to traverse once more the passage of the narrating subject in *The Devil's Footprint*, there is no perception, no apperception, no reflection, and therefore knowledge of Being-in-the-world without an act of crossing. Or rather, say *acts*: for the subject crosses in more than one fashion in any given moment, experience, or event. There are different, and differing modalities of crossing. There are, and there are given—*il y a, es gibt*—crossings that are physical, phenomenological, geographical, temporal, and so forth. At the same time, and yet, within that time disruptive, deconstructive of its condition as the illusion of a continuity.

5 At the same time, though the act or modality of a crossing in Burnside's writing may be deliberate, chosen, a conscious motion on the part of the subject, as in the passage from *The Devil's Footprint*, crossing brings change. There is no crossing without transformation or 'translation', though what that may be is, perhaps inescapably as part of a very human condition, simply a matter of chance, that which the Greeks call *Tukhé*: events that happen either as a question of luck or of fate. It is a defining condition of what it means to be human. Whatever befalls us happens because we have engaged in crossing from one place to another, literally or metaphorically, thus:

Not quite autumn, perhaps, but sweet, nevertheless, sweet and soft, almost transparent, like molten butter. Now, as I left, crossing the next field by way of a footpath that skimmed the hedged, plowed space, it was suddenly hard winter. It must have been late afternoon, but the horizon and the spaces between the trees and hedges were already beginning to darken.

6 Autumn is almost transparent. Membranous, diaphanous, its qualities are of touch and taste, not sight. In travelling with the narrator, we have already crossed the senses, moving over into another mode of perception. Taken up in a crossing, having crossed over, the reader is caught up in the transformation. This is not all though, for the narrator moves through physical space even as his perceptions of the world mark and remark the instant of crossing. He crosses the 'next field', taking a footpath that acts as a passageway and a border, a marker of crossing's passage, which gives access to traversal around, across the 'hedged, plowed space'. And with this, by chance or by fate, 'it was suddenly hard winter'. Temporally there is a crossing here also, for though the narrator knows or feels at least that 'it must have been late afternoon' the spaces 'were already beginning to darken'. The passage continues, a criss-cross of movements, observations and perceptions of movements, in a constant to-and-fro of physical motion, bodily effort, the material world and the actions of the subject within that, perceptions of the manner of the world's becoming translated within itself, and as a result, the subject's being enfolded within, in close proximity to, the various drifts, fluctuations and activities that surround and define the subject, even as that subject perceives and so defines. The inner and outer, phenomenal and physical worlds are not here adjacent so much as they are coterminous and co-existent. The one is merely the image of the other. As we read we move across inner to outer, outer to inner.

7 Burnside gives us to realise how the act of narration, and with that the act of reading enables the very perception of this phenomenological crossing of which I am speaking, a modality that is always already in play, underway, whether or not we realise it. While it may be true that all writing engages us thus, what appears particularly acute in the novelist and poet's writing is the degree to which the traversal and its travail, its labour and translation is as foregrounded as it is restless. An ebb and flow takes place. In taking place it constructs for the reader the place that one reads, and so gives place to event, action, perception and so forth. This is not merely the formal condition of writing and neither, as Jacques Derrida has it of Plato, is 'this mere play or artifice in the crossed reconciliation [rapprochement croisé]' (1972, 145), at least not in the work of John Burnside. It is also to be read as being very much the point, that here is the human condition, into the secret of which he allows us access, opening a door into this condition, if we are careful enough to read in such a way as to be able to cross over ourselves. John Burnside allows us across the border into a perceptive self-awareness of Being, doing so by foregrounding, without the obvious tricks of so-called 'postmodern' play, the work of writing itself. Burnside's writing does not describe. It is constantly performative. His trace, in tracing the motion of the narrating subject, who, in turn, traces the motion of

crossing, enacts the very movements of which it speaks. The reader is already inside the act, even as Burnside's writing acts on us.

