Narrative Constitution of Friendship

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ABSTRACT: We argue that friendship is constituted in the practice of narration, not merely identified through psychological or sociological criteria. We show that whether two people have, as Aristotle argues, 'lived together' in 'mutually acknowledged goodwill' can be determined only through a narrative reconstruction of a shared past. We demonstrate this with a close reading of Thomas Bernhard's Wittgenstein's Nephew: A Friendship *(1982). We argue that this book provides not only an illustration but also an enactment of the practice of friendship as the urge to redeem—and thus to instantiate—Aristotelian* suzên *('living together') by means of its telling.*

RÉSUMÉ : Nous soutenons que l'amitié se constitue dans la pratique de la narration, et n'est donc pas identifiable uniquement par des critères psychologiques ou sociologiques. En effet, que deux personnes aient, comme Aristote le fait valoir, «vécu ensemble» dans la «bienveillance mutuellement reconnue» ne peut être déterminé qu'à travers une reconstruction narrative d'un passé partagé. Cela est démontré par une lecture attentive du Neveu de Wittgenstein : une amitié *(1982) de Thomas Bernhard. Nous soutenons que ce livre fournit non seulement une illustration, mais aussi une mise en scène de la pratique de l'amitié comme envie de racheter — et donc d'instancier — par son récit le* suzên *(«vivre ensemble») aristotélicien.*

Keywords: friendship, Thomas Bernhard, Aristotle, narrative, literature and philosophy

1. Introduction

In this article, we argue for what we call the 'narrative constitution of friendship,' by way of clarifying and deepening Aristotle's insight that friendship depends both on mutually acknowledged goodwill and on *suzên*

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('living together'). Our view is that friendship is constituted by the telling of a life together. Doubt about the status of the relationship occasions such a story, when coupled with the authorial urge to redeem or vindicate what could be a friendship. A friendship is thus acknowledged and identified not by the familiar sort of (psychological or sociological) criteria but by the very practice of accounting for it.

We develop this unfamiliar view through a reading of Austrian author Thomas Bernhard's *Wittgenstein's Nephew: A Friendship*.[1] In this short book originally published in German in 1982, Paul Wittgenstein, the nephew of Ludwig's cousin[2] and the man whom the narrator considers his one "real friend,"[3] has recently died. But the narrator does not attend the funeral, despite Paul's hopes that he would speak at it. Reflecting on their relationship, he comes to doubt that it should even count as a friendship. He suspects that he might in fact have been exploiting Paul in the years he knew him, benefiting from Paul's terminal if idiosyncratic illness for his own existential survival and, more cravenly, for his literary success. Worried, the narrator comes to retell their life together. This attempt is so strained by his struggles to order and make meaningful their unusual relationship that he veers to the philosophical, ruminative, solipsistic, and polemical. Yet such convulsions mark not a sense of distraction or estrangement; rather they attest to the narrator's serious commitment to his story, a commitment that is a mark of the friendship's success. For, by succeeding in narratively constructing some sort of life together, the narrator not only realizes their friendship, as we will argue, but also succeeds in absolving himself from the charge of mere exploitation. That the narrator may constitute the

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1 *Wittgenstein's Nephew* consolidated the reputation of Bernhard (1931–1989) in both France and the United States. Bernhard had already won many of the most prestigious German-language literary prizes.

2 The connection to the philosopher matters to the interpretation of the text, according to Perloff (1996: 156–161), who claims that Bernhard "incorporates the meanings and strategies of the *Tractatus* and the *Investigations* directly into the text," identifying two: the idea that binaries make sense only in their dynamic relationship; and critique through repetition rather than definition or 'I'-based criticism. Perloff's reading mentions friendship only obliquely, closing with the gnomic if Aristotelian observation that the reader eventually recognizes that "'he' *is* 'me.'" We develop this thought.

3 Bernhard (1988, 22). "Real friend" translates "einen tatsächlichen Freund," Bernhard (2008, 228). The narrator is identifiable as a version of Bernhard himself—who in fact knew members of the Wittgenstein family—but with various fictionalizations to be discussed later. Citations of *Wittgenstein's Nephew* will henceforth be to the English translation, first published in 1988, and will be provided in the body of the text. Occasional citations of the German text will also appear parenthetically, and refer to the 2008 volume of the standard critical edition of his work.

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friendship too late—when it is no longer possible for them to live together, Paul being dead—is less a matter of paradox than of regret. The book, which has the generic designation "A Friendship," thus *is*, in a certain (paradoxical) way, the friendship itself, the effort (and its printed record) to retell a life together, not merely the single instance of a whimsical literary sub-genre. Accordingly, *Wittgenstein's Nephew* is not simply an aesthetic work providing ethical insight,[4] but an aesthetic work that shows the coincidence or blurriness of any distinction between two form-giving activities: aesthetic activity and ethical activity.[5] Friendship is less 'in' two people (which a book is not) than in the intentional activity of its recognition (which a book can be). Put another way, whereas narrative may seem a reflective act and friendship a practical act, in fact friendship is an act of acknowledgement, simultaneously reflective and practical.

