

a reply to the review of *Owen Meany*, 27 June 2008

## DO YOU THINK YOU CAN THINK WITHOUT ARGUING?

Critical or divine?

It is as if a man grasped “The damp souls of housewives,” (*Haltwhistle Quarterly*, Brian Lee) or didn’t and squeezed. Hello. The book in question can be found on my mother’s shelf back home, in fact she commended it to me. I may even have read several chapters. It is a book (mother assured me) that I “should” be interested in and Owen Meany is a character sure to be understood, as sure as I’m here right now typing, “IF I TRY ON A CHARACTER THAT’S BEYOND MY MIGHT/ I MAKE A POOR SHOW OF THAT AND NEGLECT THE ONE THAT FITS RIGHT!” which is, after all, Epictetus, that goes something like that. A Prayer For Owen Meany (“Ow, a Meany”?) belongs to a world. Not my world.

I like to write while I read (excuse me): title: “Made For Television”: author: anonymous . . . . It is plot, tell us the plot and do it in a novel way because that’s what we like, we like, we really like to read novels with plots that you’ve got the opportunity to elucidate; elucidate plot got in conversation with absolute nobodies . . . . Diction sounds exciting! It always sounds exciting! And when it finally comes to that “perhaps” then that there “perhaps” (you can see it!) sits in the author’s anonymous eye like a great big beam. I’ll just have to accept it: that there’s such a thing or thought as a Miniature War (or Self Sacrifice for that matter, the two concepts do fit together so very *well*). But is it incredulity or really irony, Man?

It seems to me, the critic has chosen a word to inscribe the book—subtly—good, which may or may not be like incredulity, or irony, or I don’t know. Mean, maybe. But it might really be critical (no matter whether the good is *a* good or really *good*). The word, “divine”. I’ll be (“it’s not exactly” so I guess I’ll be) exact.

And their doing so bears out, or seems to bear out, his conviction that he is the instrument of God and that everything about him, his dreams, his visions, his disabilities—even his obsessive practising of (given his height, *all* things!) basketball—serve a divine purpose, which will be revealed in his death. And it is. . . .

The *and it is* reaches back like this: *And it is* a divine purpose / *And it is* revealed in his death. It is “revelation” and “divine purpose”—corollaries—with the life of “conviction”, but it could just as well have been, simply “revealed in his death” and “serve a [—] purpose” and “conviction” the *divinity* being “part and parcel” with the revelation (insofar as we admit that our Revelation could have a bearing on *what* Divinity) . . . so in this case: *And it is* fiction / *And it is* a perfectly comprehensible Universe when Owen Meany and when an honest critic of John Irving both think the thought—“instrument of God”; the one a fiction in a book, the other a columnist on a website that either is or isn’t being smart. There’s definitely incredulity (it’s not quite facetious) and when read aloud certainly it seems ironical (i.e. *I* don’t talk like that—it sounds funny). It is *divine*. The expression—really . . . what is being pressed out of the critic—is unnecessarily effusive in that “*divine* purpose” and commingles with what we experience in advertising-culture . . . non-thought, “copy”. Still, is the loss of sense in the extraction here, A. The critic’s mode—incredulity—or is it an author’s art, his irony? Insofar as we make judgments and don’t just talk about it or decide to, it might be important . . . . It’s not so important perhaps that Mom “savvied” the book as well and sounded it out like this critic does, or that the reviewers certainly

do try to attain to the well-written sound this critic achieves . . . . It's *divine*! Read the book, it's divine—*And it is!* Or it would be—sure—if it wasn't entirely automatic.

So, is the critic-columnist expressing a paradeigmatic experience, is the realization such that we can participate in and should be a part of . . . and is that really argument? Isn't that rhetorical something or persuasion or something? "Art more engaged!" Unjust persuasion?

Answer me. There's nothing "up front" about his style that could prove ironic. A lot of: "though" (i.e. . . . though, *you* know . . .) and "as if" (i.e. as if!). There is a kind of *opposition* in it; in English-dictionary-culture then it *would* be ironical . . . insofar as my Chambers Dictionary is representative ("opposition" is *the* key concept). But *we* must think we like this sort of incredulity (it's just like a style) or we just don't.

Plainly

Really, is this what we're ever talking about?

Plainly

"Plainly" what?

John Irving is

Plainly?

an intelligent, educated man—no one could possibly wish to deny it

Maybe. There are one or two that would just change the subject though. [I lately read Rush Rhees' *Without Answers* and you know what? It was really interesting but I was a bit disappointed too. I read it as if it really did matter . . . in general.]

—a born writer. [Cough!] He writes really well—

I'll conclude. He writes really well in a *way* and the critic says what way.

Anyway, if his column is to be reduced somehow without the usual stock of esteemed attributes and decorative laudatory ("It's not supposed to be taken literally", "how funny", "how ironic", "I liked it") then: it's a *princely* criticism . . . or, he's not artistic he's just upset . . . .

God send the prince a better companion.

God send the companion a better prince!