8 But surely, someone will say, as they cut across the path on which I have set myself going; surely such criss-cross, mazy motions are there to be discerned in any act of writing? Why Burnside in particular? Perhaps a small part of an answer is to be found in the following passage from *Glister*: 'The dead fascinated him [Morrison] by the way they lived on, alone in their names, each one separate from the others, and he wanted to erase any trace that he, or his family, might leave in their solitary domain' (14). Morrison is someone who wants, who desires, to cross over, to be 'invisible, he wants, more than anything, to disappear' (9) despite his visibility being a 'function' of his being (9). Defined by the one, he craves the other, longs for the self to become an other, and thus to live on, to survive as a mere trace, a writing if you will. Which of course, is what he does, or rather this is the gift of the text, to write the self as other, thereby giving it its survival. But what makes Morrison interesting, what Burnside gives us to see, is his character's awareness of that which crosses over, that which comes to pass. Survival is in the name. It signals in itself the wholly other, distinct from every other. The trace maintains the other in having survived. Morrison's perception is an apperception of the manner in which one is not simply one side of a divide, awaiting the crossing. The subject crosses and recrosses in the apprehension of the manner of one's own expropriation: 'one expropriates oneself without knowing exactly who is being entrusted with what is left behind' (Derrida 2007, 33). To disappear would mean to abandon the anxiety of one's anticipated expropriation, given realization, appearance in the phenomenon of the proper name, that survival that one can imagine before one has vanished and so begin the process of standing before, without having crossed, the future anterior of a final crossing. The thought crosses Morrison's mind, repeatedly. It is as if he has written the statement, 'I will have survived after I die'. In this mode of apperception, Morrison, recollecting a kiss in the graveyard with Gwen, remembers how 'he had hesitated, probably'. Note that perfect uncertainty; memory struggles to define and is undercut in its own action: 'That was why he had hesitated, probably' (14). But the passage continues: 'the truth was that, at first, he hadn't wanted to go on, with the dead all around him, watching from their separate resting places across the cemetery' (14). The self is expropriated by the other. Not merely any other, each and every other intimated in the cemetery, their alterity signaled in their 'separate resting places'. Instead, the completely and wholly other. Morrison thus is the place if you will, on which is inscribed the coming to consciousness of what Jacques Derrida describes as the 'structural' absence of the author (2007, 32), which is 'not contingent upon the actual death of the author'. For the author's 'disappearance or death is implied in the trace whether he or she is already dead or still living' (Brault and Naas 2007, 56).

9 Whether on the subject of knowing oneself to be haunted by the other, in the structural anticipation and reminder of one's own inescapable absence, an absence which, as I have been exploring at length in a number of places, is also loss—not a loss, but loss itself, at the heart of Being, as that which is Being's ownmost alterity—; or, whether in the apparently ordinary act of passage—from one field to another, one season to another—there is to be discerned in the text of John Burnside a motion that is also an awareness of what can be determined provisionally under the heading of 'crossing'. As Morrison grasps through his apperception in the singular instances of the 'glisten' this inescapable condition of Being, so too does Burnside give us to read the ineluctable condition of becoming that we suffer passively. For we 'become [in the consciousness, in the appearance that crosses our minds], appearing-disappearing, like that uneducable specter who will never have learned how to live. The trace', which Burnside maps, making manifest its work, 'signifies to me at once my death, either to come or already come upon me [...] It is impossible to escape this structure, it is the unchanging form of [...] life' (Derrida 2006 22). As my two examples indicate, there is no one definition for crossing. There are crossings. What they can be discerned as sharing though is an irrevocability in a performative consciousness of the act that is, *too*, the act itself. It is the unveiling of a certain 'flaw in the sway of the world', if you will; 'where mastery fails / and a hinge in the mind swings open', as Burnside has it in the poem, 'At My Father's Funeral', first published in the *London Review of Books* (2012, 18):

like that flaw in the sway of the world  
where mastery fails  
and a hinge in the mind swings open—grief

or terror coming loose  
and drifting, like a leaf,  
into the flames.

10 The writer recognizes how one lives one's 'death in writing' (Derrida 2007, 33), in bearing witness to the acts of crossing and thus the revenance of the other. More than this though, there is the taking place of a singular event, in this case an apperception of the possibility that something—the other—can always come, can always return crossing over, effecting a crossing. This is perhaps a desire, in the poem in question, but it is more than that. In order for this apperception to take place, the subject has to become open to the other, allowing the other's crossing as a possibility, however impossible. In this, the subject's consciousness assumes a radical reorientation—again an opening, tracked in that moment where 'mastery fails' and 'like that flaw in the sway of the world', there arrives the event of the crossing, as a result of which 'a hinge in the mind swings open' (2012, 18).