This view appears to risk disqualifying most friendships from the status of 'friendship,' if—as seems typically to be the case—most putative friends do not narrate their lives together. We may think we judge particular relationships (our own and others') to be friendships, after all, without narratively reconstructing what we see. Yet this thought is mistaken; it overlooks the reason for identifying relationships as friendships. Assertions about friendship are ethical, not merely descriptive. They are made to defend or reject the claims made by friends (or non-friends) against one another. Such assertions occur in moments of doubt: 'if we were friends, I would be justified in having asked that favour; but, if not, would I have just been capitalizing on his weaknesses?' A person resolves these doubts by determining whether he has in fact 'lived together' with his putative friend. Determining this is not to be done simply by looking for a piece of evidence, as would be the case were friendship defined by psychodynamic criteria. Narration is the only way that this *living*, and thus living together—which unfolds in time, with intentions and actions—can be determined.[6] Indeed, without the interpretative work of narration—the retrospective interpretation of two people's activities as meaningfully linked—there is simply no pre-existing fact of

[4] Klebes (2006: 81) studies this book as one of "Wittgenstein's Novels" and claims that Bernhard succeeds in writing a philosophical novel in a way that neither Ludwig nor Paul did (see below). We agree in part.

[5] The ambiguous relationship between friendship and questions of form is a familiar problem; see, e.g., Sharp (1986: 4, 26–29) and Jusdanis (2014: 1–5, 27–37), who, however, focus on the parallel between rather than the overlap of friendship and literary form. Meyer (2008) comes closer to our position, arguing that continuous memory is necessary for (ethically-rewarding) friendship, but does not discuss the role of narrative in the construction of memory.

[6] For arguments that narrative allows our coming to terms with temporal existence, see Ricœur (1983–1985) and Cochrane (2014: 305–306), and about the importance of multiple perspectives in a narrative that tells of a life, see Moran (2015, with bibliography at 10n1).

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the matter whether some *suzên* occurred (by contrast, say, with brute physical proximity).[7] Our account dispels the impression that there are billions of friendships that lack the imprimatur of narrative reflection; relationships turn from acquaintanceship to friendship when they become, no matter how unobtrusively, the objects of narrative reconstruction.

We can put this yet another way. Aristotle shows that friendship requires mutual recognition. Even if two people unbeknownst to one another care for each other and engage in parallel activities, they do not count as friends until they acknowledge their sharing, somehow, in a life. This acknowledgement takes more than a sensitivity to another's affection or regard. It requires a narrative accounting of that sharing in a life. Thus the narrative constitution of friendship ends up being a deeper formulation of the familiar Aristotelian account.

Wittgenstein's Nephew has often been read as a tale of failed friendship, the narrator's (or, should the book be autobiographical,[8] Bernhard's) delusion.[9] This view assumes a static, transparent, and rather sanguine view of what it means to be friends. We argue against this view. The book reveals a philosophically provocative view of friendship, one that takes seriously its problematic aspects.[10] It manifests the narrator's struggles to reconcile his doubts with his

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[7] This narrative work is thus a mode of cognition, an idea that can be traced back to Aristotle's *Poetics* 9. In particular, the work of narrative involves the shaping of the raw material of isolated events into more than a purely chronological sequence. Such transformation requires imposing order, meaning, and value. Narration is a fundamentally interpretative activity that seeks to make sense of otherwise scattered occurrences.

[8] There is no critical consensus on *Wittgenstein's Nephew*'s status as fictional or autobiographical narrative. Bernhard had just completed his five-volume autobiography, which ends at age 19; in an interview with Jean-Louis de Rambures in *Le Monde* (January 7, 1983), he seems to claim that his efforts at autobiography stopped there. Freudenberg (1995), Betz (1997), and Pfleger (2009) read the book as mostly or completely autobiographical; Morneweg (2004: 40–42) and Billenkamp (2008: 12) read it as mostly or completely fictional. For a detailed discussion of the ambiguous status of the book *vis-à-vis* Bernhard's biography, see Pfleger (2009: 50–61).

[9] Freudenberg (1995: 247–259), Honegger (2001: 239), Klebes (2006: 74–75), Pfleger (2009: 79–80), Schaefer (1986 and 2013). Most critics, however, either ignore the role of friendship or find in it an instrument of Bernhard's other cultural or aesthetic concerns *vis-à-vis* Vienna or Austria, e.g., Konzett (1995: 251–258), Betz (1997: 296–297).

[10] These are problems that go beyond those rightly observed by Nehamas (2016: 5–7, 23, 59–63, Ch. 5).

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experience of *suzên*.[11] It is both the process and product of this construction, we maintain, that presents the constitution of friendship.[12]

But if the work *itself* is a friendship (as some other work might be a novella, or an elegy), this means that, at least for Bernhard, friendship is constituted in an unfamiliar way: narratively. We argue that this innovative conception of friendship-as-telling accounts for the book's odd structure, the exposition's vagaries, and the narrator's conflicted impulses. We also argue that it makes sense of the way we decide, in a moment of doubt, whether we are in fact friends: not through identification of perceptible or otherwise instantaneously available features of the relationship (which may seem lacking, or indeterminate, or obscured), but by determining whether we have indeed 'lived together,' an act that requires some form of narration, bestowing a sequence of shared experiences with significance, no matter how disparate or seemingly irreconcilable they may be. To be sure, these shared experiences must contain the promise (though not the pre-interpretative reality) of a true friendship. But the actualization of that friendship, we find, is realized in its telling. *Wittgenstein's Nephew* makes this telling especially salient by unfolding a narrative that emphasizes the process of its construction (its *discourse*) over the product of this construction (its *story*).[13] It is in this way that the book itself less represents friendship than brings it to be.

2. The Book and its Title, Friendship and its Failures

The narrator begins his story with a relatively detailed memory of his and Paul's parallel hospitalizations (his for lung disease, Paul's for 'madness') in the contiguous pulmonary and psychiatric wards on Vienna's Wilhelminenberg.

