

**Glimpsing the balance between earth and sky:
a meeting ground for postmodernism and Christianity
in four selected novels by
Jeanette Winterson and John Irving.**

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Abstract:

The phrase “glimpsing the balance between earth and sky” in the thesis title is taken from Jeanette Winterson’s Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit. In this novel, the central character Jeanette believes she has glimpsed the possibility that human relationships can find their mirror in the relationship with God, as she understands the divine *Other*. This glimpse has set her wandering, trying to find such a balance.

This examination of four selected novels by Jeanette Winterson and John Irving shows that for Irving, “glimpsing the balance” means in part, giving voice to a strongly “Christian” view of humankind and human nature but in an age where the prevailing intellectual worldview is strongly sceptical of any Grand Narrative. The “voice” expressed in Irving’s work has to be situated, like Winterson’s, as one among many possibilities. Irving’s voice is itself masked as different, *other/Other*, freakish, in the narrative worlds he creates. Through his use of grotesque comedy as a vehicle for deeper philosophical concerns, Irving asks us: What after all in the postmodern world is the main show?

This thesis argues that if Winterson and Irving are testing or re-presenting a Christian worldview in a postmodern context, then they are asking whether Christianity is capable of assimilating and rising above the worst circumstances the world, writer, and life can throw at it. In Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit, Winterson tells a story of “forbidden love”, posed as a direct challenge to the prevailing way of knowing in her character’s community. In Gut Symmetries, she expands this challenge by employing the insights of quantum physics to make sense of the complexities raised by a triangular love relationship.

Irving offers the story of Owen in A Prayer for Owen Meany as the kind of story which might possibly make a believer out of him; in short, that he would have to be a witness to some kind of miracle, something utterly inexplicable. In A Son of the Circus Irving narrates the quest for identity undertaken by an Indian doctor who is in every way a Displaced Person – the condition, he implies, of anyone who purports to find their piece of the truth.

The theoretical concerns of the postmodern project are examined through Lawrence Cahoon's argument that postmodern writing offers criticism of: presence, origin, unity and transcendence through an analytical strategy of constitutive otherness. In each of their texts, Irving and Winterson are seen to use these four critical elements and to offer a postmodern strategy of re-presenting meaning through "constitutive otherness". Both writers also employ a strategy of historiographic metafiction (as defined by Linda Hutcheon) as a means of constructing and re-presenting their narrated stories.

Postmodern paradox is compatible with what could be called a Christian plan for living, if the latter is in turn given an appropriate 1990s interpretation. The selected novels by Winterson and Irving are offered as contemporary evidence for this view. This thesis argues that the connection between postmodernism and other worldviews, particularly Christianity, is found in both projects' process of making meanings through encounters with an *other/Other*.

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Abbreviations used for primary texts:

The longer titles of primary texts have been abbreviated in this thesis as follows:

Jeanette Winterson:

Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit: Oranges

Gut Symmetries: GS

Art Objects: AO

John Irving:

A Prayer for Owen Meany: OM

A Son of the Circus: AS

Trying to save Piggy Sneed: PS

/title.ends

1. For an explanation of the lowercase "p" in this spelling of postmodernism, see comments on the crisis of representation: a central obsession in postmodernist discourse, page 7-8.

Introduction:

Glimpsing the balance between earth and sky:¹ a meeting ground for postmodernism and Christianity in four selected novels by Jeanette Winterson and John Irving.

Jeanette Winterson and John Irving are two seemingly unconnected contemporary writers in everyday terms, sharing only a common cultural moment at the latter end of the twentieth century. However, closer examination reveals that their joint central concern, an examination of the nature of the self, is conceived by each in somewhat parallel terms. For example, each author deliberately creates central characters who communicate much of their interior life to the reader, while engaged in their respective quests for self-worth and identity. This personal explicitness – in part an urge for exactitude – is an ironic artefact of a world grown increasingly uncertain and indeterminate around them.

For his part, Irving takes the reader into a textual world where readerly expectations about “normal” and “abnormal” are problematised. His central characters, artists-in-the-making, offer their “normality” for the reader’s acceptance and identification, but they belong to families who are shifted one degree off normal. Through these shifts that operate in their lives, Irving creates worlds of strange, eccentric searchers with whom we are invited to identify. This social arena has links with Winterson’s. She takes a contemporary battleline, the increasingly blurred line between hetero- and homo-sexual love, and problematises it as her characters strive to make meaning from their lives, to figure out who they are.

In the novels selected, Irving and Winterson attempt to reconcile two opposing worldviews: those of spirituality and of postmodernism. The postmodern ethos underlying their writing and the types of Christianity described both imply such worldviews; and advocates of each distinct thought system would no doubt argue vehemently for their different merits. They do, however, enjoy certain points of contact, little recognised. Arguably, both camps orientate their quests around the possibility (or impossibility) of locating a “significant other/Other”.

Whether that other/Other is a transcendent God, or a perpetual linguistic play on the nature of the decentered self, and the loss of logocentric meta-narratives, the notion of other/Other-ness is vital.

Winterson's work revolves around the anguish of betrayal by significant others/Others that her central characters trust. In Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit, those others/Others are her family, her 1950's Pentecostal church, and ultimately her first lover. In Irving's novels, the reader often meets an individual artist who constantly strives for excellence in the face of a grotesque reality best represented by black humour and debilitating sexual angst. Repeatedly, the struggle is to be as true to oneself as possible, in a world of confusing, even terrifying, others. The choices made, whether these are choices to love, or betray (or not to love, or not to betray) are crucial deciding factors in unravelling the individual's destiny.

In Winterson's writing, the reader is struck by the intensity of the central character's longing for something, anything, which makes sense of the agonising confusion which sets in at unsettling moments. Deep within her texts is a cry of deep longing for an other/Other who understands the ache inside.

The unknownness of my needs frightens me. I do not know how huge they are, I only know that they are not being met . . .

One thing I can be certain of, I do not want to be betrayed, but that's quite hard to say, casually, at the beginning of a relationship. It's not a word people use very often, which confuses me, because there are different kinds of infidelity, but betrayal is betrayal wherever you find it. By betrayal, I mean promising to be on your side, then being on somebody else's. (Oranges, 165-166)

What Winterson shows in her work is the different life-transforming meanings which people attach to certain words. In this extract from Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit a word which is shown to be vitally important is "betrayal": how different characters make sense of the word as it is applied to love for God in a closed religious community, and love newly discovered between two women.

In The World According to Garp, an earlier novel by Irving, the central character is trying to pursue his dream of writing with all his energy. One night, Garp's wife is terribly emotional

and begs him to make love to her. He refuses because his writing must always come first, literally and metaphorically speaking. His denial of her at a point of emotional crisis gives her an excuse to enter into an affair with one of her students. She continues meeting her lover until the guilt overwhelms her and in what is intended to be her last farewell gesture before ending the affair, she performs fellatio on her student lover in Garp's driveway. Garp returns home in the dark, in his car. His vehicle collides with the car parked in his driveway. Two things happen. His wife bites off her lover's penis and, Garp's son who is sitting in the rear seat of Garp's car is thrown violently forward onto the gear stick (whose knob Garp has neglected to reattach) and loses his eye. The use of grotesque humour in Irving's work illuminates the way in which the choices we make sometimes bring about life-changing consequences.

Both Winterson and Irving typically use the sexual experiences of their characters to point to significant shifts of perception in the characters themselves. Their work celebrates a healthy tradition of literature which explores perpetual struggles between sites of sex, spirituality, and power.

Postmodernism as a contemporary way of contextualising knowledge offers a specific worldview which is deliberately difficult to grasp. For readers and writers nurtured in the tradition of modernist epistemology and brought up on the literary theories of the first half of the twentieth century, postmodernism offers particular difficulty because of the challenges it presents to notions of subject/object, and even the privileged distance of "the reader".

Postmodern texts ask the reader to come out of the readerly closet, and own the experience of reading and making meanings.

If postmodernism constitutes an informing foundation for interpreting Winterson's and Irving's thinking then what is the theory underlying this worldview? John Lechte, in his study Fifty Key Contemporary Thinkers, offers this overview of postmodernism:

Although there are various understandings of what postmodernity is, a key notion. . . deriving from the work of Jean-François Lyotard and Jean Baudrillard, is that postmodernism involves a questioning of a modernist epistemology based on a clear distinction between subject and object. Other things said in describing postmodernity

concern the “incredulity toward metanarratives” (Lyotard) - meaning that no global explanation of conduct is credible in an age of purposive rationality. Moreover technology is seen to lead to a focus on reproduction, in contrast to the modernist paradigm² of production. Or again, postmodern thought takes the implications of modernity absolutely seriously. For instance, if signs and language are the result of differential relations rather than an essential quality, and if, following Foucault, power has no essential quality, postmodernity follows through on some of the radical implications of this. (Lechte 1994, 231)

Lechte is suggesting that postmodernism is a logical successor to modernism’s now dated claims to objective searches for objective Truth. The idea that “the truth is out there” is textually valid through a radical postmodern worldview only when a subjective reader/writer makes subjective sense of the text in question. Claims to definitive knowledge through close textual reading are dated, as dated as Judeo-Christian claims to absolute truth in the form of a personal saviour.

Christopher Norris continues this argument in his introduction to What’s Wrong with Postmodernism as he critiques the “grand narratives” of enlightenment, progress and truth.

Like Foucault, [Lyotard] sees [the truth-claims of both liberal and Marxist salvation-histories] as amounting to nothing more than a species of grandiose delusion, a trick whereby the self-appointed revolutionary vanguard (or the class of “universal intellectuals”) sets itself up as the possessor of some ultimate truth, some omniscient or God’s-eye perspective from which to theorise the logic and meaning of historical events. . .

Hence the whole range of disenchanted stances - post-Marxist, postmodern, post-historical, post-enlightenment, post-just-about-everything - that have since come to characterise “advanced” French thought during the past two decades. What these movements have in common is a deep suspicion of any theory that claims a vantage-point of knowledge or truth, a self-assured position of “scientific” method from which to criticise the various forms of “ideological” false-seeming or commonsense perception . . .

In short, the only option for critical theorists - in so far as that phrase still applies - is to accept this predicament as best they can and carry on working as “specific intellectuals” in this or that localised field of activity, without any claim to have privileged access to some truth behind the ideological façade or some ultimate (“meta-narrative”) theory that *explains* why history should have taken this untoward turn. . .

Where these issues converge is on the question of *representation*, understood in the twofold sense of that term as used by critical theorists and philosophers in the post-

Kantian tradition. On the one hand it signifies the capacity of reason to grasp and interpret truths of experience that present themselves before the critical tribunal of adequate or answerable knowledge . . . Other versions of this anti-foundationalist drive can be seen in the various critiques of representation that characterise post-structuralist thinking (with its attack on that much-aligned mythical entity, the “classic realist text”) and postmodernism, with its attitude of thoroughgoing sceptical doubt in regard to questions of truth, meaning, and historical interpretation. On the other hand these movements reject the idea that intellectuals (i.e. critical thinkers) could ever claim the right to *represent* human interests, needs or political aspirations that go beyond their own, necessarily partial and self-interested view of events. For this is to ignore precisely those lessons that postmodernism draws from its reading of the way that history - especially recent history - has failed to live up to these grandiose “totalising” plans and projections. (Norris 1990, 28-29)

What has evidently become so problematic is the means by which writers present and re-present their worldviews through their texts, particularly where a writer makes political or ontological claims about the nature of being, and how that personal ontology reflects the greater ontology of the world beyond self.

Jean-François Lyotard picks up the issue of contesting meta-narratives and uses it to problematise the legitimacy of objective viewpoints.