11 This is, I would argue, at once wholly singular—particular to this poem and apprehensible only in the iterable trace of its singularity—and yet, tropically, as if the trope were by analogy available to us in forms and manifestations wholly dissimilar, typical, if not exemplary, of the work of crossing in the text of John Burnside and what it comes to reveal to the reader, as well as the subject: which is, that there is for the subject in the phenomenological apprehension of the other's arrival that no mastery can dictate, predict, programme or be prepared for, a temporal suspension; the revelation, in short, of an *epoché*. Winter is there, suddenly, the dead are glimpsed indirectly, there—*there* in a space that is other than the space occupied by the subject and yet part of a continuum between the 'in here' of the subject and the 'out there' of the world, speaking phenomenologically—or the dead reveal themselves in the very impossible possibility of their revenance, a return-to-come. In each of the textual extracts considered briefly thus far, an epochal suspension takes place. In that suspension of any normative narrative or subjective temporality, there arrives a transformation of the habitual, or conventional modes of perception and understanding, as the subject, touched by what he comes to apprehend, receives as it were the gift of the other. Thus Burnside's subjects suffer passively awaiting the arrival of a trace, a difference, a glister if you will. But what marks such moments of unveiling as significant—significant in that in each of these the very condition of one's Being is announced—is that the subject is not only observing, from the outside. The very nature of the epochal experience places the subject at the heart of that experience: I am watching this event, I am of and in the event. The 'I' reveals itself to itself in that suspension. There takes place therefore a generation of perception born out of the suspension of the habitual, as the subject's connection to place generates intuitive associations and responses dictated by the other, glimpsed perhaps through a process of heightened awareness, and with that the crossing over of an enduring language of Being. This in turn comes to appear through writing that excavates, erases, retraces and layers, to make available to the reader the common ground of Being.

12 What I am calling 'crossing' therefore in John Burnside's text is just this process of phenomenological apprehension embedded in narrative as a 'poetic' (for want of a better word) interruption of conventional and assumed narrative temporalities. Against the mimetic and straightforwardly representational modes of production by which narrative so often functions, even today, there occurs from within, as if surreptitiously yet always in plain sight, what Edmund Husserl describes as a 'first-awakened manner of appearance' that makes possible an '*assimilative apperception*' by which the subject apprehends its coporeality 'in the mode "There"', and thus as an other, as a bodily supplement, an object in and of the 'surrounding world' (1999, 151), analogous and coexisting with the subject. The subject in Burnside always apprehends his Being-there, his Being-in-the-world, this inescapable materiality and temporality because the subject 'crosses' over into that 'first-awakened' apprehension: winter, the dead, the resonance of place, all serve to give to the subject in narrative a suspension from the narrative motion and thus a form of border crossing if you will on the part of the subject into the opening of his singular 'sphere of ownness', a 'primordial ownness' as Husserl has it (1999, 151). And it is primordial inasmuch as every revelation, whether in novel or poem, because Burnside presents and enacts the unveiling *as if for a first time every time; as if every event of consciousness does not merely present, but enacts as a performative speech act, a phenomenal-originary epoché*, such is the stark poetic force of the revelation that I read. It is as if there were two John Burnside's at least. There is, on the one hand, John Burnside the novelist. On the other hand, there is John Burnside the poet. And if one hand doesn't know what the other hand is doing, this is because the other hand very much does not wish the one hand to realise what is taking place. For there is the sense that

nothing crosses the border quite so much as the poet within the novelist, taking narrative hostage in its poetic arrest, bringing the reader up short, to a halt, in the name of the other.

13 In order to consider such modes of crossing by which the self is seen, and apprehends himself as inseparable from world, place, or other a little further, I wish to turn in a moment and all too briefly to a few fragments from Burnside's poems and the conclusion of *Glisten*. For the moment however, it is necessary to go back over the ground a little. In Burnside's writing the crossing that takes effect erases the distinction between physical and psychical reality in the epochal disclosure, as the subject finds itself presenting and performing simultaneously a particular orientation—however disorienting to the reader. The orientation assumes the form of a disclosure, which is, at the same time, what Heidegger calls an 'En-owning' of Being. The self 'owns' what is ownmost in its Being, thereby opening itself and projecting its self into the opening, thereby stepping into a space, an opening as clearing within which Being is fully realized and announces itself authentically. (Heidegger 1999, 39) At the head of the poem already cited, 'At My Father's Funeral', there is a citation from J. A. MacCulloch's *The Religion of the Ancient Celts*, which recapitulates the idea 'that the body as well as the soul was immortal'. In the desire to prevent the body from returning there comes to be articulated the strife between self and other. The desire to disown the other—'and didn't we think, for a moment,/ of crushing his feet/ so he couldn't return to the house' (2012, 18)—is undone in that instant of imagining the face of the other, standing at the window, 'smoking and peering in, the look on his face'. The look is one of grief 'or terror coming loose/ and drifting, like a leaf,/ into the flames'. I want to ask a deliberately naïve question, in order to promote what might be considered a strong reading of these lines. To whom does the terror belong? Is it merely that of the one who returns, or the subject who speaks also? Is the face of the other-to-come an anticipation for the subject of his own terror? Is it an echo already returning as the possibility that the subject must own? Which is to say, is this, the possibility of the face of the other, nothing other than a figure for the primordial opening of Being that crosses from the invisible to the visible, as the echo of Being itself (Heidegger 1999, 75)? And is this not what takes place, to call a halt, and bring us up short, in every act of crossing in the text of John Burnside?