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[11] See Meyer (2008: 82–83) on the importance of uncertainty in confronting friendships.

[12] Bernhard, deeply influenced by Pascal, Montaigne, Schopenhauer, and Wittgenstein (on which see Höller (1993: 47)), had long given thought to the problems of friendship. In the story "Ungenach" (1968) the lawyer Moro reflects on the possibilities of friendship, ultimately deciding that it is "impossible"; see Kirchmayr (2005: 112–115). The Paul-avatar in *The Lime Works*, named Konrad, also thinks that friendship might not be possible, and his relationship with his wife even anticipates the theme of exploitation and self-sacrifice. Two works contemporaneous with *Wittgenstein's Nephew*, *Yes* (1978) and *The Loser* (1983), continue Bernhard's investigation into friendship. The former tells the story of an ostensibly self-serving friendship; the latter portrays a three-way friendship between two fellow musicians and Glenn Gould, a friendship that leads one musician to suicide, the other to a never-completed literary study of the famous pianist.

[13] One might therefore say that the narrative's story *is* its discourse. We appeal here to the classical narratological distinction between *what* is narrated and *how* it is narrated. The 'story' is the narrative's abstracted content, which is available to us only as some particular telling, or 'discourse.' See, for instance, Chapman (1978). In Bernhard's case, this discourse-level of the narrative is made explicit by means of self-reflexivity and metanarration; see Fludernik (2003).

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Though it was during this stay in 1967 that the two "sealed" their friendship (56), as the narrator emphasizes, their relationship extends further back. With the apparent aim of bringing their life together into better focus, the narrator sets out from this lengthier opening scene, sometimes by association, often without transition, to fragments of older and newer memories, some pertaining to his shared experiences with Paul, others to events to which Paul was marginal, and yet others where he is absent or seems irrelevant. These memories sometimes give way to isolated anecdotes about Paul in his life apart from the narrator and to the narrator's often vitriolic musings. Such non-narrative reflections ultimately eclipse the episodic and anecdotal passages. By the end, the narrator leaves us with little more than his melancholic doubts about that friendship with Paul, and the sense that he has, all along, been trying to establish the meaningfulness of the "scraps of memories" (19) with which his now uncertain friendship has left him.

This rather unusual structure of the book finds expression in its title. The first part thereof, "Wittgenstein's Nephew," simultaneously designates the narrator's friend Paul (without naming him); recalls the famous philosopher;[14] and alludes to Denis Diderot's *Rameau's Nephew*. That book, which, like Bernhard's, has no fixed genre, identifies a related problem of friendship and self-definition.[15] The purpose of the second part of the title, "A Friendship," is less clear. Bernhard scholarship has called it a "subtitle."[16] Yet it is German publishing convention to include a generic designation on title pages and (typically) on covers. More notoriously, it was also Bernhard's own practice, beginning with the first volume of his autobiography and continuing to his final work, to employ ambiguous secondary titles, especially for those works—such as *Woodcutters: An Irritation* (1985) and *Extinction: A Decline* (1986)—whose genres, because they sit somewhere between

[14] On Bernhard's interests in Wittgenstein, see his *Correction* (1975), Sorg (1977: 182–188), Barthofer (1979), Weber (1981), and Perloff (1996: 145–146, 155–161). In a letter, Bernhard wrote that writing about Wittgenstein would be like writing about himself (2015: 634). Wittgenstein himself had a complicated relationship with friendship; see Savicky (2014).

[15] Similarities go beyond this thematic parallel: key portions of Bernhard's book, and all of *Rameau's Nephew*, comprise café-talk; while two crucial scenes in *Wittgenstein's Nephew* take place on a bench, Diderot's book starts with a scene on a bench; Rameau's nephew, like Paul, is a crazy and erratic opera lover; and both books are engaged in a trenchant critique of their respective national cultures. Bernhard would have known Diderot's book in Goethe's famous translation. In a book on Voltaire that Bernhard owned (Georg Holmsten's *Voltaire in Selbstzeugnissen und Bilddokumenten* (Rowohlt, 1971)) he marked up a page on which Goethe's description of Voltaire, which originally appeared in the appendix to his translation, is excerpted. On a mostly-blank advertisement page in this same book, Bernhard wrote, "Wittgenstein's Nephew / I knew him for 10 years, and so on." For more on Diderot–Bernhard, see Betz (1997: 293–296).

[16] E.g., Honegger (2001: 239), Klebes (2006: 73), Gignoux (2010: 396).

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fictional and factual narrative, are his own. Bernhard appears to be giving idiosyncratic names to idiosyncratic forms of writing. We have good reason to suspect, then, that the second part, "A Friendship," designates, like 'novel,' the genre, what the book *is*, and not the contents, what the book is *about*.

But an argument from German and Bernhardian convention will not alone support the argumentative weight we put on the second part of the title. Below, we argue more thoroughly against the view that this second part simply describes the content of the book. Indeed, as *Wittgenstein's Nephew* progresses, we come to have increasing difficulties taking what the narrator calls his disconnected "notes" (19, 82, 98) as simply a *description* of a friendship.