Postmodernity, on the other hand implies that these goals of knowledge are now contested, and, furthermore, that no ultimate proof is available for settling disputes over these goals. In the computer age where complexity is perceived to be ever increasing, the possibility of there being a single, or even dual, rationale for knowledge or science, becomes remote. Before, faith in a narrative (e.g. religious doctrines) would have resolved the potential difficulty. Since the Second World War techniques and technologies have . . . shifted emphasis from the ends of action to its means. Regardless of whether the form of narrative unification is of the speculative or of the emancipatory type, the legitimisation of knowledge can no longer rely on a “grand narrative”, so that science is now best understood in terms of Wittgenstein’s theory of “language game”. (Lechte 1994, 246-247)

Wittgenstein’s language game means that no concept or theory can be seen as adequately capturing language in its totality. As soon as such a system of knowledge or interpretation attempts to catch language it, by necessity, involves itself in a particular language game. Grand or meta-narratives (epistemes) are part of this language game, the master-game, an endlessly interconnected multiplicity of language games. Lyotard has demonstrated, for instance, that science is a language game with specific linguistic rules, inviolable boundaries

ordering the ways statements should be linked to each other.

Within the modernist paradigm, systems theory proposes that human beings are part of a homogenous, stable, theoretically knowable, and therefore, predictable system. As Lechte observes (248), within this worldview, “Knowledge is the means of controlling the system. Even if perfect knowledge does not yet exist, the equation: *the greater the knowledge the greater the power over the system*, is, for the systems theorist, irrefutable”. It is precisely this intellectual arrogance, this claim to definitive knowledge, which postmodernism derides. The radical view Lyotard presents is one strand of the postmodern worldview, as qualified here by Lechte.

By contrast, Lyotard shows that systems theory is located within a modernist epistemology. For within the very terms of the system [such] as performativity, control through knowledge lowers its performance, since uncertainty increases rather than decreases with knowledge (cf. Heisenberg). Now, a new, postmodern paradigm is coming into being, one that emphasises unpredictability, uncertainty, catastrophe . . . chaos, and, most of all, paralogy, or dissensus. Dissensus challenges the existing rules of the game. Paralogy becomes impossible when recognition is withheld and legitimacy denied for new moves in the game. Silencing - or eliminating - a player from the game is equivalent to a terrorist act. (Lechte 1994, 248)

Emmanuel Levinas helps to bridge the gap between modernism and postmodernism through the discourse of post-structuralism. Of particular significance to later thinkers such as Maurice Blanchot, Jacques Derrida, Luce Irigaray, and Jean-François Lyotard, has been Levinas’s re-presentation (as an act of making an old idea appear new) of the concept and contextualisation of the Other (*Autrui*). Particularly, with regard to ethics, Levinas has intimated his foregrounding of the Other “prior to any act” (Lechte, 290). In tackling the murky world of alterity, and foregrounding its primacy, Levinas carries his readers into a philosophical space where the thinking subject is placed in a secondary role, that of searching for connection with the Other. In Levinas’s view, it is this search for the Other which enables a reader to understand his identity.

The interest of Levinas’s approach here comes in part from his insight that language cannot be reduced to a system of logic or representation. Like the future, the infinite, and the face, language becomes an extended epiphany. It is the astonishment of the Other speaking in me - the Other speaking in me which enables me to become a self

in language; in other words, through language, the Other enables me to have an identity. (Lechte 1994, 118)

If Levinas is to be understood in a postmodern context, then the reader needs to make sense of this notion of alterity and the theological implications of trying to connect with the Other.

The face “signifies” beyond, neither as an index nor as symbol, but precisely and irreducibly as a face that *summons me*. It signifies *to-God* (*à Dieu*), not as sign, but as the questioning of myself, as if I were summoned or called, that is to say, awakened or cited as myself. (Levinas 1983, 112)

As Lechte goes on to note (118), Levinas, in his later work, is more insistent in equating God with the infinite. It seems as though a Western philosophical outlook is abandoned in favour of theology in order to ensure that the acknowledgement of alterity is once again foregrounded in intellectual thinking - a place beyond the limits of ontology.

Other analysts of the postmodern worldview rely on a comparison between modernism (or pre-postmodernism) and postmodernism through a list of thesis and antithetical premises or elements. The two tables at the end of this chapter illustrate models of such comparison by Ihab Hassan and Donna Haraway. They are intended solely as guidelines, for claiming that any list of postmodern elements *is* definitive is precisely to fall into the modernist epistemological trap which postmodern thinkers warn their readers to be wary of.

What both Hassan and Haraway demonstrate in their comparative lists is the fluid and elastic boundaries of postmodernism, and the large number of possibilities for member elements. Trying to define the scope of inquiry in a study of this type is problematic precisely because the subject in question is, in its own terms, resistant to definition and committed to escaping any attempt by critical analysts to pin it down. As Hassan is willing to allow, when translated into a religious metaphor, a Modernist epistemology is structurally founded on vertical power relationships. These typically foreground the parental qualities of a Judeo-Christian God as Father, or offer some secular substitute, such as Art. In the postmodern paradigm (although it would resist such a translation) the theological emphasis switches to horizontal lines of power with the understanding of God as the Holy Ghost.

What does the postmodern worldview say about literary study? According to Craige (1988) the antilogocentric approach to a given text is presented in one way by the following:

1. Things and events do not have intrinsic meaning. There is no inherent objectivity, only continuous interpretation of the world.
2. Continuous examination of the world requires a contextual examination of things. *We ourselves* are part of that context.
3. The interpretation of a text depends on the relative viewpoint and the particular values of the interpreter. To understand a text on the basis of one's life-relation to it is to have preunderstanding. Interpretation does not depend on the external text nor its author.
4. Language is not neutral but is relative and is value-laden. It is the medium through which we do our thinking.
5. Language and discourse convey ideology, and a society's intellectual discourse rests on political values and affects society in political ways. (Craige in Phillips & Okholm 1995, 104)

Arguably, the crisis of representation can be isolated as a central obsession in postmodernist discourse. Post Modernism, or as it is more usually spelt, *postmodernism*, presents and re-presents itself in numerous modes of discourse throughout today's world of infinitely consumable texts. Where modernism sought to ask questions dealing with epistemological concerns of locating knowledge, typically the question "How can I know?", one can detect a deeper ontological quest within postmodernism which attempts to situate and bring back a version of reality, asking "What is real?" Flowing straight into and through this postmodern situation of question-asking, and multiple meaning-making, one could say that we have in the afternoon of the last decade of the 20th century reached a "crisis of representation".

In postmodernism's concern to problematise the nature of reality, writers and readers within the meta-discourse postmodernism has become are struggling to present old literary wisdoms in new clothes. Essentially the crisis amounts to re-presenting the Emperor to the reading-writing public, as a grand old heterosexual patriarch who still wears no clothes.

In Linda Hutcheon's The Politics of Postmodernism the following question is presented:

Have we ever known the "real" except through representation/s? We may see, hear, smell, and touch it, but do we know it in the sense that we give meaning to it? (1989, 33)

The process of *meaning-making* becomes crucial within postmodernism's attempts to question the role played by each of the participants in a text's being or becoming a textual entity. Three antagonists perpetuate the re-presentation crisis as one finds oneself asking of postmodernism:

"Who, what, when, where, why, how is (1) the writer, (2) the reader, and (3) the text presented?"

The voices of postmodern discourse, if we can refer to what we hear and read now in the 90s as such, urge us to consider questions of subjectivity: the reflexive nature of the mind which asks, or attempts to tell a listener, what the reality is. Clumped together with subjectivity are the dual phenomena of locatedness and situatedness. As soon as a writer attempts to re-present a piece of textual information, the location and situation of the speaker are seen as vital, as if the re-presenter must by his and her credentials prove that what is spoken is credible. Voices within contemporary discourse urge us to hear their opinions because they are people of colour, women of desire, sub-alterns with newly acquired fluency who wish to speak, authentic third world witnesses, and so the list continues.

Thus in re-presenting aspects of itself, postmodernism celebrates the self-conscious, self-contradictory, self-undermining statement. In postmodern texts we typically discover playfulness and a teasing, flirtatious relationship between writer, text, and reader.

Underpinning all this however is also the understanding that the issues we are dealing with in contemporary life are as serious as they are laughable. This leads to what a writer such as Milan Kundera will call the situation of "terminal paradox", where we find ourselves aware of both humour and sadness in the human condition.

Asked whether all novels written were psychological and thereby concerned with the enigma of the psyche, Kundera answered:

Let's be more precise: All novels, of every age, are concerned with the enigma of the self. As soon as you create an imaginary being, a character, you are automatically confronted by the question: What is the self? How can the self be grasped? It is one of those fundamental questions on which the novel, as novel, is based. (Kundera 1988,

23)

For Kundera however, the search for a concrete answer to discovery of the self is doomed to early failure. In his analysis the investigation of man's interior life, although an interesting space for a writer to play with, is condemned to eternal frustration. Kundera dismisses the possibility of ever capturing the notion of self because:

The quest for the self has always ended, and will always end, in a paradoxical dissatisfaction. I don't say defeat. For the novel cannot breach the limits of its own possibilities, and bringing those limits to light is already an immense discovery, an immense triumph of cogitation. (Kundera 1988, 25)

In postmodernist talk about the ontological quest to discover “How to Be”, we begin to question the meaning of words used by speakers and writers, a situation revealed by the popular habit of guest lecturers to enclose choice phrases in quotation marks indicated by appropriate finger signals. We begin to notice a subtle yet disturbing distinction between: highlight vs “highlight”, subvert vs “subvert”, the irony of “irony”, and, most problematic of all, postmodernism vs “postmodernism”.

We begin to wonder if the obsession with re-presentation can ever be resolved, or satiated. As Hutcheon observes (1989, 10) the focus of postmodernism has undergone subtle but important changes over the last four decades. The 1960's version of postmodernism looked for meaning between two extremes: apocalyptic *despair*, and a visionary, at times orgiastic, *celebration* of being. In the 70s and 80s postmodernism, in its broadest sense, found little cause for despair or celebration and instead slid into a third mode of profound *questioning*.

Hutcheon links the crisis of re-presentation with feminism. She seems to be asking that postmodernism, as an intellectual and lived experience of our times, be moved into the realm of gender studies, where issues of identity are fundamental sites for debate.

When one problematises the notion of re-presenting old ontological ideas in new textual clothes it is perhaps useful to think again of Kundera's textual strategies as an author. His authorial thoughts³ are concerned with examining human existence, the dilemmas of everyday life, for a global society which no longer believes in God, rejects history as an

endless perpetuation of lies, and laughs at the notion of any centre or wholeness to human experience.

In “Dialogue on the Art of the Novel” he expands his view of the work characters in novels do. In essence what he is speaking of is how to re-present his fictional worlds:

A novel examines not reality but existence. And existence is not what has occurred, existence is the realm of human possibilities, everything that man can become, everything he's capable of. Novelists draw up the map of existence by discovering this or that human possibility. But again, to exist means: “being-in-the-world”. Thus both the character and his world must be understood as possibilities. (Kundera 1988, 42-43)

As Hutcheon says (1989, 14) narrative representation, both fictive and historical, is fast becoming postmodernism’s *historiographic metafiction* by which narrative discourse is solidly founded on historical and socio-political facts (understanding how problematic “facts” are) and finds a context in the excruciating self-reflexivity of postmodernism. Catherine Stimpson observes:

Like every great word, representation/s is a stew. A scrambled menu, it serves up several meanings at once. For a representation can also be a narrative, a sequence of images and ideas . . . Or a representation can be the product of ideology, that vast scheme for showing forth the world and justifying its dealings. (Stimpson in Hutcheon 1989, 223)

Sketching the links between the strategies of feminism and those of postmodernism, Hutcheon (1989, 16) suggests that postmodernism positions itself against the restoration of faith in institutions. According to her, postmodernism asks the following of us as readers and writers:

In whose institutions will faith be restored?
In whose interest will such a restoration be?
Do these institutions deserve our faith?
Can they be changed?
Should they be? (Hutcheon 1989, 16)

As I have suggested earlier, following on from Hutcheon’s hints that postmodernism’s central obsession with a crisis of representation links it closely with feminism, why do we not go

further and tie it to Queer Theory⁴ where the ontological question of identity becomes even more crucial?