Falstaff . . . who I think of when I think there are people who know when things are dreary. "Plainly," sure . . . *Intelligence* is talking with lots of people. *Education* is just like the posters say, "Achieving success together!" . . . I mean, who types this *stuff that's so plainly words, words, words?* Meany. Meany. Meany.

Art, Articulate, Articulation . . . . The last, the critic of the book here takes up the last . . . that the book "suggests" a need for better criticism . . . . As a credo not particularly suggestive, is it? Of course "it" *collapses*: to say so though is as tiresome as "Escape from The Black Hole" a

scenario that, no matter how rehashed, without something to say about the science defeats itself. To me it's a trudge, this column, an episode . . . .

This *week* in The Columny the “Edgeways Technique” is applied—applied with no less veracity—to the book that's been on English women's night-time reading bookshelves along side “Paddle to the Amazon” and Mich Albom's “The 10 People You Meet in Heaven” [at least I can think so if I'm a set director for television programming]—Yes, it's John “Christmas in the '90s” Irving's—hem!—novel . . . well, light entertainment: “A Prayer For Owen Meany”. Yes, on the shelves of English men, too! On everybody's shelves!

One wants a corral of mass-market-paperbacks to begin to pitch in like in *The Sorcerer's Apprentice*! Like in Disney! Emptying out John Irving onto everything. We want so dearly to be *right*. Of course it's very evil just to like to pick a book so's you can say the title 'cause it's pretty, well, pretty “something” . . . *divine*.

It's not the subject (anonymous though he may be) but the object that's the problem with *this*.

Zarathustra? Zarathustra! It's just as bad as I thought; there's people out there . . . . People! They've got this book and, well, I've read it. Here, let me show you a thing or two—I've got a real good question, just listen . . . . Well, not a question—but you can hear the question resonate in this self-assured pose that I can do . . . look, I'm posing a question!

Before his question I would like to correspond here more like myself. 1. I've always wanted to write an essay on the literary criticism of directors that can be got at through a contemplation of the “friendship” of Steven Spielberg with Stanley Kubrick. I've had the opportunity to speak it, though very rarely, to the sort of person that likes impassioned argument. However, despite my very life, I can see that the effort is entirely wasted and absolutely meaningless, 2. The first INKW ICH is printed. “17-34,” *Selected Poetry From The Peach Picker*, by A. J. Lepp. A nice edition of 10 numbered copies of which 5 were set aside for the poet. Signed by the author and the publisher, 33 pages. Hardcover book with a dust jacket featuring original artwork by the poet: 3 available. \$50 Canadian. It is possible to contact INKW ICH.

The question goes like this. Picture in it a bit of ferociousness. “It's worse, it's professional.” [Sigh] Questions posed like convictions. Great. About as meaningful here as divine purpose is (called “vocation” isn't it?), or revelation is, or better criticism is . . . . Is the word for it, when it's done so neat and impersonally: “nagging”?

“We're all just amateurs,” said Orson Welles when his professionalism was a question, “None of us lives long enough to be anything else” (I think I heard Peter Bogdonovich's impression of this . . . on a DVD . . . not Orson Welles himself).

By “professionalism” (I'll note it's an “ism” and not a good ol' pro fess'n') in a sense of disappointment, is meant a world of systematic talking-to, yes, disappointing to those who could profess what they should. And there's a bunch of words about it and the least of us and that and the other thing.

In that professionalism indicates a “same relation” the critic means (I guess) what could be wholly expressed in “all of a piece”. A “same relation” is, I suppose, a body of art and its relation to the divine subject: divine in itself . . . .

In as much as I am moved to acknowledge having read this bit called “Made For Television” . . . then I must—I will. Such is the relation here. *And what really could be more wholly professional—and in relation, certainly imposed upon me?*

As a work of art the work seems to me to be the formulation of this judgment: that John Irving failed to . . . I guess: love God enough.

The critic-columnist’s charge against the artist John Irving is that he don’t suffer. No suffering = no poetry (no poetry = no novel). I can go for the precedent: one can read “Symbolic Extraction” a chapter in *Poetic Process* (1953) that I’ve borrowed a few words and phrases from in this here—from George Whalley . . . so one could read that and compare it to Robert Marchant’s chapter “Poetry” in *For An Ave Mary*. A comparison that suggests *striking similarities* but does not fall under the heading of “same relation” or “of a piece”; it’s not—you know. It is good.

Re: The author’s character defining the words . . . “I think you’ll find he defines the word *differently*, sir,” says the dotting private, in curt syllables in brief to the lackadaisical American officer re: the British officer in question . . . and he gives the camera a look—or rather the camera gives him a look . . . fade to black.

Do we agree that *dominion* is indicated here: “The power of words and the character revealed in words”? It is not made incredulously, it is not quite ironic . . . . It belongs to the “all of a piece”, the worldliness of the critic, but does require a thought . . . which is... “Bah,” there’s no point spelling it out. Maybe we’re all just “*cheap courtiers*”, eh? There’s a “conviction” for you.

Sincerely

J. L.

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