14 These are, I think, questions of perspective as well as perception. The perception of the other in the poem requires, for its becoming visible not only that there is the perspective of the speaking subject but that the subject withdraws, becoming invisible in the act of sketching that perspective. In this there is an apparent paradox, as Jean-Luc Marion observes. For, the 'paradox attests to the visible, while at the same time [...] it constitutes [...] a counter-appearance' (Marion 2004, 1), in this case a human face that bears witness for the subject, within the 'structures of the human' (Char 1983, 140). 'What enters [and so crosses over] into visibility', Marion continues, 'is that which one should not have encountered there. [...] the paradox is born from the intervention of the invisible in the visible, whatever that might be' (Marion 2004, 2). This is what we are given to see in the other passages quoted, and elsewhere also, if we pause long enough to adjust our focus. And '[f]rom this arises the necessary effect [...] in thought but also in the sensible: it dazzles, taking the mind by surprise and shocking the gaze [...] in such a way that, far from fulfilling or satiating [...], its very excess of visibility injures' (Marion 2004, 2). Hence the force of Burnside's writing, its power to make visible, with an excess of bruising visibility, the 'apparently straightforward encounter' revealing, as Paul Batchelor has remarked in a review of *The Hunt in the Forest*, 'unexpected dimensions' that direct 'us away from stock responses' (Batchelor, n.p.). Of the poem 'Old Man Swimming' from Burnside's eleventh collection, Batchelor observes how what begins as a 'simple recollection' of a man observed at the swimming pool during childhood, shifts suddenly as memory of the other is caused to echo through 'the blue-grey of the park', which brings to mind the swimmer's eye colour. For Batchelor this grounds the moment while at the same time leaving in place the 'meditative silence that lies behind language; by the structures of our memories; and by colour' (Batchelor, n.p). As elsewhere, something crosses over, and we are 'regularly surprised by moments of intense beauty' (Bracke 421).

15 One such moment emerges from the contemplation of a painting that provides the title of the poem, 'Pieter Brueghel: Winter Landscape with Skaters and Bird Trap, 1565' (2011, 59–60). In the poem, Burnside suggests that 'we have to imagine' the everyday world being left behind, in an 'escape from hardship' for Brueghel's subjects. These subjects retain however 'his private hurt, her secret dread'. Admittedly, 'it seems a fable and perhaps it is'. They—these unknown figures behind the representation of whom lies drudgery, unhappiness, abuse, casual moments of domestic violence, the absence of love, are seen in what 'seems a fable and perhaps it is'. Yet for the poet, there is that moment of response to a call, a recognition in the activity of the nameless others, so that their lives and ours echo with a shared sense of

Being. We are grounded in recalling ourselves in them. For 'we live in peril, die in happenstance', the ice at once all too real and a powerful trope for all that might, or can befall us at any moment, such is the precarious condition of Being. Yet from out this, there appears 'still a chance'

a man might slide towards an old  
belonging, momentarily involved  
in nothing but the present, skating out  
towards a white  
horizon, fair  
and gifted with grace  
to skate forever, slithering as he goes  
but hazarding a guess that someone else  
is close beside him, other to his other. (2011, 60)

16 So he skates, and the narrator of *Glister* observes that 'I am stepping forward into this vast, impossibly brilliant light. I step forward with the feeling that I'm going to fall, or be swallowed up, and instead I am standing right in the middle of that unbearable light. [...] Everything I know is gone, and all that remains is [...] the slow insistent motion of the waters [...] turning on the shore and in my mind' (255). So the subject crosses over, stepping out from the invisible to become visible momentarily, only to disappear, to retreat. But the reader is left with this echo, this revelation of Being. For as the 'I' disappears, so the skater skates out of a forever present, into our consciousness, revealing to us ourselves as 'other to his other'.

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