The Sense of an Ending

I am today taking executive privilege and allowing myself a hiatus in my discussions of various things academic in this post. I still have several posts I want to make about editing the edition of the apostolic fathers – especially about translating them – and I want to get back to what I was writing about before all that, as I do more and more reading of relevance to the topic of belief in Jesus’ resurrection. And I want to talk about the two book ideas that I have been floating to my publisher. But all that can wait. I want to talk about an amazing novel I just finished.

So, as background information that you didn’t ask for. This past New Years I made some resolutions and oddly enough, in a rare event of history, I’ve actually been keeping them. I vowed to lose 15 pounds (I did, and still want to lose 5 more; but it ain’t easy!) (my daughter, years ago, suggested that if I wanted to lose my beer gut I should stop drinking beer; that struck me as altogether impracticable) (I don’t drink nearly as much beer now, but nice red wine, martinis, single malts, etc have made up the difference); I vowed to work out four times a week (I manage 3-4 times usually, when I’m not travelling like crazy); to meditate every day (that’s happening); and to read fiction every day.

I’m doing that too. I’m a big 19th century buff, and to my shame I had never read any Anthony Trollope. I’m hard at work going through some of his best stuff. He wrote 47, count them, 47 novels; I’ve been reading the Barchester novels (six of them). Fantastic. Next the Palliser novels, which are supposed to be even better. But this week I decided to give myself a break for a bit and picked up last year’s winner of the Man Booker Prize, a book by Julian Barnes called The Sense of an Ending. What a terrific book. Short but completely compelling. Beautifully written. Moving. Thought
provoking. I can’t recommend it highly enough.

My wife Sarah – the most voracious reader I’ve ever met, by a wide margin – asked me what it was about. I won’t give up the plot, but, well, it’s about life, death, getting older, memory, and remorse.

Two lines really struck me. The first is spoken by one of the characters in a history class in school in his upper sixth (that’s the year English students prepare for university; it’s a lot more rigorous than our senior years in high school) (mine anyway; and I went to an unusually good high school!). When asked, at the end of the term, what history is (looking back at all they had studied), he responds: “History is that certainty produced at the point where the imperfections of memory meet the inadequacies of documentation.”

Brilliant. It ties closely into the plot – although in some ways you don’t realize it till the very end of the book, virtually the last page. But it’s an insightful comment about even what it is I do, with the distant past, where the documentation is thoroughly inadequate, and even this is based on memories that are fully imperfect. Out of that we try to create the certainties of what happened. Fat chance, when you think about it. It’s hard enough to recreate what happened 20-30-40 years ago. As this book shows in a gut-wrenching way.

The second line took my breath away and I reread it about ten times. The main character has just called his 32-year old daughter before going on a vacation for five days to Mallorca, making sure he got in touch and left on a good note in case something should happen to him on the trip, and it makes him think how much more important that would be before one’s “final” trip. So, he reflects: “And if this is how we behave before a five-night winter break in Mallorca, then why should there not be a broader process at work towards the end of life, as that final journey – the motorized trundle through
the crematorium’s curtains – approaches?”

Wow. “the motorized trundle through the crematorium’s curtains.” What really wrenched my attention was the thought that one sometimes has: that’s really going to happen. There will be a time when my body will be sent to the incinerator, and I am no more. My body will be burned (or if you prefer the long-term approach, it will eventually decay; and if it doesn’t decay, it’ll be incinerated anyway when the sun blows up). And life will go on anyway (well, until the sun blows up). People will mourn. People will get on with their lives. The sun will still rise. Sports will still be played. The storms will still come. Nations will rise and fall. Our children will grow old and die. And then their children. And then their grandchildren. And soon, no matter how important or unimportant we seem to be to the world, we will be completely forgotten. And then *that* generation will come and go. And so it will happen. It happened to our parents; to our grandparents; to our great-grandparents; to …. all the way back. And it will happen to us, each of us, individually, one at a time. It will happen to me, with the motorized trundle through the crematorium’s curtains.

For me, these thoughts completely relativize everything I do. And they make me appreciate the good things I have and the life that I lead, life itself, so precious to me. They don’t make me despair or turn nihilist. They make me love existence and want to do more to help others love it.

Time for some nice red wine.