Consider the following definition of heterosexism, noting its close semantic links with feminist attempts to define sexism as a clash within a male/female binary opposition. This can be seen as an attempt to re-present sexism in heterosexist clothes. The Emperor is a cross-dresser perhaps?

Heterosexism may be defined as *a diverse set of social practices* - from the linguistic to the physical, in the public sphere and the private sphere, covert and overt - *in an array of social arenas* (eg work, home, school, media, church, courts, streets, etc) *in which the homo/hetero binary distinction is at work whereby heterosexuality is privileged.* (Plummer 1992, 19)

Considering the crisis of representation within postmodernism, and finding its equivalent in feminism's attempts to reach consensus on an ideological position, one can also see explicit links with Queer Theory's crisis of re-presenting its own theories of Being.

The quest for the grand truth, the scientific solution, the correct political position, the linear progression, and the theoretical purity are now all seen as flawed...Such characterisations have profound implications for our homosexualities. The search for the truth of a unitary phenomenon designated "homosexual" is discredited precisely because there is no such unitary phenomenon.

At the same time, some of the dangers of this must be noted. Postmodernism can become massively self-contradictory - there are no grand narratives, except, presumably, the one of postmodernism. It can be politically paralysing - since there is no grand goal and no chance of progress, what's the point of a political struggle? But to recognise the furthest excesses of postmodernist indulgence is not to fail to recognise that we are on the verge of a rapidly shifting social order: one in which the search for any grand truth - essences, universals, foundational philosophies, master narratives, dominant ideologies (call them what you will) - must give way to radical doubt; to contingency and irony; to fragments, multiplicities, diversities, complexities. (Plummer 1992, 15)

If postmodern society and the literary art being produced and consumed in our immediate context is so conscious of sexuality, and the relativity of sexual space between "significant selves" and "significant others", then where could a contemporary Christian reader find evidence of deeper spirituality? By foregrounding these concerns (especially in relation to Winterson) I hope to explore the issue of power dynamics between sexuality and spirituality

in recent and contemporary literature.

This section will deal with drawing links, in a postmodern context of ideas, between sexuality, spirituality and power. These three contemporary dynamics are specifically *sexuality* as celebrated within and between postmodern texts; *spirituality* as explored within and between the Christian experience of self and God; and *power* as mediated through the relationships between *writer/s-text/s-reader/s* and *self/selves-God-other/s*.

Postmodernism as a literary theory and phenomenon of our times is a vast and nebulous entity. In questioning notions of selfhood, identity and relationship with material and metaphysical *others*, I would like to propose an area called “*existential postmodernism*” which brings Sartre’s ideas of radical freedom and the importance of individual choice and responsibility right into the context of *now*, this last decade of the 20th century and right into the 21st century. Millennial fever and apocalyptic visions aside, the issues of personal choice and responsibility remain some of the most important decisions we, as rational free agents, can ever make.

Postmodernism insists that nothing of significance lies outside the boundaries of what can be captured in a linguistic net. The text is everything. Yet within text one discovers boundaries which language continually attempts to cross. The *medium* of text implies an intermediate position, an intervening substance. In the process of communicating thought, through the medium of language, it is the text itself which must act as mediator between writer and reader. As Mark Taylor argues (in Cahoone 1996, 526) it is this point of threshold where opposites meet and cross. The medium can never be contained, captured, or caught by any fixed pair of terms. This is a site of ambiguous transition, where meaning moves between two states of being. In text, the space which meaning negotiates becomes a type of permeable membrane undermining the simplicity of oppositions and distinctions. It becomes, in Derrida’s terms, something like a *hymen*:

[T]he hymen, the confusion between the present and the non-present, along with all the indifferences it entails within the whole series of opposites . . . produces the effect of a medium (a medium as element enveloping both terms at once; a medium located between the two terms). It is an operation that *both* sows confusion *between* opposites

and stands between opposites “at once”. What counts here is the *between*, the in-between-ness of the hymen. The hymen “takes place” in the “inter-”, in the spacing between desire and fulfilment, between penetration and its recollection. But this medium of the *entre* has nothing to do with a center. (Derrida 1981a, 77)

It is within text that meanings co-habit the same spaces, make new meanings in the same milieu. It is through the possibility of textual connection that two worldviews as diverse as postmodernism and Christianity can find points and moments of contact. Christianity is something Other. It is more than a master-narrative, more than simply a grand totalising theory about life. Rather it becomes, through the meaning-making possibilities of its multiple readings, a process of direct confrontation on the level of experiencing what is constantly shifting and unknowable. As an ongoing relationship with a divine Other, Christianity seen through postmodern eyes resists closure - actively challenging the kind of certainty which modernism sought in Grand Narratives such as “Art”, “Form”, “Beauty” and “Being”.

Where Derrida adamantly maintains that deconstruction “blocks every relationship to theology” (1981b, 40) Taylor argues that in its profound questioning, reflecting and challenging postmodernism expresses “greater appreciation for the death of God than most contemporary philosophers of religion and theologians” who all “too often attempt to solve difficult religious problems by simply trying to recapture a past that now seems decisively gone” (Taylor in Cahoone 1996, 515). As Taylor observes, postmodernism is deeply concerned about the “religious” significance of contemporary art, literature and philosophy for marginal thinkers:

Postmodernism opens with the sense of *irrevocable* loss and *incurable* fault. This wound is inflicted by the overwhelming awareness of death - a death that “begins” with the death of God and “ends” with the death of our selves. We are in a time between times and a place which is no place. Here our reflection must “begin”. In this liminal⁵ time and space, deconstructive philosophy and criticism offer rich, though still largely untapped, resources for religious reflection . . . In view of its remarkable grasp of the far-reaching significance of the dissolution of the Western theological and philosophical tradition, it would not be too much to suggest that *deconstruction is the “hermeneutic” of the death of God*. (Taylor in Cahoone 1996, 515)

The experience of pursuing relationship with the Jesus of Christianity becomes a milieu of truth which is a road, a process not an absolute destination. A consideration of contemporary

life in the late 20th century offers us the choice to ask questions about the self and meaningful connections with others. In pursuing this choice it is not impossible for a synchronous Christian worldview to throw new light on the questions we have been asking. When two contemporary writers like Winterson and Irving are examined as products (and co-producers) of the postmodern project, one sees that a central feature of their work is the textualisation of identity and the search for self in an age which is often at a loss to explain what is important and where meaning lies. By telling stories which foreground individuals in search of their quintessential selves, existential postmodernism shares an essentially meaningful quest with Christianity - the quest to find and connect with an Other.

There is an analogy between a redefined and (re-presented) postmodern Christian outlook and the “existential postmodernism” of Irving and Winterson. The link between these two ideologies is a common “hymeneutical” outlook which credits an “other/Other” impinging on the interior unknowables identified by postmodernism, as artefacts of a world apparently produced and so limited by its inescapable interpretations.

However, what may not be clear is why the ideology of specifically contemporary Christianity (as opposed to modern Islam, Taoism, Hinduism, Buddhism or indeed, secular mysticism) is invoked in this analysis. The author of this thesis is most closely associated with contemporary Christianity and identifies it as the belief-system most readily identified as a locus of interest (for critique and inspiration) in both Irving and Winterson’s analysed texts. I do not, and cannot, claim to be speaking for all contemporary Christians. Indeed, many of them might find my link between “existential postmodernism” and Christianity questionable. The inevitably controversial answers to these questions are not intended to be too obscurely hidden. Reticence on my part is considered both subtle and tasteful at this point, where theological argument is not the key thrust of this thesis.

A further question for exploration is however implied. What does the specifying of a link with contemporary Christianity add? The parallels between Irving, Winterson, and Christianity come to the fore in their shared project to answer four key questions. These

shared questions are: What can I know?, Where do I come from?, Where am I going?, and What is of ultimate value? The answers to these become a reader's or writer's attempts to present (or re-present) a coherent worldview in the ethos of postmodernism's "crisis of representation". That the texts engaged with

in this reading tackle these questions is beyond reasonable doubt, and more explicit comment on using a Christian ideology to read against the grain of contemporary postmodern texts is re-examined in the conclusion to this thesis.

/intro.ends

Table 1: Ihab Hassan's Modern and postmodern elements

  vertical relationships	  horizontal relationships
Modernism Romanticism/Symbolism Form (conjunctive, closed) Purpose Design Hierarchy Mastery/Logos Art Object/Finished Work Distance Creation/Totalization Synthesis Presence Centering Genre/Boundary Semantics Paradigm Hypotaxis Metaphor Selection Root/Depth Interpretation/Reading Signified <i>Lisible</i> (Readerly) Narrative/ <i>Grande Histoire</i> Master Code Symptom Type Genital/Phallic	Postmodernism Pataphysics/Dadaism Antiform (disjunctive, open) Play Chance Anarchy Exhaustion/Silence Process/Performance/Happening Participation Decreation/Deconstruction Antithesis Absence Dispersal Text/Intertext Rhetoric Syntagm Parataxis Metonymy Combination Rhizome/Surface Against Interpretation/Misreading Signifier <i>Scriptible</i> (Writerly) Anti-narrative/ <i>Petite Histoire</i> Idiolect Desire Mutant Polymorphous/Androgynous
Paranoia Origin/Cause God the Father Metaphysics Determinacy Transcendence	Schizophrenia Difference-Differance/Trace The Holy Ghost Irony Indeterminacy Immanence /ihab.ends

Table 2: Donna Haraway's contrasted elements of Modernism and postmodernism

[elements of Modernism]	[elements of postmodernism]
Representation	Simulation
Bourgeois novel, realism	Science fiction, postmodernism
Organism	Biotic component
Depth, integrity	Surface, boundary
Heat	Noise
Biology as clinical practice	Biology as inscription
Physiology	Communications engineering
Small group	Subsystem
Perfection	Optimization
Eugenics	Population Control
Decadence, <i>Magic Mountain</i>	Obsolescence, <i>Future Shock</i>
Hygiene	Stress management
Microbiology, Tuberculosis	Immunology, AIDS
Organic division of labor (viz. US spelling)	Ergonomics/cybernetics of labor
Functional specialization	Modular construction
Reproduction	Replication
Organic sex role specialization	Optimal genetic strategies
Biological determinism	Evolutionary inertia, constraints
Community ecology	Ecosystem
Racial chain of being	Neo-imperialism, United Nations humanism
Scientific management in home/factory	Global factory/electronic cottage
Family/market/factory	Women in the integrated circuit
Family wage	Comparable worth
Public/private	Cyborg citizenship
Nature/culture	Fields of difference
Cooperation	Communications of enhancement
Freud	Lacan
Sex	Genetic engineering
Labor	Robotics
Mind	Artificial intelligence
World War II	Star Wars
White capitalist patriarchy	Informatics of domination
	/donna.ends

Endnotes to Introduction.

1. The phrase in the thesis title is taken from a passage in Winterson's first novel where she considers the possibilities of her own spiritual search: "I don't even know if God exists, but I do know that if God is your emotional role model, very few human relationships will match up to it. I have an idea that one day it might be possible, I thought once it had become possible, and that glimpse has set me wandering, trying to find *the balance between earth and sky*" [my italics] (Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit, 165).

2. The term *paradigm* is now commonly used in reference to a shift in the thinking of a particular generation's intellectual mindset, hence the term *paradigm shift*. The term is originally used by Thomas S Kuhn (1970, 92). He describes scientific revolutions as "non-accumulative developmental episodes" *sine qua non* to the occurrence of paradigm shift.