At first glance, the narrator's relationship with Paul appears to conform remarkably well to Aristotle's ideal and by consequence the conventional notion of 'best friends.' This notion involves joint activity oriented by moral and intellectual virtue, practiced by people who so share in sensibility and understanding as to be, in some respects, the other's self, and with the triple end of pleasure, self-improvement, and the advancement of the other's good. Especially in the book's first half, the narrator claims to have gained a partner with whom he shares in aesthetic experience; through whom he expands his consciousness about what he cares most for; and thanks to whom he might understand himself and his life better (see, e.g., 22). He and Paul would spend untold hours critiquing society at cafés, listening to music, and driving around the countryside, and in so doing actualize and intensify this especially authentic form of togetherness. As the narrator muses, even those "who have meant everything and been everything to us at certain critical moments or certain critical periods of our lives" we hesitate to call our friends—at least until they have died, for we fear "being totally, embarrassingly, and ludicrously wrong." With Paul, by contrast, the narrator proclaims, he "had no such inhibition" (81). Paul was, while still alive, not just an "extraordinary friend" (17), but in fact "a real friend" (22).

And yet signs that the narrator's relationship with Paul might not be so clearly an extraordinary and authentic friendship appear not far into the book. The narrator soon mentions, if obliquely, other relationships that were apparently just as significant. Paul, for instance, had a long and loving second marriage with a woman, Edith, whose death may have precipitated his own demise (34, 40, 49–50, 77). The narrator has his own ultimate relationship, with his "*life support*" (*Lebensmensch*, 224), "the one person who has meant more to me than any since the death of my grandfather, the woman who shares my life and to whom I have owed not just a great deal but, frankly, more or less everything" (18–19).[17]

[17] In real life, this was Hedwig Stravianicek, a woman thirty-seven years Bernhard's senior, who was for him as much a mother figure as a friend. Honegger (2001: 12, 15) notes that Bernhard's actual "closest friend" during approximately the time of this book, 1965–1975, was Karl Ignaz Hennetmair (not Paul Wittgenstein), a friendship that appears to have ended abruptly and completely.

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These relationships do not in themselves cast shadows on the relationship with Paul; but they do hint that the centrality of Paul to the narrator's life may come less from his relative objective importance than from the perspective the narrator is striving to maintain. Further complicating this picture is that the narrator admits that he and Paul needed "repeated *proofs of friendship*" (65) and that their relationship was "naturally difficult": "It was the kind of friendship that has to be daily renewed and re-won, and in the course of time proved exceedingly strenuous" (64). This strain comes to a head on the Wilhelminenberg. At precisely the moment when their friendship was supposedly deepened, the narrator reacts to Paul's fits of affection with actual fear (32–33).

Furthermore, the narrator's relationship with Paul, if indeed a friendship, reveals itself to be a highly unconventional one. The picture that emerges is one of at best intermittent companionship. The narrator lingers on episodes in which Paul is tangential. The long passages relating the narrator's prize receptions (65–73) and one particular theatre production (93–98) are presented explicitly as evidence of Paul's support, understanding, and truthfulness *as* a friend (65, 97), and yet Paul himself plays almost no role in them. Moreover, we learn that the narrator was hardly ever even invited to Paul's apartment, despite its being in the same building as a café they frequented. The friend's absence even characterizes their moments together. One of the narrator's fondest memories is of the evenings they spent listening to music, "without saying a word" and in separate rooms of the house (34).[18]

The peculiar and repeated separation of the friends is most evident in the opening passages of the book detailing their shared convalescence, where nearly every attempt to overcome the (small) distance between them is thwarted. Amid lengthy diatribes against doctors and psychiatrists, the narrator describes his attempts and failures to meet up with his friend. Although Paul does at one point show up at his bedside and agrees that they should pay each other regular visits, this "plan was put into effect only once," namely, when the two meet halfway between their respective wards, "on a bench just inside the chest patients' territory" (45). This meeting on the bench, however, is an abject failure: Paul, unable to stop weeping, repeats "*Grotesque, grotesque!*" and the narrator has to bring him back to his ward.

The bench scene is echoed later in the book when, roles reversed, the narrator breaks down in the face of his dying friend, fleeing Paul's apartment—"I suddenly could not stand being with him any longer" (78)—and taking refuge "on a bench in the City Park" (79).[19] If the first bench episode "had set a permanent seal [*immer besiegelt*, 262] on [their] friendship" (56) but also

[18] On the importance of joint listening to music as part of living together in the rich way described by Aristotle, see Cochrane (2009) and, more sceptically, Zangwill (2012).

[19] The confrontation with Paul takes place while seated, as the narrator mentions four times, on the Wittgenstein family sofa—in other words, on a kind of domestic bench.

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showed its frailty, this second bench episode appears to dissolve it, but also to occasion for it a renewed understanding. This understanding comes in two stages. The narrator explains his response as a fear of death; and he understands Paul's and his own breakdowns as defence mechanisms triggered by an inability to confront one another's—and thus their own—dying. "I no longer visited [Paul] because I was afraid of a *direct* confrontation with death. I constantly repressed this thought and finally expelled it from my mind" (98). But it is precisely by way of this realization that the narrator comes to the most damning assessment of his relationship with Paul: he only used his friend to draw the strength he himself needed to survive. "I had used Paul's dying for my own advantage, exploiting it for all I was worth" (99). These worries of exploitation pose the most serious threat to a reading of the book that takes it to depict a successful, even true, friendship. It would thus be strained to call "A Friendship" a descriptive subtitle. More reason, then, to take it as a genre-designation. But what would this mean, and why would Bernhard create and name such a genre?

