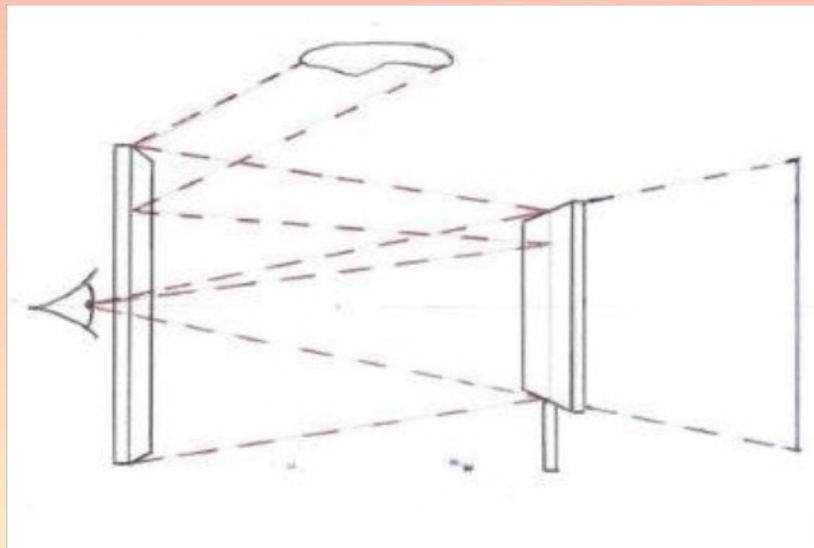


# *Other Perspectives*



John C. Nash

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*Other Perspectives* is an ongoing collection of works of essays, fiction and memoirs following on from the **Different Perspectives** collection.

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*John Nash* Ottawa, 2024

## Talking to Ghosts

It's that time of year when fallen leaves and frost combine with carved pumpkins, children in costumes and old-soldiers marching unsteadily past war monuments to the drone of bagpipes playing familiar tunes few can name. Images of ghosts decorate houses and shops. Stories and Hollywood illusions of them scare but entertain youth while real ghosts – memories of the actual dead – haunt those touched by horrors past.

For some people, these ghosts are most easily found in cemeteries. Grief sends the bereaved to talk, and sometimes to listen, to the departed. Personally, I was never drawn to seek proximity to the graves of family members. I find more connection through a modest number of things that were connected to them. The wife of a friend left me a wind-breaker he used to wear. It was good quality. Now it's more or less relegated to wear when I must work in the garage or garden. No matter. When I put it on, a memory of George is present.

Cemeteries do bring their own spirits, though more a collectivity than a body of individuals. And I must admit that I could feel the intensity of their presence most forcefully in some of the more famous and most unhappily and numerous populated cemeteries. In late summer of 1979, the Saint Julien Canadian Memorial near Passchendaele had 5000 red roses. I think the roses are now gone, and if I went there again, I would find their absence as oppressive as the history of death and destruction associated with the place.

In Beaumont Hamel, the surprise of being welcomed by Parks Canada employees in a military monument in France only amplified the horrifying absurdity that the better part of a million men and a few women died in a space I could walk east to west in an hour and north to south in less than a day.

Of course, there are centers where death has been compressed in time and space. Auschwitz is well-known, but to me seemed more like a horror film theme park than a museum to human evil. Chelmno, by contrast, the Nazi site where efficient killing was perfected, was silent, morose, and redolent with incomplete bereavement and unabsolved guilt. Its crowning insult is a massive Soviet-built concrete monument, now surrounded by warning tape because the concrete, being manufactured under Stalinist commissars, is crumbling and unsafe.

Figure 1: St. Julien Canadian Monument



The third killing center of the Nazis I have visited was Mauthausen in Austria. Few Jews were murdered here, but many political prisoners, slavs, Roma – then called gypsies – and homosexuals. I was with a group of delegates to the 1980 Amnesty International Council in Vienna, so we were given an excellent exposition by a knowledgeable historian. There is a cruel irony that Mauthausen was a commercial enterprise founded on the idea of cheap slave labour. Yet, in the chaos and corruption of the Third Reich, it was able to lose money. To cut costs, unproductive workers were eliminated to save food, fuel and space. Blocks of stone in the quarry that was one of the enterprises of the concentration camp scream loudly with the silence of the victims.

Time for visits to places where spirits may linger in huge numbers are too short, and the venues generally too busy with tourists for the living to develop conversations with the dead. One must seek more placid surroundings so patience and meditation can allow the passage of faint messages between us and ghosts.

Figure 2: Crumbling Soviet monument. Chelmno, Poland



Listen to them with a spiritual ear. Reply with quiet thoughts.

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## Freedom and Liberty

As Canadians, we seem to spend less time thinking about the nuances of freedom and liberty than our neighbours to the South. Most people likely have difficulty giving voice to the difference between the meanings of the words "freedom" and "liberty"? Dictionaries make some effort to distinguish them, but my own view is that they struggle. If I am to colour the words, I would stress the power of the individual to act as he or she wishes as freedom, while liberty is the absence of restraint upon such choices.

That really isn't my theme, however. My concern is much more with both the cynical misuse of the two words by the clever and their careless and sloppy sloganization by addle-brained idiots.

We saw both evils in Ottawa in early 2022 in the so-called Freedom Convoy. There was, of course, not one but several groups of vehicles that entered Ottawa. So it was convoys, plural. As well, it is fairly clear, as a number of individuals and groups who arrived by various means and joined the throng causing trouble on Parliament Hill.

If "Convoy" was mis-applied, "Freedom" was re-defined. Downtown residents were obstructed from going about their daily lives. A senior-citizen friend was assaulted while shopping in a Lower-Town supermarket for wearing a mask in the waning days of the Covid pandemic. Later he was nearly run over by a large pick-up truck with flags and placards threatening sexual activities on the Prime Minister.

Don't get the idea that any of this sort of thing is new. The French Revolution rather tarnished the word Liberty by giving a mob the freedom to enjoy killing people. In the same era, a much-beloved song "Jefferson and Liberty" – the tune is still a favourite for folk dances – touted the moral greatness of a man who owned slaves and is known to have "taken liberties" with at least one of them.

Somehow, it makes Civility seem a greater goal.

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