3. Milan Kundera in a reply to an interviewer's comment on the type of novels taking place in the last act of the Modern Era, which Kundera calls the "period of terminal paradoxes", states:

All these reflections on terminal paradoxes, et cetera, did not precede my novels but proceeded from them. It was while I was writing The Unbearable Lightness of Being that - inspired by my characters, all of whom are in some fashion withdrawing from the world - I thought of the fate of Descartes' famous formulation: man as "master and proprietor of nature". Having brought off miracles in science and technology, this "master and proprietor" is suddenly realising that he owns nothing and is master neither of nature (it is vanishing, little by little, from the planet), nor of History (it has escaped him), nor of himself (he is led by the irrational forces of his soul). But if God is gone and man is no longer master, then who is master? The planet is moving through the void without any master. There it is, the unbearable lightness of being. (1988, 41)

4. Ken Plummer describes the "new Queer Theorists" in a reference to Teresa De Lauretis (1991) and describes why this new theory is emerging:

The quest for the grand truth, the scientific solution, the correct political position, the linear progression, and the theoretical purity are now all seen as flawed . . .

The search for the truth of a unitary phenomenon designated "homosexual" is discredited precisely because there is no such unitary phenomenon . . . the awareness of a dispersal of

homosexualities must also mean the awareness of a dispersal of heterosexualities. Indeed, the late modernist project dissolves such a distinction at base. The separate genders and their separate sexualities cannot so clearly be sustained. Further, since the idea of a fixed meaning is dissolved, new readings of all manner of cultural phenomena become possible. Lesbianism, for example, may be seen as a complex metaphor: not a simple sex act, nor a simple way of being, but a profoundly complex symbol anchoring a range of concerns, pleasures, and anxieties. It feeds into a radical re-visioning, a task already started by the new Queer Theorists. (Plummer 1992, 14-15).

5. *Liminal*, meaning marginal, transitional, at the border crossing. “Limen” means *threshold*.

/ends

Chapter One: Autobiography and hermeneutics¹ in Jeanette Winterson's Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit.

Oranges is a threatening novel. It exposes the sanctity of family life as something of a sham; it illustrates by example that what the church calls love is actually psychosis and it dares to suggest that what makes life difficult for homosexuals is not their perversity but other people's. Worse, it does these things with such humour and lightness that those disposed not to agree find that they do. (Winterson Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit, xiii)

Most readers would agree that Jeanette Winterson's writing is deeply concerned with the identity of women. As researchers commented in their study of women's reception of the television version of Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit (hereafter Oranges):

In this research, we set out to test our own reading of Oranges are Not the Only Fruit against those of other women. We feel that on the basis of the responses we received, the "naturalising" of lesbianism that we had identified as the text's strategy was largely successful. We also feel that in general, and despite differences of emphasis, all agreed that what the text "was about" was "female identity". (Hallam & Marshment 1995, 14)

The issue of identity is crucial in any worldview, raising the problematic question of self, and the relative positionality of that self in a world of other selves. As a viewer of Oranges commented, "I know it's only fiction, but these things are happening somewhere" (Hallam & Marshment 1995, 1). The relationship between an autobiographical author and the narrating voice in this novel is interesting, in that separating Jeanette (Winterson) from Jeanette (the central character) is at times difficult. Winterson's own life story is remarkably similar to her main character's yet we need to remember that this is a carefully constructed fiction, a representation of another earlier story.

Winterson's first novel is interesting precisely because it plays off one minority world-view against another. As Hallam and Marshment note,

Playing off the representation of one unpopular minority position (religious fundamentalism) against another (lesbianism), they [the makers of the screen version] aimed to secure a reading in sympathy with the protagonist Jess² and her predicament rather than with the fundamentalist sect who persecute her. (1995, 2)

It is this clash between opposing worldviews which throws Winterson's work into the realm of the postmodern. Cahoone (1996, 14) points to five prominent postmodern themes:

“Postmodernism typically criticizes: *presence* or presentation (versus representation and construction), *origin* (versus phenomena), *unity* (versus plurality), and *transcendence* of norms (versus their immanence). It typically offers an analysis of phenomena through *constitutive otherness*”. Within Winterson’s novels, we find individuals struggling for selfhood, for the expression of their true identities, often in worlds which resist the individual and her struggle for selfhood. But what does one mean by “worldview”, and why should the place a character or a writer speaks from be so important to the creation and reception of her voice?

Solomon proposes a number of possibilities from various sources as to the definition of a worldview, and how it affects the way a person makes meanings from their experience in the world:

James Sire (1995, 17) asserts that “A worldview is a set of presuppositions (or assumptions) which we hold (consciously or subconsciously) about the basic makeup of our world”. Phillips and Brown (1991, 29) state that “A worldview is, first of all, an explanation and interpretation of the world and second, an application of this view to life. In simpler terms, our worldview is a view of the world and a view for the world”. Walsh and Middleton (1984, 32) provide what I think is the most succinct and understandable explanation: “A worldview provides a model of the world which guides its adherents in the world”. (Solomon 1994, electronic document)

With the realisation that many subtleties can be added, this will be my working definition. Moving forward to a point where one can examine the predicament of today’s literary world, though the process of striving to identify and articulate a coherent worldview, Solomon suggests why a specific worldview is needed.

World views act somewhat like eye glasses or contact lenses. That is, a world view should provide the correct “prescription” for making sense of the world just as wearing the correct prescription for your eyes brings things into focus. And, in either example, an incorrect prescription can be dangerous, even life-threatening. People who are struggling with world view questions are often despairing and even suicidal. Thus it’s important for us to give attention to the formulation of the proper world view. Arthur Holmes (1983, 5) states that the need for a world view is fourfold: “the need to unify thought and life; the need to define the good life and find hope and meaning in life; the need to guide thought; the need to guide action.” Yet another prominent need for the proper world view is to help us deal with an increasingly diverse culture. We are faced with a smorgasbord of world views, all of which make claims concerning truth. We are challenged to sort through this mixture of world views with wisdom. These needs are experienced by all people, either consciously or unconsciously. All of us have a world view with which we strive to meet such needs.

The proper world view helps us by orienting us to the intellectual and philosophical terrain about us. (Solomon 1994, electronic document)

The question of wisdom, what it means “to sort through this mixture of world views with wisdom”, might be considered begging the question. Which comes first: the worldview or the wisdom? Solomon comes dangerously close to forcing an interpretation on us through the use of loaded terms such as “correct”, “incorrect”, and “proper”. However he does argue forcefully for the need for a worldview which allows its “viewer” to make choices which are wise, life decisions which bring about positive effects. Winterson demonstrates this through her novel as she shows how certain ideas and one particular “worldview” (fundamentalist religion) has devastating consequences in the life of a young woman.

In Oranges, we are witnesses to the bringing together of two opposing worldviews, that of fundamentalist Christianity with its claim to a definitive truth revealed through a personal relationship with Jesus Christ, and postmodernism’s assertion that there no longer is any such thing as absolute truth. As Solomon asserts, any world view should be able to pass certain tests, a fourfold qualification. Firstly, it should be rational. It should not ask us to believe contradictory things. Secondly, it should be supported by evidence. It should be consistent with what we observe. Thirdly, it should give a satisfying and comprehensive explanation of reality. It should be able to explain why things are the way they are. Finally, it should provide a satisfactory basis for living. It should not leave us feeling compelled to borrow elements of another world view in order to live in this world.

Any world view also has a number of common components, including the following four essential ingredients observed by Solomon. His first premise is that something exists. This may sound obvious, but it really is an important foundational element of world view building since some will try to deny it. But a denial is self-defeating because all people experience cause and effect. The universe is rational; it is predictable. Solomon’s second premise is that all people have absolutes. Again, many will try to deny this, but to deny it is to assert it. All of us seek an infinite reference point. For some it is God; for others it is the state, or love, or power, and for some this reference point is themselves or man.

The third premise forwarded by Solomon is that two contradictory statements cannot both be right. This is a primary law of logic that is continually denied. Ideally speaking, only one world view can correctly mirror reality. This cannot be overemphasized in light of the prominent belief that tolerance is the ultimate virtue. To say that someone is wrong is labelled intolerant or narrow-minded. A good illustration of this is when we hear people declare that all religions are the same. It would mean that Hindus, for example, agree with Christians concerning God, Jesus, salvation, heaven, hell, and a host of other doctrines. This, in Solomon's analysis, is nonsense.

The final premise he proposes is that all people exercise faith. All of us presuppose certain things to be true without absolute proof. These are inferences or assumptions upon which a belief is based. This becomes important, for example, when we interact with those who allege that only the scientist is completely neutral. Some common assumptions are: a personal God exists; man evolved from inorganic material; man is essentially good; reality is material.

Although Solomon uses the phrase "ideally speaking" in his explanation of the third premise, it is apparent that humans cannot "speak ideally". Perhaps this is the centre of the problem raised by a consideration of differing world views. Solomon's argument is a risky one to invoke because his views are theologically apologetic in nature. Part of the struggle faced by an intellectually sound thinker who also admits the possibility of an authentic spiritual dimension to human existence, is how to rationally justify this double life. The point is that no criteria exist to differentiate between equally applicable but nonetheless contradictory world views. Most "isms" and religions unfortunately appear to fit this category. If Solomon's third premise *two contradictory statements cannot both be right* is true then premise four *all people exercise faith* appears unnecessary.

Solomon continues to assert the implications of adopting a particular world view, whether one is aware of consciously making that decision or not. In true existentialist fashion one realises that not choosing one world view is choosing another, which by default brings that other world view into one's thought life.

If your model of the world includes an infinite-personal God, as in Christian Theism, that belief should provide guidance for your life. If your model rejects God, as in Naturalism, again such a belief serves as a guide. Or if your model asserts that you are

god, as in New Age Pantheism, yet again your life is being guided by such a conception. These examples should remind us that we are living in a culture that puts us in touch constantly with such ideas, and many more. They cannot all be true. (Solomon 1994, electronic document)

Even if one questions the validity of Solomon's premises, common sense admits the idea that a person uses a particular world view³ to make choices about life, and problems encountered on that journey. People discover the validity or the hollowness of a worldview when it is put to the test. When the worldview itself becomes part of the problem it is attempting to address, then making wise choices becomes that much more problematic. Through Jeanette's search, Winterson demonstrates that wisdom is learned by negotiating obstacles, through an on-going experience of problem-solving. Faced by her dilemma, Jeanette could plead for wisdom and not move forward until she possessed enough of it, wherever it might be obtained. Yet in taking on one world view with such determination, and moving through its challenges, Jeanette discovers appropriate wisdom along the way. She finds her wisest answers en route, and simply does not possess enough wisdom at the outset of her quest. Jeanette must venture forth to find what she desires so passionately.

In order to read accurately, we need to understand the world view through which a writer or a reader observes the world. Empirical evidence is accumulated, picked up through various experiences in life, and with that a view of the world emerges. In Oranges, a young girl's emotions are being torn apart by the clash of two belief systems. On the one hand, she has a family tradition of religious fundamentalism, a bullet-proof system as tight shut as the see-through protective bubble around the "Popemobile" which has conveyed Pope John Paul II to his various speaking engagements around the world. On the other, she is faced by the screaming heart cry and/or desire within her, to acknowledge her awakened sexuality. This is her first experience of burning and consuming love. Thrown against this passion within her, Winterson's female voice is confronted by the religious "solution" to her problem.

Yield not to Temptation, for yielding is sin,
Each Victory will help you some other to win.
Fight manfully onwards, Dark passions subdue,
Look ever to Jesus, He will carry you through. (Oranges, 53)

It is no surprise that organised religion's answer to this woman's questions should be framed

by a patriarchal response. If one is faced by “temptation” especially “dark passions”, then the religiously correct answer seems to be to “fight manfully onwards” even if one is a woman. Winterson continues to express the awkwardness of maintaining balance in this situation through her narrator’s memories:

By the time we got to verse 3, Next Door had started to bang on the wall.

“Listen to the Heathen,” my mother shouted jubilantly, her foot furious on the hard pedal.