3. Narrating a Life Together

At face value, *Wittgenstein's Nephew* is the narrator's—and even Bernhard's—attempt to memorialize his friend Paul, and further, to satisfy Paul's request that the narrator hold the eulogy at his funeral: "Two hundred friends will come to my funeral and you must make a speech at the graveside." This request frames the narrative, appearing both as epigraph and in the final lines, where the narrator admits that he failed to make the funeral (100); in fact, he says, he has not even been to the grave.[20] Though he never explicitly claims to feel guilty, some readers have thought that in writing this book Bernhard (as actual friend of Paul Wittgenstein) must have recognized his failing, and used the book to honour, however belatedly, his friend's request.[21] While not implausible, this view conflates the narrator and the author, and worse, ignores the complexities we have shown in the narrative of the friendship.

Wittgenstein's Nephew demonstrates how the effort to narrate a life together can constitute the friendship itself. The narrator claims that he and Paul became real friends during their shared stay at opposite ends of the Wilhelminenberg. Yet, despite their proximity, they saw each other only twice. What, then, could have caused the deepening of their friendship? Perhaps the natural desire for nearness while in recuperation made Paul's company so appealing: "I longed for nothing more intensely than to see Paul again, having for so many months

[20] In an interview, Bernhard confirms that he in fact missed Paul's funeral. Kurt Hofmann: "Why weren't you at Wittgenstein's funeral?" Bernhard: "Because I wasn't there. I left town that day. I didn't know that he was dead, otherwise I probably would have gone. Maybe" (Hofmann 2001: 143–144).

[21] E.g., Anderson (2002: 122).

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been deprived of all contact with his mind and having almost suffocated among hundreds of other minds" (27). But it may not have been the thirst for communion with this sympathetic man that deepened their friendship, but what it led the narrator, a writer after all, to do: "The day will come when I really will visit Paul, I thought, and I made some notes about things that I intended to discuss with him … At that time I found it quite simply impossible, without Paul, to have any conversation about music or philosophy or politics or mathematics" (27). He wrote himself, albeit sketchily, *into* the matter of a friendship. Not all of his reflections were positive: "I suddenly hesitated, wondering whether it was really wise to establish a link …, whether it might not do both of us more harm than good. … I was suddenly scared of seeing him … The possibility of Paul's coming to visit me became a nightmare" (31–32). In both cases, the narrator places himself into conversational activity with Paul; he can do so only because he recognizes the importance of their earlier conversations together. It was not some affective intensity or fresh discovery of shared interests that deepened the friendship; it was the narrator's making a meaningful proto-literary reconstruction of their past together.

Bernhard had wanted since the mid-1960s to write about Paul Wittgenstein.[22] The narrator indicates that he began taking notes about Paul around 1967 (98). While these notes referred mostly to "music and crime, to the Hermann Pavilion and the Ludwig Pavilion [the friends' two wards in the hospital] and the intense relations between the two" pavilions, they also recorded Paul's having "had some remarkable things to say about politics, about wealth and poverty, all on the basis of his own experiences, the experience of one of the most sensitive men I have known" (99). Indeed, the narrator has an even larger treasury of remembered stories, "thousands of Paul's anecdotes in which he is the central figure" (60), which he has been hoping, for the duration of the friendship, to use as a basis for writing about Paul and his relationship with him. Here we see most plainly the connection between friendship and narration. Fitting these stories together gives meaning to the men's shared experiences.

But it is precisely in wanting to write about Paul that the narrator comes to worry that his literary impulse has taken the place of proper affection and attachment—the traditional criteria of friendship. Just as he "had *traced*

[22] Drafts of his early novel *The Lime Works* (1970) indicate that he initially wanted to name Konrad, its main character, Paul Wittgenstein; Honegger (2001: 5) adds that Prince Saurau in *Gargoyles* (1967) "may well owe some of his enlightened insanity to" Paul Wittgenstein; and Mittelmayer (2011: 25) claims that Paul is a "paradigmatic figure for countless Bernhard protagonists." In *Concrete* (1982), the fictional narrator mentions his acquaintance Paul Wittgenstein's death in relation to his feelings about Vienna and illness. Bernhard also states in an endnote to his play *Ritter, Dene, Voss* (1984) that, during his work on it, his "thoughts were mainly concentrated on [his] friend Paul and on [Paul's] uncle Ludwig Wittgenstein."

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[in notes] his dying over a period of more than twelve years," the narrator claims he "had used Paul's dying for [his] own advantage, exploiting it for all [he] was worth" (99). On the one hand, then, narrating his shared life with Paul helped constitute the friendship; on the other hand, it risked separating the two. And yet, coming at the book's end, the narrator's recognition of this separation—and thus his recognition of the hazard of giving (narrative) form to his friend's life while trying not to forget what matters, the friend himself—blends into his most human description of his friendship: Paul's request that the narrator speak at his funeral, and the narrator's admission not to have yet visited Paul's grave. The narrator's fear about transmuting Paul into literary material, and thereby exploiting him, threatened to hinder him from writing about his life together with Paul. Yet it is just such writing that constitutes the friendship and vitiates his worries that their relationship was simply one of selfish exploitation.