“Sing it again.”

And we did, while the Heathen, driven mad by the Word, rushed away to find what blunt instruments they could to pound the wall from the other side.

Some of them ran into the back yard and yelled over the wall, “Stop that bloody racket.” (*Oranges*, 53)

Young Jeanette is grappling with the storm inside her. Her life experience so far wrestles against the newness of sexual passion. She is caught in a bewildering transition stage between leaving the naive Jeanette behind and growing into an enlightened sexual outlaw. The “missionary child, servant of God, blessing” (*Oranges*, 10) in her mother’s ambitious dream, is understandably confused.

Framed by her fanatical religious environment, Jeanette (Winterson’s central character) will presumably be acquainted with Paul’s letter to the Corinthians on the way of love:

When I was a child, I talked like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became a man, I put childish ways behind me. Now we see but a poor reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known. And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love. (*1 Corinthians* 13:11-13, NIV)

The quotation from Paul uses the word “agape” in the original, a type of unconditional Christ-like love versus the possibility of “eros” love, which is more fundamentally erotic and sexual. Paul looks forward to a heavenly, eternal love of “then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known” while Jeanette seeks to be “known” in a much more directly carnal way. Thrown against this biblical position are Jeanette’s attempts to integrate two deep loves within her: one is the traditional Christian view, and the other is new and much more tangibly exciting.

We read the Bible as usual, and then told each other how glad we were that the Lord

had brought us together. She [Melanie] stroked my head for a long time, and then we hugged and it felt like drowning. Then I was frightened but couldn't stop. There was something crawling in my belly. I had an octopus inside me.

And it was evening and it was morning; another day.

After that we did everything together, and I stayed with her as often as I could.....

"Do you think this is Unnatural Passion?" I asked her once.

"Doesn't feel like it. According to Pastor Finch, that's awful." She must be right, I thought. (Oranges, 86)

The phrase "And it was evening and it was morning; another day" is deliberately evocative of the wording of Genesis during the account of creation. Winterson ties this archetypal story of origins into her narrated experience of first sexual encounter. This sets the tone for the existential journey⁴ a young woman makes towards her independence. Jeanette in the novel must struggle to understand the Pentecostal framework of Pastor Finch and her mother's worldview in order to be able to resist and replace it with her own sense of selfhood.

If an element of postmodern strategy is to utilise textual tools in new ways, then the chapter layout of Oranges makes an interesting case-study. Winterson has deliberately used the first eight books of the Old Testament in the narrative of her story: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy, Joshua, Judges, Ruth. In exegetical terms, Winterson has taken these books and remythologised them, transforming their traditional meaning-making potential into the parables of her own story. In narrative terms, she has picked up eight books and reworked them into her own meta-narrative. Winterson's transformation of these Old Testament "classics" into the structure of her narrative, and its meaning in the context she chooses, necessitates some commentary.

The Bible is a meta-text itself as one text containing an entire library of other interconnected texts. We discover one "book" divided into two sections, Old and New Testaments, and these themselves then divide into 39 Old Testament texts, and 27 New Testament ones. A host of human writers, acting (they would claim) on divine inspiration produce a library of 66 books. Winterson takes the first eight, each with its already established meaning in the genre of biblical tradition, and remythologises those meanings within her new narrative of Oranges.

The following overviews of the original biblical books are indebted to a Thompson Chain

Reference Bible, particularly its study section on “Analyses of the Books of the Bible” (1987, 1514-1517). In the introduction to that study, the writer observes: “The authorship, historical occasion of the writing, main theme, and other points of special interest are brought out. The aim has been to strike, whenever possible, the keynote of the book and to open up its deeper spiritual meaning.” (Thompson Chain Reference Bible 1987, 1514.)

Moses is commonly accepted as the human author of Genesis writing under Jehovah’s divine inspiration. This text is seen as the biblical book of origins, a record of the origin of our universe, the human race, sin, redemption, family life, corruption of society, the nations, the different languages, and the Hebrew race. It is no wonder that of so many biblical texts, Genesis receives much critical analysis particularly due to the contested content it presents. Presenting an account of creation it offers readers the choice to receive it as a collection of facts (as most fundamentalists claim), as a mythological story embellished with profound symbols on the nature of being human, or as an amalgamation of both.

Only a single chapter is devoted to the subject of creation (just a bare outline of narrated events), while the remaining 38 chapters are devoted to the history of God’s chosen people. The book concerns the story of man’s sin, his “fall” from divine blessing in the garden of Eden, and the initial steps taken for humanity’s redemption by a divine covenant made with a chosen race, whose early history is portrayed here.

“Beginning” is a key word in this book, a profound concern for origins, an explanation to address the question: “Where do we come from?” The book is especially noted for its first mention of messianic prophecy in the encounter between God’s angel and the serpent who has seduced Eve to eat forbidden fruit from the tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil: “And I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; he will crush your head, and you will strike his heel” (Genesis 3:15, NIV). This is interpreted as divine indication of the eventual triumph of Christ (as Eve’s descendant) over Satan (the serpent) through their meeting at Golgotha, with Christ’s crucifixion and resurrection.

Winterson’s Chapter One, Genesis, functions as her beginning, a chapter of origins. The key

word here is “beginning”.

Now and again my mother liked to tell me her own conversion story; it was very romantic. I sometimes think that if Mills and Boon were at all revivalist in their policy my mother would be a star.

One night, by mistake, she had walked into Pastor Spratt’s Glory Crusade. It was in a tent on some spare land, and every evening Pastor Spratt spoke of the fate of the damned, and performed healing miracles. He was very impressive. My mother said he looked like Errol Flynn, but holy. A lot of women found the Lord that week. Part of Pastor Spratt’s charisma stemmed from his time spent as an advertising manager for Rathbone’s Wrought Iron. He knew about bait. “There is nothing wrong with bait,” he said, when *The Chronicle* asked him why he gave pot plants to the newly converted. “We are commanded to be Fishers of Men.” When my mother heard the call, she was presented with a copy of the Psalms and asked to make her choice between a Christmas Cactus (non-flowering) and a lily of the valley. She had opted for the lily of the valley. When my father went the next night, she told him to be sure and go for the cactus, but by the time he got to the front they had all gone. “He’s not one to push himself,” she often said, and after a little pause, “Bless him.” (*Oranges*, 8)

Here, from the beginning of this narrative, we are witness to the working out of destiny in the life of young Jeanette. Her story is already being written before her birth, by a “radically saved” mother, who prays for a special child. Throughout her re-presentation of biblical narrated “fact”, Winterson uses humour to exploit the meaning-making possibilities of the original texts. The idea of a wrought-iron salesman finding God and now selling salvation with special pot-plant give-aways is funny, and not incredible in an age of professional conmen and manipulative TV evangelists. Notwithstanding Winterson’s harsh satire, a textual echo in the story of Samuel’s birth is implied:

In bitterness of soul Hannah wept much and prayed to the Lord. And she made a vow saying, “O Lord Almighty, if you will only look upon your servant’s misery and remember me, and not forget your servant but give her a son, then I will give him to the Lord for all the days of his life, and no razor will ever be used on his head....So in the course of time Hannah conceived and gave birth to a son. She named him Samuel, [the NIV notes that *Samuel* sounds like the Hebrew for *heard of God*] saying, “Because I asked the Lord for him.” (*1 Samuel* 1:10,11 and 20, NIV)

Returning to Jeanette’s mother and her heart-cry to the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob:

My mother, out walking that night, dreamed a dream and sustained it in daylight. She would get a child, train it, build it, dedicate it to the Lord:

a missionary child,
a servant of God,

a blessing

And so it was that on a particular day, some time later, she followed a star until it came to settle above an orphanage, and in that place was a crib, and in that crib, a child. A child with too much hair.

She said, "This child is mine from the Lord".

She took the child away and for seven days and seven nights the child cried out, for fear and not knowing. The mother sang to the child, and stabbed the demons. She understood how jealous the Spirit is of flesh.

Such warm tender flesh.

Her flesh now, sprung from her head.

Her vision.

Not the jolt beneath the hip bone, but water and the word.

She had a way out now, for years and years to come.

We stood on the hill and my mother said, "This world is full of sin".

We stood on the hill and my mother said, "You can change the world". (*Oranges*, 10)

The biblical diction and the phrases straight from Sunday School lessons are the means by which Winterson uses old textual wineskins to hold new textual wine. The words sound all too familiar, for any reader subjected to hours of Bible teaching as a child, yet Winterson uses these same overused words to offer us new lessons. As a child, Jeanette is taught that the "world is full of sin" but also, that she "can change the world." From the start the text reminds us that there are at least two sides to every narrative, probably three: the story a writer tells, the story a text shows, and the story as interpreted by a reader. Jeanette's education, her mother's painstaking process of instilling within her pre-school daughter a fundamental worldview, begins early:

It was in this way that I began my education: she taught me to read from the Book of Deuteronomy, and she told me all about the lives of the saints, how they were really wicked, and given to nameless desires. Not fit for worship; this was yet another heresy of the Catholic Church and I was not to be misled by the smooth tongues of priests.

"But I never see any priests".

"A girl's motto is BE PREPARED".

I discovered that everything in the natural world was a symbol of the great Struggle between good and evil. "Consider the mamba," said my mother. "Over short distances the mamba can outrun a horse." And she drew the race on a sheet of paper. She meant that in the short term, evil can triumph, but never for very long. We were very glad, and we sang our favourite hymn, *Yield Not to Temptation*. (*Oranges*, 15-16)

From the beginning, as in Genesis, the battle between walking in fellowship with the creator of Eden and eating the fruit from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil is raging within young seven-year-old Jeanette:

“Why don’t I go to school?” I asked her. I was curious about school because my mother always called it a Breeding Ground. I didn’t know what she meant, but I knew it was a bad thing, like Unnatural Passions. “They’ll lead you astray,” was the only answer I got.

. . . Meanwhile, my lessons continued, I learnt about Horticulture and Garden Pests via the slugs and my mother’s seed catalogues, and I developed an understanding of Historical Process through the prophecies in the Book of Revelation, and a magazine called *The Plain Truth*, which my mother received each week.

“It’s Elijah in our midst again,” she declared.

And so I learned to interpret the signs and wonders that the unbeliever might never understand.

“You’ll need to when you’re out there on the mission field,” she reminded me. (Oranges, 16-17)

At last Jeanette’s mother is forced to send her daughter to the Breeding Ground. A fat letter arrives in the post. Her mother thinks it is “thank you” letters from the devotees of the latest Healing the Sick campaign. Instead it is a letter ordering her to send Jeanette to school. Jeanette’s reaction to leaving Egypt for the Promised Land is immediate and ecstatic, “I whizzed into the toilet and sat on my hands; the Breeding Ground at last” (Oranges, 17).

Jeanette realises that escape from the clutches of her oppressive “Egypt” is possible and that learning more about the world outside her closed religious community might be a means of discovering the way to the “Promised Land”. Her mother views the world outside church as a threatening place, the “Breeding Ground” of evil. However her young daughter sees in it, the hope of something better, something new.

Moses is commonly accepted as the author and central character in Exodus, the central protagonist in a story which records the history of Israel from the death of Joseph to the construction of the tabernacle. A key thought on which the book revolves is the notion of “deliverance,” particularly as the children of Israel flee Egypt to face the perils of wandering in a desert, entirely dependent on the mercies of an awe-inspiring (awful and awesome) God.

The pilgrimage of Israel, from captivity to the brink of the Promised Land, can be seen as a type of the Christian life. Symbols expressed in the narrative become very definite pictures of the challenges faced in forsaking one way of living (in Egypt) for another (Canaan) through a difficult trial (the desert years). This story is considered so important by the New Testament writers that it is re-presented by Paul in his letter to the church in Corinth as a call to perseverance in the Christian journey.

For I do not want you to be ignorant of the fact, brothers, that our forefathers were all under the cloud and that they all passed through the sea. They were all baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea. They all ate the same spiritual food and drank the same spiritual drink; for they drank from the spiritual rock that accompanied them, and that rock was Christ.

Nevertheless, God was not pleased with most of them; their bodies were scattered over the desert. Now these things occurred as examples to keep us from setting our hearts on evil things as they did. . . These things happened to them as examples and were written down as warnings for us, on whom the fulfillment of the ages has come. (1 Corinthians 10:1-6, 11, NIV)

This book is seen then as a type of spiritual map, an account of “the way things were” when the people of God were still trying to get their lives right. So important are the difficult lessons they learned that this story becomes a road-map for the future Christians to take heed of.

Winterson’s Chapter Two, Exodus, presents the great escape from a personal Egypt and depicts Jeanette’s journey through the desert en route to the Promised Land. The key thought here is deliverance.

Jeanette is struggling through her early school years to break the yoke of a mind trained in another way from the rest of the children. Her blatant fundamentalism, as warped by her mother’s sense of Christianity as it is, is sharply at odds with her school peers. It is a time of learning new things, learning that oranges are not the only fruit, in spite of her mother’s insistence. When Jeanette is hospitalised for deafness, her mother is busy planning the church’s Christmas campaign.

When she couldn’t come herself she sent my father, usually with a letter and a couple of oranges.

“The only fruit,” she always said.

Fruit salad, fruit pie, fruit for fools, fruited punch. Demon fruit, passion fruit, rotten fruit, fruit on Sunday.
Oranges are the only fruit. (Oranges, 29)

Winterson's diction is revealing - the ways in which "Fruit salad" is gradually transformed into "rotten fruit, fruit on Sunday". For a woman who reduces all of life's experience to one type of fruit, this entropy from fresh fruit salad to rotten fruit, is symbolic of the way Jeanette's mother's life has experienced decay through religion. It also serves as a warning of the fate facing Jeanette if she does not discover that there is more than one fruit, more than one way of constructing and making sense of the world.

Looking through an old photo album with her mother, Jeanette is intrigued by photographs of mother's "Old Flames". Here she begins to sense that there is more than one way of looking at the world, that the world is full of many different types of fruit. In the struggle to break out of the closed system of her mother's Christianity, Jeanette is eventually moving towards a new closed system, that of her emerging sexuality. To return to the photographs:

"Why didn't you marry that one, or that one?" I asked, curious.
"They were all wayward men," she sighed. "I had a bad time enough finding one that was only a gambler."
"Why isn't he a gambler now?" I wanted to know, trying to imagine my meek father looking like the men I'd seen on films.
"He married me and he found the Lord." Then she sighed and told me the story of each one of the Old Flames . . .

So she married my father and reformed him and he built the church and never got angry. I thought he was nice, though he didn't say much. Of course, her own father was furious. He told her she'd married down, that she should have stayed in Paris, and promptly ended all communication. So she never had enough money and after a while she managed to forget that she'd ever had any at all. "The church is my family," she always said whenever I asked about the people in the photograph album. And the church was my family too. (Oranges, 36)

As this chapter closes, Jeanette narrates a version of the story of the biblical exodus, using it to explain her difficulty in making sense of a world which is not always as clearly defined as her mother has taught her.

When the children of Israel left Egypt, they were guided by the pillar of cloud by day, and the pillar of fire by night. For them, this did not seem to be a problem. For me, it was an enormous problem. The pillar of cloud was a fog, perplexing and impossible. I didn't understand the ground rules. The daily world was a world of Strange Notions,

without form, and therefore void. I comforted myself as best I could by always rearranging their version of the facts. (*Oranges*, 47)

As she realises her own need to create a unique meaning from every story told to her, Jeanette explains how she creates a new worldview, a new mythology from “their version of the facts”. This is a lesson she will choose to apply very soon, in rearranging her mother’s “version of the facts”. Here is the story she creates, with the pressing need to make some sense of the Strange Notions in the world her eyes are being opened to.

One day I learned that Tetrahedron is a mathematical shape that can be formed by stretching an elastic band over a series of nails.

But Tetrahedron is an emperor . . .

The emperor Tetrahedron lived in a palace made absolutely from elastic bands. To the right, cunning fountains shot elastic jets, subtle as silk; to the left, ten minstrels played day and night on elastic lutes.

The emperor was beloved by all.

At night, when the thin dogs slept, and the music lulled all but the most watchful to sleep, the mighty palace lay closed and barred against the foul Isosceles, sworn enemy to the graceful Tetrahedron.

But in the day, the guards pulled back the great doors, flooding the plain with light, so that gifts could be brought to the emperor.

Many brought gifts; stretches of material so fine that a change of the temperature would dissolve it; stretches of material so strong that whole cities could be built from it.

And stories of love and folly.

One day, a lovely woman brought the emperor a revolving circus operated by midgets.

The midgets acted all of the tragedies and many of the comedies. They acted them all at once, and it was fortunate that Tetrahedron had so many faces, otherwise he might have died of fatigue.

They acted them all at once, and the emperor, walking round his theatre, could see them all at once, if he wished.

Round and round he walked, and so learned a very valuable thing: that no emotion is the final one. (*Oranges*, 47-48)

Here, a young woman begins to write the alternative narrative of her life and her world. The mathematically solid concept of geometrical shapes, what is safe and workable, is transformed into a world of mutable shapes. The “Tetrach” of Old Testament hermeneutics becomes her “emperor Tetrahedron”. She creates an alternate version of her “reality”, using the “material” of a story-teller’s words to build stories, which “can be so fine that a change of the temperature would dissolve it; stretches of material so strong that whole cities could be built from it”. Most importantly for her, she articulates the importance of life’s “stories of

love and folly". She learns too that it is vital to have many faces, to see the many acts in life, the multiplicity of tragedy and comedy. It is in walking "round and round" like her created emperor Tetrahedron, that Jeanette (who is Winterson's creation) will learn "a very valuable thing". It is this realisation "that no emotion is the final one" (Oranges, 48) which catapults Jeanette out of her Egypt of sheltered home-learning into the world's desert, the testing ground, the dark night of the soul.

The name of the book Leviticus is derived from the name of the tribe of Levi, the priesthood of Israel, led by Aaron (Moses's brother) and Moses is commonly accepted to be its author. Key words in this book are "access" and "holiness," containing as it does a digest of divine laws. The central character focused on here is the high priest, who goes before God on behalf of the people of God, pleading for mercy. A central question the book raises is "How can sinful man approach a holy God?" (The word *holy* occurs over 80 times in the book).

Winterson's Chapter Three, Leviticus, is also described as her "Book of laws" (Oranges, 51). The key words to consider here are access and holiness. Jeanette's world of laws includes her mother's rigid religious life, aspects of which infect every part of their neighbourhood.

The heathen were a daily household preoccupation. My mother found them everywhere, particularly Next Door. They tormented her as only the godless can, but she had her methods.

They hated hymns, and she liked to play the piano, an old upright with pitted candelabra and yellow keys. (Oranges, 51)

Within the chapter, Jeanette encounters another problematic thought, that of the logical possibility of perfection. The text's means of resolving it, is to mythologise it with the story of a prince who sets off on a quest by saying, "I want a woman, without blemish inside or out, flawless in every respect. I want a woman who is perfect". (Oranges, 59)

Jeanette's meaning-making process is initiated by a particularly thought-provoking sermon:

The sermon was on perfection, and it was at this moment that I began to develop my first theological disagreement.

Perfection, the man said, was a thing to aspire to. It was the condition of the Godhead, it was the condition of the man before the Fall. It could only be truly realized in the next world, but we had a sense of it, a maddening, impossible sense,

which was both a blessing and a curse.

“Perfection,” he announced, “is flawlessness.” (Oranges, 58)

In his search for the perfect woman, the prince in Winterson’s story waits three years for his advisors to report back. Eventually he begins to write a book to pass the time.

It was called *The Holy Mystery of Perfection*. He divided it into three sections.

Part one: the philosophy of perfection. The Holy Grail, the unblemished life, the final aspiration on Mount Carmel. Saint Teresa and the Interior Castle.

Part two: the impossibility of perfection. The restless search in this life, the pain, the majority who opt for second best. Their spreading corruption. The importance of being earnest.

Part three: the need to produce a world full of perfect beings. The possibility thereby of a heaven on earth. A perfect race. An exhortation to single-mindedness. (Oranges, 60)

Apparently the prince has to learn the difference between Perfection and Flawlessness, which he does when one of his advisors stumbles across the most gorgeous woman in his kingdom with “That special something”. She can sing beautifully, and she can sew too. To the advisor this is the woman who will answer the prince’s heart cry:

I want a woman, without blemish inside or out, flawless in every respect. I want a woman who is perfect. (Oranges, 59)

Winterson’s narrative, and its contemplation of perfection as a prerequisite for the ideal woman, alludes conveniently to the perfect Passover Lamb, a fore-runner of Christ’s Passover sacrifice. In Winterson’s text perfection and flawlessness are held up as impossible ideals. In the original Leviticus text, the only acceptable sacrifice was a perfect and blameless offering:

The Lord said to Moses, “Speak to Aaron and his sons and to all the Israelites and say to them; ‘If any of you - either an Israelite or an alien living in Israel - presents a gift for a burnt offering to the Lord, either to fulfill a vow or as a freewill offering, you must present a male without defect from the cattle, sheep or goats in order that it may be accepted on your behalf. Do not bring anything with a defect, because it will not be accepted on your behalf.’” (Leviticus 22:17-21, NIV)

This exists as a part of an inter-text. One body of Biblical text reads another within the same text - here Leviticus “reads” Exodus. It could be seen to allude to the gospel accounts of Christ’s crucifixion, with integral connections back to Exodus, and the Passover ceremony.

The animals you choose must be year-old males without defect, and you may take them from the sheep or the goats . . . Then [you] are to take some of the blood and put it on the sides and tops of the doorframes of the houses where [you] eat the lambs . . . Eat it in haste; it is the Lord's Passover. On that same night I will pass through Egypt and strike down every firstborn - both men and animals - and I will bring judgement on all the gods of Egypt. I am the Lord. The blood will be a sign for you on the houses where you are; and when I see the blood, I will pass over you. No destructive plague will touch you when I strike Egypt. (Exodus 12: 5, 7; 11-13. NIV)

Important facts to note about this Passover lamb are that the sacrifice must include a perfect male animal (alluding symbolically to Christ), whose blood must be shed (the crucifixion). In the tale narrated in Oranges this question of perfection is expressly foregrounded - the woman must also be "perfect" - but significantly different from Biblical story in that the perfect sacrifice is a woman. The prince in Winterson's text goes to investigate the woman in her village, and reports back after a three day visit with her.

Calling his chief advisors around him, he told them all that had taken place.

The woman was indeed perfect, there was no doubt about that, but she wasn't flawless. He, the prince, had been wrong. She was perfect because she was a perfect balance of qualities and strengths. She was symmetrical in every respect. The search for perfection, she had told him, was in fact the search for balance, for harmony. (Oranges, 59)

After another day and night of wondering how to announce his mistake, that he was wrong, the prince stands before the court and all the village and calls for the woman to come forth.

As she came from her home, the first light caught her, and she shone beacon-like across the clearing. There was a murmur of amazement, for she was more beautiful than ever that day. The prince swallowed hard, and began his speech.

"Good people, all of you know of my search for perfection, and many of you I hope have read my book. I had hoped on coming here to find an end to my quest, but I now know that perfection is not to be found, but to be fashioned, there is no such thing as flawlessness on this earth . . ."

"But there is such a thing as perfection," the woman spoke out, her voice clear and strong.

"This woman," continued the prince, "has done her best to convince me that perfection and flawlessness are not the same thing, and why should she not take such trouble if she were not flawed herself?"

"I took no trouble," returned the woman, as strong as before. "It was you who sought me."