The story concludes, as we have just said, with the narrator's admission that he failed his friend's final request to "make a speech at the graveside." Since we naturally imagine this speech to be a eulogy, an accounting of the friend's life, we are encouraged to think that the narrator's reflections in *Wittgenstein's Nephew* constitute that speech. Were this the case, the book would allow the narrator finally to discharge his obligation, in a belated act of friendship. But the reflections this 100-page book comprise would constitute an absurd graveside speech.[23] This is because it is not about Paul himself so much as about the narrator's attempt to articulate the meaningfulness of his relationship with Paul, which necessarily coincides with reconstructing the course of that relationship. Rather than take *Wittgenstein's Nephew* as itself a eulogy, we should see it as focusing our attention on the nature and practices of reflecting narratively on a life. In one episode, the narrator, having just expostulated on the importance of his friendship with Paul, says that he persuaded Paul to write his autobiography. Paul modified this advice, saying he intended to write "a thoroughly philosophical account of his life, *not just a rigmarole* [keine Schwafelei, 265], as he put it." (As it turns out, he never wrote more than a few pages (59).)[24] A little later, as the narrator recounts Paul's waning days, he digresses to his own award speeches, which themselves turn out to be philosophical reflections on life (65–72). Both attempts at recounting one's life make thematic the importance we accord to telling a life for making one's life meaningful *as* a life. The narrator's attempt to recount two lives together is thus philosophical *about* friendship; but it is also constitutive *of* that friendship, making it *meaningful*, which is to say, a friendship at all.

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[23] The relatively large font and small pages of the German first edition result in 163 pages. In the new critical edition we have used, as well as in the English translation, it is exactly 100 pages.

[24] Fragments of Paul Wittgenstein's work were published in Schaefer (1980).

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4. The Philosophy of Friendship

Many of those who write in the philosophy of friendship seek out friendship's necessary and sufficient conditions, its definition, or its central and penumbral instances. They take as unsatisfying, even if phenomenologically plausible, Michel de Montaigne's 'because it was he, because it was I.' Such a view seems to make friendship irrational, unexplained, and irresponsive to what we find most important about people. But they also take as unsatisfying those definitions that found friendship on the more explicable traits or essential humanity of the friend. These views risk treating the friend merely as a (replaceable) vehicle for either desirable traits or a respect-worthy core.[25] An appealing solution to this apparent dichotomy comes in a recent paper, Benjamin Bagley's "Loving Someone in Particular." Inspired by the models of *Wuthering Heights* and jazz improvisation, Bagley argues that a friendship gains both significance and particularity as a mutually dependent exercise in self-constitution, the concerted search for life-guiding norms. He observes that only with certain people can I develop and receive help in developing myself; these are the ones I call my friends. The more I work on myself with another, and thus the more we share in life-guiding norms, the more irreplaceable, and explicable, my friend becomes to me. We begin as incompletely self-knowing individuals, but girded by a sense of promise we stick together, and end up finding ourselves through that friendly other. In this analysis, Bagley does not, somewhat surprisingly, cite Aristotle; but in an important way his work realizes and improves on some key strands of Aristotelian theory of friendship. It is worth setting out these Aristotelian strands. All the same, Bagley's work does not make certain elements explicit enough, especially the importance of recognizing a friendship as a friendship, and the route by which this may be achieved. Nevertheless, his account allows for, even presupposes, the one we have presented here; we take that fact as useful corroboration.

Aristotle argues that friendship depends on mutually acknowledged goodwill (*Nicomachean Ethics* 8.2). This means that a friend takes his friend's good as his own, and finds his own good to be shared by his friend. This reciprocal affection and valuing might appear to demand no actual proximity or performance. But Aristotle notes that inactive friends—those living apart, not communicating, simply holding the other in their good wishes but not doing anything to advance their common interests together—drift away (8.2 1157b12). Inactive friends are not just precarious, however; they represent the mere potentiality for full friendship. Active friendship requires joint activity; Aristotle says that nothing characterizes friends as much as living together (*suzên*, 8.5, 9.5, 9.9–10). "Whatever it is for each person that serves as the substance or purpose of life, in this he wishes to share with his friends: thus some drink together, some play dice together, others exercise together, or hunt together, or philosophize together"

[25] See, for example, Velleman (1999), Kolodny (2003), Frankfurt (2004), and more generally Lynch (2005).

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(9.12 1172a2–5). These joint activities pass the time; but at least for reasonable people, they also lead to mutual self-improvement unavailable to those who do not know each other so well (9.9 1170a11), and similarly to an expansion of consciousness and the pleasure taken in life (9.9 1170a12–b16).

All this strikes us as a largely sound view of friendship. Nevertheless, Aristotle does not equally emphasize every key aspect of friendship, and we think he underplays one. When taking our friend to share our good, sometimes we worry that we may end up exploiting him, benefiting from him in a way not adequately justified by our shared activity. Presumably, Aristotle does take this worry seriously—he notes often that many of us strive, even despite ourselves, for self-sufficiency (9.9) and fret about the best way to discharge our obligations in asymmetrical relationships (8.7–8, 8.10–9.2, cumulatively Aristotle's longest discussion in his work on friendship). Our knowledge of our friend's attitude toward us is incomplete, especially during certain types of separation (when we may still be yielding goods from the friendship). And, if we are successful in a way that our friend is not—vagaries of luck making this always possible—we can fear that our success in fact depended on his failure. What the two books about friendship in Aristotle's *Ethics* do not emphasize is the way in which ameliorating this fear—a conscientiousness for which the reasonable people Aristotle imagines in ideal friendships would be prone—may constitute a large and even essential part of the relationship between friends. In a friendship that spans years, the mutuality of goodwill must at least once be acknowledged, but also cannot be acknowledged once and for all; doubts arise, and with them efforts—of varied success—at re-acknowledgement.[26] Likewise, the togetherness of living cannot simply be established once and for all; each personal victory or jealous moment demands renewed scrutiny about the share in one's life played by the friend. Though this self-questioning dynamic points only at the imperfect attainment of friendship, not the inadequacy of Aristotle's definition, it does seem from the practical perspective central to our experience of friendship.[27]

Bagley's article shows how friendship develops from a state of partial ignorance. A person lacks complete understanding of his own values, and those of another; but sympathy between the two allows the joint discovery of those values. This occurs improvisationally, a listening to the other, interpreting where he is going, and taking up that direction for oneself. This appeal to joint improvisation gives further definition to Aristotle's idea of mutually acknowledged goodwill and living together. For Bagley, it is living together that improves one's ability to acknowledge both the other's good and one's own, because it is

[26] This is the thesis of Cavell (1984). See also Meyer (2008: 82–83).

[27] In an interview, Bernhard suggests that a lack of togetherness was somehow essential to his actual friendship with Paul Wittgenstein: "The less we saw one another, the more intense the friendship became" (Hoffmann 2001: 143). The implication may be that distance occasioned doubt, productively.

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in the living, and the acknowledging, that there comes to be a definitive good for which both parties seek. This view identifies the uncertainty in which, or through which, much friendship occurs.

All the same, we identify two lacunae in Bagley's account. The first is the same with which we charged Aristotle. Improvisation may lead us momentarily astray, into conflict and misunderstanding. There may be many points where we simply doubt that we are in sync or in tune with our companion. One person goes off on a long solo; is that part of our joint song, or is it a turning away from our partnership? We are playing dissonantly; will that yield a refreshing sound, or is it just a sign of incompatible musical visions? Jazz improvisation, especially in its free jazz or free improvisatory incarnations, seems even to depend on these constant risks of departure, incongruence, and disaster.[28] Great music—as well as much terrible music—can be made only in hazard. Just so, friendships based in routine, on a script, as mere ornamentation of a standard, lack a certain authenticity; those with vulnerability, heedless energy, and originality can fail, and often do, but may also be the only real ones. So the chance of doubt, and the desire to redeem (that is, *make*) the song or friendship from it, seems essential to good improvisation. Indeed, it is perhaps always at the moment of doubt that the song or friendship is reappraised, the direction reconsidered, the effort redoubled.

The second lacuna is related to something that Aristotle makes quite clear: friendship requires the (continued) mutual acknowledgement of that friendship. For Bagley, friendship depends on a history of joint improvisation. But friendship, generally understood, either requires knowing that one is in it or does not require knowing it. It is implausible to think that one could be in joint improvisation without knowing it. So friendship, on Bagley's improvisational model, requires knowing one is in it. Yet to know that one is in joint improvisation takes not just looking at the current situation but recognizing the *history* of that joint improvisation. What this recognition amounts to is a vision of living together through time that has been building on what preceded and that aims for some as-yet undecided future. It amounts to an interpretation of the sequence of joint activities as meaningful. This sequence is meaningful in that each moment of reflection is meant to re-orient that joint activity toward continued and better joint activity. Translated into the social sphere, this improvisatory model describes an activity that is essentially narrative: the retrospective interpretation of a continually unfolding sequence of events as meaningful. We argue that it is precisely such meaning-making activity as carried out in the retelling of a shared past that is, ultimately, necessary to friendship.

Putting these two elements together, we find that Bagley's theory implies, even as it does not state, what our narrative theory claims. The experimentation and indefiniteness that characterizes improvisation means that there will always be junctures of doubt. It is most at these junctures of doubt—and even of

[28] Bailey (1992, 83–84).

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ambivalence, frustration, and fear—that we re-evaluate whether we are in fact in joint improvisation rather than just in solitary reverie or exploitative asymmetry. We determine the existence of a history as joint improvisation by means of narrative creation, trying to make meaningful the sequence of activities we have lived through together.

5. Two Final Considerations

In the previous section, we emphasized *mutual* acknowledgement. Yet the narrative constitution of friendship seems to ignore that mutuality, to the extent that, in our example, only one friend is engaging in narrative reflection. *Wittgenstein's Nephew* is not a story told by the narrator and Paul together. It is, rather, the story of a friendship told unilaterally. That it is a story told unilaterally seems to ground the narrator's very worry that he has failed to be a friend, has exploited Paul for all he's worth, and has done little but advance his own literary career. In fact, a number of readers of *Wittgenstein's Nephew* have taken basically this line.[29] Joint improvisation has been replaced with solipsistic storytelling.

The superficial plausibility of this conceptual worry allows us to clarify our position. It would be misplaced to expect *Wittgenstein's Nephew* to have two narrators, or that Paul should have to write his own book—*Wittgenstein's Nephew's Friend: The Same Friendship?* Narratives are told from a particular perspective, and recognition—even mutual recognition—happens from a particular perspective. The narrator seeks to establish that *suzên* and mutual recognition did exist, which requires him to establish that Paul himself worked to recognize (through narrative reconstruction) a friendship with himself. The narrator's occasional attention to Paul alone, and himself alone, points to his effort to see the matter from both sides, though of course that effort is his own.

The more urgent problem is ethical, not conceptual. A risk of unilateral narrative constitution of a friendship is that without any constraints from the other's perspective it runs the risk of no longer being true to the shared experiences of the friends, and of thus becoming both fictional and self-serving. The narrator of *Wittgenstein's Nephew* explicitly raises the possibility of such self-serving impulses, as we have noted. These worries are the same doubts we have posited as essential motivators of the narration and constitution of friendship. That the narrator recounts, in his very attempt to reconstruct a life lived together with

[29] See footnote 8. Readings of the book that take the narrator to be unreliable and thus dismiss the authenticity of the friendship rely on the autobiographical status of the narrative as the authority against which to judge this unreliability, a status that—as we noted above—is by no means clear. The general *uncertainty* or *instability* of the narrative voice—its shifting stances and emotions, its lack of unified intention, its proclivity for contradiction—is in fact a symptom of the doubts that motivate the telling in the first place. These we have maintained are integral to the book's form *as* friendship. Paradoxes in accounting for friendship 'from one side,' as it were, have arisen since Plato's *Lysis*.