There was ripple of dissent among the crowd. Suddenly someone cried out.

"But she healed you!"

"Heathen arts," snapped back the chief advisor. "Arrest that man." And the man was bound and taken away.

“But she has no blemish,” shouted out another.

“But I have,” said the woman quietly, “I have many.”

“Proof from her own lips,” screamed the chief advisor.

Then the woman took a step forward and stood before the prince who began to tremble uncontrollably.

“What you want does not exist,” she said.

“Proof from her own lips,” screamed the chief advisor again.

The woman took no notice, but continued to address the prince, who had turned deathly pale.

“What does exist lies in the sphere of your own hands.”

The prince fainted.

“Evil, Evil,” shrieked the advisor. “We will not give up on our task.”

“You’ll be dead first,” shrugged the woman, about to go back inside.

“Not before you,” cried the prince, coming to. “Off with her head.”

And they chopped off the woman’s head. (*Oranges*, 63-64)

Winterson’s text seeks to re-write an old patriarchal text (Moses is commonly supposed to have written *Genesis*, *Exodus*, *Numbers* and *Deuteronomy*), and tell the story of a woman’s genesis, her exodus from that place of beginnings in a single-minded mother’s home, and her entry into a levitical world of laws, of religious cause and effect. Here we see the move from a theological disagreement to the beginnings of a new worldview. As with the woman in the story arguing the subtle difference between perfection and flawlessness, when Jeanette begins to question the absolutised purity of heterosexual love, the keepers of the law (like the prince’s advisors) demand her blood sacrifice.

In this story the woman becomes a type of scapegoat (originally a goat on which the sins of Israel were transferred before it was banished into the desert) just as Jeanette will carry the burden of sin in her religious community. The prince, like the religious pharisees who sought to trick Jesus on the intricacies of Jewish law, demands perfection and flawlessness and allows no room for human failure. Jeanette is trying to exchange religious fundamentalism for a worldview which allows her a lesbian identity - such a move is seen to be breaking the laws of her church community. In *Leviticus*, the laws of God are interpreted and enforced by the priests. In Winterson’s *Leviticus*, the priests, advisors and church elders also seek to enforce what they interpret as God’s laws. By setting her story of an innocent woman killed by pharisee-like advisors in this *Leviticus* chapter, Winterson writes against the biblical tradition - her text argues that every letter of religious law interpreted so ruthlessly might well be a

mis-reading, a failure to read the situation in context.

The title of Numbers is derived from the numberings of the people of Israel. A central lesson conveyed through the book seems to be that unbelief (in God as the all sufficient provider) bars entrance to abundant life. Again, in the parallel passage tradition of Hebrew narrative, the New Testament refers back to the old in order to expose an abiding truth.

So, as the Holy Spirit says: “Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts as you did in the rebellion, during the time of testing in the desert, where your fathers tested and tried me and for forty years saw what I did. That is why I was angry with that generation, and I said, ‘Their hearts are always going astray, and they have not known my ways.’ So I declared on oath in my anger, ‘They shall never enter my rest.’”

(Hebrews 3: 7-11, NIV)

Here we read that belief is the single most important condition for gaining entry to rest and providence, to the Promised Land.

Winterson’s Chapter Four, Numbers, is the text of Jeanette’s pilgrimage. It too conveys a central lesson where unbelief in one world view bars entrance to the abundant life promised by that world view. If falling in love, and marriage as one of its possible consequences, is seen as a deeply meaningful rite of passage in human society, then Winterson tackles love and marriage head on in Numbers. The chapter begins with a young girl’s nightmare, getting married.

It was spring, the ground still had traces of snow, and I was about to be married. My dress was pure white and I had a golden crown. As I walked up the aisle the crown got heavier and heavier and the dress more and more difficult to walk in. I thought everyone would point at me, but no one noticed.

Somehow I made it to the altar. The priest was very fat and kept getting fatter, like bubble gum you blow. Finally we came to the moment, “You may kiss the bride.” My new husband turned to me, and here were a number of possibilities. Sometimes he was blind, sometimes a pig, sometimes my mother, sometimes the man from the post office, and once, just a suit of clothes with nothing inside. I told my mother about it, and she said it was because I ate sardines for supper. The next night I ate sausages, but I still had the dream.

There was a woman in our street who told us she had married a pig. I asked her why she did it, and she said, “You never know until it’s too late.”

Exactly.

No doubt that woman had discovered in life what I had discovered in my

dreams. She had unwittingly married a pig. (*Oranges*, 69)

We also see how the young Jeanette learns that the worldview imparted by her mother is not the only way of making meaning of life. As her mother is peeling her an orange, and humming *What a Friend We Have in Jesus*, Jeanette broaches a sensitive subject.

“Why did you marry my dad?”

She looked at me closely.

“Don’t be silly.”

“I’m not being silly.”

“We had to have something for you, and besides, he’s a good man, though I know he’s not one to push himself. But don’t you worry, you’re dedicated to the Lord, I put you down for missionary school as soon as we got you. Remember Jane Eyre and St John Rivers.” A faraway look came into her eye.

I did remember, but what my mother didn’t know was that I now knew she had rewritten the ending. *Jane Eyre* was her favourite non-Bible book, and she read it to me over and over again, when I was very small. I couldn’t read it, but I knew where the pages turned. Later, literate and curious, I had decided to read it for myself. A sort of nostalgic pilgrimage. I found out, that dreadful day in a back corner of the library, that Jane doesn’t marry St John at all, that she goes back to Mr Rochester. It was like the day I discovered my adoption papers while searching for a pack of playing cards. I have never since played cards, and I have never since read *Jane Eyre*. (*Oranges*, 72-73)

Jeanette’s mother carefully reworks her personalised *Jane Eyre* so that Nice Christian Jane ends up with St John Rivers, man of God and missionary to the heathen. Her re-reading, this re-presentation of Jane’s story, is exactly the way Jeanette experiences the life-changing re-reading which her church tries to enforce on her life. Her mother’s deception is subtle but entirely warps the original story. The “real” Jane Eyre chooses love over religious bias, she decides with her heart and not with her Sunday conscience. Jeanette’s mother is quite possibly a true hypocrite, a religious pharisee who honestly believes in her reading of the world - literature and love. To be a true hypocrite surely means really believing in what you are saying and doing, dedicating oneself absolutely to a lie which one is convinced bears witness to the truth of a given situation. Pastor Finch, Jeanette’s mother, and the church community really believe they are right in judging Jeanette’s “Unnatural Passion” so vehemently. However, what Jeanette learns from the way her community treats her is that believing, even living a lie, in no way makes that lie less damning. No matter how much religious labelling her community applies to what they judge as her “sin” Jeanette realises that being true to herself is far more complex than blindly accepting her church’s worldview.

For the first time as she overhears two neighbours gossiping, Jeanette realises that oranges are not the only fruit, that heterosexual love is not the only option for her. Doreen and Nellie are discussing Jane, Doreen's daughter, who, to their horror, is a seventeen year old without a boyfriend.

"If she don't get a boyfriend folks will talk. She spends all her time at that Susan's doing her homework, or so she tells me."

Nellie thought that Jane might be seeing a boy on the quiet, pretending to be at Susan's. Doreen shook her head.

"She's there all right, I check with Susan's mother. If they're not careful folk will think they're like them two at the paper shop."

"I like them two," said Nellie firmly, "and who's to say they do anything?"

"Mrs Fergeson across saw them getting a new bed, a double bed."

"Well what does that prove? Me and Bert had one bed but we did nothing in it."

Doreen said that was all very well, but two women were different.

Different from what? I wondered from inside the dustbin . . .

[Doreen] struggled to her feet as Nellie started to peg out the washing. When it was safe, I crept out of the dustbin, as confused as ever and covered in soot.

It was a good thing I was destined to become a missionary. For some time after this I put aside the problem of men and concentrated on reading the Bible. Eventually, I thought, I'll fall in love like everybody else. Then some years later, quite by mistake, I did. (*Oranges*, 74-75)

Jeanette meets Melanie at the local fish-shop, and everything changes: "She looked up, and I noticed her eyes were a lovely grey, like the cat Next Door" (*Oranges*, 78). Jeanette invites her new friend to church and Melanie answers Pastor Finch's altar call:

At the end of his very fine sermon [about a whole family in Cheadle Hulme who were ridden with an epidemic of demons because of "Unnatural Passions"], Pastor Finch made an appeal, he urged any sinner to raise their hand, and ask forgiveness there and then. We bowed our heads in prayer, squinting up now and again, to see if it was working. Suddenly, I felt a hand on mine. It was Melanie.

"I'm going to do it," she hissed, and pushed her other arm into the air.

"Yes, I see your hand," acknowledged Pastor Finch.

A ripple of joy ran through the church. There was no one else, so Melanie had plenty of attention at the end of the service. Not that she wanted it. "I feel terrible," she confided.

"Don't worry," breezed Alice, who was passing by, "It's homeopathic."

Poor Melanie, she didn't understand any of them, she just knew she needed Jesus. Then she asked me to be her counsellor, and I agreed to go round to her house every Monday, while her mum was at the club where she worked. (*Oranges*, 83-84)

From this moment Jeanette and Melanie discover what Pastor Finch would describe as

“Unnatural Passion”. However, in the new mythology which each girl reworks for herself, Pastor Finch’s view of “Unnatural Passion” is awful. What Jeanette and Melanie feel for each other is by no means awful, therefore in their new world-view, it is acceptable. Each girl has made a radical choice, which the text deliberately mirrors with a conversion experience, and moves them out of the closed system of Pentecostal Christianity, into another closed system, that of same-sex love. Both worldviews are closed to outsiders. It is only *within* each system, when one becomes party to “inside” knowledge that the two women can begin to make choices about the validity of each closed system’s internal logic. This is not to say that Jeanette must experience lesbian love to know that her religious belief system forbids it. But in terms of Jeanette’s journey towards self-knowledge the move from a heterosexual world into a same-sex one, is as much of a threshold experience as conversion to Christianity. A closed system is “closed” in terms of the way it selectively makes meaning from the wide choice of possible meanings to be made from the world.

The title of Deuteronomy is derived from two Greek words: *deuteros*, meaning “second” and *nomos*, meaning “law”. The book addresses the context of a new generation of Israelites, inheritors of God’s promise of freedom from slavery. The previous generation of Israel had died in the wilderness (for their disobedience in following God’s guidelines); hence it was important for the law to be repeated and expounded to the new generation before they entered the Promised Land. What the book consists of is a series of discourses and exhortations given by Moses on the plains of Moab before the crossing of the Jordan, the physical border of Canaan.

The ten commandments originally proclaimed in Sinai are reiterated, with a call to obedience, interspersed with a review of the experiences of the old generation. An essential element the new generation must take heed of is God’s divine requirement of obedience. God promises blessings for obedience and curses as an inevitable consequence of sin.

And now, O Israel, what does the Lord your God ask of you but to fear the Lord your God, to walk in all his ways, to love him, to serve the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul, and to observe the Lord’s commands and decrees that I am giving you today for your own good? (Deuteronomy 10:12-13, NIV)

Winterson’s Chapter Five, Deuteronomy, is described as “The last book of the law” (Oranges,

89). One of the main themes it foregrounds is a reiteration of all the religious laws proclaimed in Jeanette's childhood, with a call to obedience, interspersed with a review of the experiences of the old generation. A key thought conveyed is that leaders within a community present obedience as a divine requirement and offer the threat of curses to any person who violates religious (legalistic) boundaries.

Jeanette's experience of the world rapidly leads her from one hard lesson to another, each of which helps her to accumulate wisdom through her encounters. As time passes, the naive Jeanette grows more hardened to the ravages of time. Her account of the lessons she has learned is sad and cynically charged.