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Paul, his self-incriminating worries that he used Paul merely as the object of a good story, even when Paul was in the worst state imaginable, a state that demanded above any the care for a friend that the narrator did not offer, provides good evidence (even if it does not prove) that the (possibly fictional) story is authentic, and that the narrative impulse is not merely self-serving. That the account presented in *Wittgenstein's Nephew* does not take the shape of the conventional story manifests the narrator's good faith attempt at reconstructing his past with Paul, not reimagining it. It attests to the narrator's intention to redeem his (at times fraught or reprehensible) memories of living together—an act that refuses to erase or whitewash those doubtful aspects that originally called for this redemption. It is in this way that the telling of a friendship, even when done alone, can validly constitute something shared.

For all that, there is something true in the hope that there might be two narratives told. In seeking the mutuality of recognition, we seek our friend's effort also to engage in a similar attempt to recuperate that mutuality. Though at first unconcerned, the narrator turns pessimistic as to whether Paul shared his efforts. This pessimism is a source of more than sadness; his worry that he exploited Paul has a basis only if Paul did not see the narrator as his friend, or did not try to. Paul's exclamation, "*Grotesque, grotesque!*" (45), marks this ambivalence in his intentions to recuperate his friendship with the narrator. For while with this exclamation Paul appears to dismiss the very idea of a friendship, only by having looked back and accounted for his arrival at this juncture with his friend could he have voiced his melancholic resignation. And it is this effort at looking back that grounds the friendship. "*Grotesque, grotesque!*" is at once an expression of doubt, fear, and the profound desire to allay these same worries.

A second consideration is related to the first. We have argued that narration constitutes a friendship. Yet the narrator is telling the story of his living together with Paul only after Paul's death. Might there be something absurd about constituting a friendship *after* the death of one of the partners, at which point any living together is obviously impossible? Or, by contrast, is it somehow necessary, in the same way that Aristotle says that we can count no man happy until he is dead (*Nicomachean Ethics* 1.10)? The narrator did, after all, suggest something like this, while making an exception for Paul.[30]

[30] "We occasionally manage to count three or four people to whom in the long run we owe … not just something but a great deal—people who have meant everything and been everything to us at certain critical moments or certain critical periods of our lives. … Yet at the same time we should not forget that the few people in question are all dead, that they died long ago, for bitter experience naturally inhibits us from including the living in our calculation—those who are still with us, perhaps even at our side—unless we want to risk being totally, embarrassingly, and ludicrously wrong, and hence making fools of ourselves, above all in our own eyes. I would certainly have no such inhibition with regard to Ludwig Wittgenstein's nephew Paul" (80–81).

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As it turns out, the narrator seems quite nervous about this question, thinking, perhaps, that his narrative reconstruction comes too late. The death of his friend could be in some sense the source of the ultimate doubt: *How could we possibly be friends? Paul is dead*. But in a perverse way, the death may have been necessary, at least in this case, for the friendship's narrative reconstruction. Paul's dying, the narrator avers, was the source of his own survival. His conviction about this leads him to suspect that he exploited Paul and thus was not in fact a friend, a worry that motivates the narrating of their life together. But Paul also, on this view, kept the narrator alive so as to respond to this very doubt. Now, friendship after death is impossible only if friendship requires two simultaneous narratives. But we have argued against this view. Furthermore, while friendship is constituted by narrating a life together, which extends back in time, whether one's friend is alive at that moment of narrative reconstruction is relevant only to the continuation of the friendship, not to the friendship itself, which, as it happens, is constituted retrospectively. Sometimes one's retrospective vantage point is simultaneous with continued living together, but often it is not. We might conclude by saying that the fact that this question—whether friendship outlives death—arises does not undermine our narrative view of friendship, for example, on the grounds that it leaves out the most important part of friendship, two living people; rather, it vindicates it, in that we can explain why the question arises and why we feel pulled to answer in it both directions.

6. Conclusion

We have been defending our view that Bernhard wrote a book in the literary genre called "friendship" that also *is* a friendship, and that in doing so he revealed something crucial, if long overlooked, about the ethical relationship or practice also called 'friendship.' What he revealed—which we hope to have articulated in our more mundane and direct mode—is that the genre and the relationship have more than an accidental connection. *Wittgenstein's Nephew: A Friendship* demonstrates that we often doubt whether what we thought was a friendship really was a friendship, and the book attests to the means by which we resolve such doubt. These means consist in reconstructing whether we can in fact say that we have 'lived together,' that is, whether we have engaged in joint activities over time with mutually acknowledged goodwill. To determine this takes something other than perceiving proximity, feeling commitment, or registering emotion. It takes interpreting our concerted behaviours as interdependent goal-oriented actions, linked through time in the way that the parts of life are linked through time. We hold that Aristotle's and Bagley's theories of friendship require this view, even if they fail to make it as explicit as we have tried to do. Thus the study of narrative, and especially the study of narratives about friendship, is complementary to the study of friendship. Bernhard's *Wittgenstein's Nephew*, finally, is a witness to friendship, as in another mode friends themselves may be: not as a transparent window onto a troubled one, but as the (literary) activity that constitutes a friendship itself.

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