Time is a great deadener. People forget, get bored, grow old, go away....Of course that is not the whole story, but that is the way with stories; we make them what we will. It's a way of explaining the universe while leaving the universe unexplained, it's a way of keeping it all alive, not boxing it into time. Everyone who tells a story tells it differently. Some people say all kinds of things can be proved. I don't believe them. The only thing for certain is how complicated it all is, like string full of knots. It's all there but hard to find the beginning and impossible to fathom the end. The best you can do is admire the cat's cradle, and maybe knot it up a bit more. History should be a hammock for swinging and a game for playing, the way cats play. Claw it, chew it, rearrange it and at bedtime it's still a ball of string full of knots. Nobody should mind. Some people make a lot of money out of it. Publishers do well, children when bright, can come top. It's an all purpose rainy-day pursuit, this reducing of stories called history. (*Oranges*, 91)

In terms of re-mythologising history, re-appropriating the past, taking its stories and re-telling them, this is one of the thrusts of historiographic metafiction, within the genre of contemporary postmodern textualisation. Postmodern writers take historical events and re-tell them, re-packaging them with appropriate fiction and tying these historical narratives to other stories, creating a newer, bigger story. As Hutcheon argues, postmodern texts problematise what is conventionally called the "real, historical world" by "their paradoxical combination of metafictional self-reflexivity with historical subject-matter" (1988, 19). Hutcheon explains that this type of fiction rejects the notion of simplistic mimesis by actively transgressing the boundary between fiction and non-fiction. Historiographic metafiction teaches that the historical, social, and existential *reality* of the past is *discursive* reality, just as fiction is another of the discourses through which we construct our versions of reality. In this way postmodern texts are able to ask both epistemological and ontological questions by

combining “what Malcolm Bradbury has called argument by poetics (metafiction) with argument by historicism (historiographic) in such a way as to inscribe a mutual interrogation within the texts themselves” (Hutcheon 1988, 42).

In this light, Winterson takes the historical stories of Moses’s narratives, and ties them to the story of Jeanette’s escape from her childhood in Egypt (perhaps Pastor Finch is the hard-hearted Pharaoh) to a lesbian Canaan. The story of one woman seeking freedom from religious patriarchal heterosexuality, links up with the larger story of all women seeking freedom from religious bondage, and sexual slavery within marriage, or at the very least in continued servitude in an exclusively-male-biased world.

This chapter, Winterson’s “last book of the law”, marks a turning point in Jeanette’s way of seeing the world - letting go of one story and starting to live another.

People like to separate storytelling which is not fact from history which is fact. They do this so that they know what to believe and what not to believe. This is very curious. How is it that no one will believe that the whale swallowed Jonah when every day Jonah is swallowing the whale? I can see them now, stuffing down the fishiest of fish tales, and why? Because it is history. Knowing what to believe had its advantages. It built an empire and kept people where they belonged, in the bright realm of the wallet . . .

Very often, history is a means of denying the past. Denying the past is to refuse its integrity. To fit it, force it, function it, to suck out the spirit until it looks the way you think it should. We are all historians in our small way. And in some ghastly way Pol Pot was more honest than the rest of us have been. Pol Pot decided to dispense with the past altogether. To dispense with the sham of treating the past with objective respect. In Cambodia the cities were to be wiped out, maps thrown away, everything gone. No documents. Nothing. A brave new world. The old world was horrified. We pointed the finger, but big fleas have little fleas on their back to bite them.

People have never had a problem disposing of the past when it gets too difficult. Flesh will burn, photos will burn, and memory, what is that? The imperfect ramblings of fools who will not see the need to forget. And if we can’t dispose of it we can alter it. The dead don’t shout. There is a certain seductiveness about what is dead. It will retain all those admirable qualities of life with none of that tiresome messiness associated with live things. Crap and complaints and the need for affection. (*Oranges*, 91-92)

Winterson clearly states her own role as a writer re-presenting the past, even as she asks a fundamental question: Why do we tell stories? We tell stories to understand who we are. If

any one asks me, “Who are you?” I tell them a story about this person, this character I call my self. Who am I? I am the story I tell myself of who I am. Each time I tell this story it may well change. As it is requested, listened to and retold through the course of yesterday, today, and tomorrow the story will not remain the same. This is the inherent nature of stories, they change in the telling. With regard to the truth content of these stories, one is tempted to ask how to attach or find truth in the stories we hear and read, in the stories we ourselves tell, and re-present. In order to know what we believe, it is vital for us to establish what we do not believe. As Jeanette grows older, and weighs up the events which are shaping her life, she begins to learn what she can no longer believe in - the stories of her Pentecostal childhood - and she begins to understand what she does believe in - the story of her newly discovered sexual identity.

As psychologist R D Laing has identified and stated: “One’s self-identity is the story one tells one’s self of who one is. One’s need to believe this story often seems to be one’s desire to discount another story, that is more primitive and more terrible” (Laing 1969, 77). Jeanette, in this Deuteronomy chapter, is threatened with divine curses if she disobeys the laws of her religious community. Yet her need to believe in a new story, her own story, is fuelled by disobedience in discounting the story her church has always told her. For her the risk of being cursed is worth taking - breaking old laws is the only means by which (in her own eyes) she can cross a border (like the Jordan River) and venture into her Promised Land.

What is the truth value of stories? How do we make sense of the past, of which we have been part, and arrive at meaningful conclusions for selfhood? Winterson formulates part of an answer in this Deuteronomy chapter.

So the past, because it is past, is only malleable where once it was flexible. Once it could change its mind, now it can only undergo change. The lens can be tinted, tilted, smashed. What matters is that order is seen to prevail . . . and if we are eighteenth-century gentlemen, drawing down the blinds as our coach jumbles over the Alps, we have to know what we are doing, pretending an order that doesn’t exist, to make a security that cannot exist.

There is an order and balance to be found in stories.

History is St George.

And when I take a look at a history book and think of the imaginative effort it has taken to squeeze this oozing world between two boards and typeset, I am astonished. Perhaps the event has an unassailable truth. God saw it. God knows. But I

am not God. And so when someone tells me what they heard or saw, I believe them, and I believe their friend who also saw, but not in the same way, and I can put these accounts together and I will not have a seamless wonder but a sandwich laced with mustard of my own. (Oranges, 93)

From this moment of realising that meaning resides in the way she tells her story, Jeanette can begin to re-write the meaning-making possibilities of her life. As she re-writes her story, she also begins to tell it anew - to offer a new story in her search for selfhood.

The text of Joshua marks the transition from one Old Testament writer (Moses) to the next (presumed to be Joshua) in what will prove to be a long chain of succession. The book is concerned with narrating the story of conquest and dividing up the promised land of Canaan. A key thought is ascertaining how to be successful in the battles of life, with the spiritual advice given to Joshua.

Do not let this Book of the Law depart from your mouth; meditate on it day and night, so that you may be careful to do everything written in it. Then you will be prosperous and successful. Have I not commanded you? Be strong and courageous. Do not be terrified; do not be discouraged, for the Lord your God will be with you wherever you go. (Joshua 1: 8-9, NIV)

A suggested spiritual lesson to be gleaned from this text is acknowledging the certainty of the fulfilment of divine purpose. Canaan becomes a metaphor for the challenges faced in going deeper into relationship with God. In this way biblical lessons are conveyed through parallel texts - so that an Old Testament text (Joshua) is seen to speak meaning into a number of New Testament texts, particularly Paul's epistles to the early Christian church where possessing the promised land mirrors the call to a disciplined Christian lifestyle. This application of intertextuality allows for a postmodern ingredient in even ancient wisdom texts like the Bible. Where some readers might see this as a "post-hoc" activity not present in the Old Testament texts as originally created, from our perspective (post both New and Old Testaments) the Bible exists as one collective text. In this way earlier events in the narrative offer overt links to events and commentary in later sections of the same narrative. In this way an ancient text offers comment and readings of itself in an obviously postmodern fashion.

Winterson's Chapter Six, Joshua, presents a leading topic which details the conquest and division of Jeanette's "promised land". A key thought here is how she is to become successful

in the battle of life. For Jeanette, the move towards the Promised Land, her self hood, her own independent identity, is not without fear or anxiety. It is a journey with promise, but not without threat.

Uncertainty to me was like Aardvark to other people. A curious thing I had no notion of, but recognised through second-hand illustration. The feeling I now had in my head and stomach was the same as on that Awful Occasion, and that time, as I stood by the tea urn in the vestry, I had heard that Miss Jewsbury say, "Of course, she must feel very uncertain". I was very upset. Uncertainty was what the heathen felt, and I was chosen by God.

That Awful Occasion was the time my natural mother had come to claim me back. I'd had an idea that there was something curious about the circumstances of my birth, and once found my adoption papers hidden under a stack of flannels in the holiday drawer. "Formalities," my mother had said, waving me away. "You were always mine, I had you from the Lord." (*Oranges*, 98)

Winterson uses that example of the word "Aardvark" to express an unknown premonition. Aardvark is a word which one finds at or near the beginning of most dictionaries - a word which alludes to an unknown thing, at most an exotic creature which for European readers might only be glimpsed in a zoo. For Winterson, "Uncertainty" is as mysterious and mystical a creature as "Aardvark" representing an event or experience in life which one can only recognise "through second-hand illustration". The important thing which Jeanette as yet fails to realise is that uncertainty in life, like a real aardvark snorting around termite mounds in Africa in search of food, really does exist. Not possessing knowledge of an event, in no way negates that event's reality or ability to suddenly burst in on one's life.

Through this stage of the narrative, Jeanette is growing aware that something is about to happen, an uncomfortable premonition is at work inside her. Then suddenly, at a Sunday morning church service, "it" happens.

When the hymn was over, I squeezed a bit closer to Melanie and tried to concentrate on the Lord. "Still," I thought, "Melanie is a gift from the Lord, and it would be ungrateful not to appreciate her." I was still deep in these contemplations when I realised that something disturbing was happening. The church had gone very quiet and the pastor was standing on his lower platform, with my mother next to him. She was weeping. I felt a searing pain against my knuckles; it was Melanie's ring. Then Miss Jewsbury was urging me to my feet saying, "Keep calm, keep calm," and I was walking out to the front with Melanie. I shot a glance at her. She was pale.

"These children of God," began the pastor, "have fallen under Satan's spell." His hand was hot and heavy on my neck. Everyone in the congregation looked

like a waxwork.

“These children of God have fallen foul of their lusts.” (*Oranges*, 102)

At this moment Jeanette is thrown into the abyss of turmoil which pits her love for God as she has learnt of his nature in her church, against her love for Melanie. Both of these passions draw on the deepest parts of her, these attempts to try and fathom love for an other. Moments before they leave home for this particular church service, Jeanette declares to Melanie: “I love you almost as much as I love the Lord” (*Oranges*, 102). Standing before the congregation, facing the accusations of their faces, this is exactly the degree of love which Jeanette is called to account for.

“Just a minute . . .,” I began, but he took no notice.

“These children are full of demons.”

A cry of horror ran through the church.

“I’m not,” I shouted, “and neither is she.”

“Listen to Satan’s voice,” said the pastor to the church, pointing at me. “How are the best become the worst.”

“What are you talking about?” I asked, desperate.

“Do you deny you love this woman with a love reserved for man and wife?”

“No, yes, I mean of course I love her.”

“I will read you the words of St Paul,” announced the pastor, and he did, and many more besides about unnatural passions and the mark of the demon.

“To the pure all things are pure,” I yelled at him. “It’s you not us.”

(*Oranges*, 102-103)

Jeanette’s entire world-view up to this point is turned on its head. For the first time she experiences the real conflict between her mother’s world-view which she has been taught, but which is not, it seems, a part of her inner life, and the undeniable experience of sensual love. Jeanette is faced by a disturbing notion. She is forced to admit that her experience of God and Christianity up to this point is no longer adequate to answer her experience of life. She is caught in a terrifying dilemma, between two courses of action: to submit to religious authority and deny her love for Melanie, or to follow her heart and risk rejection by those who have been her closest friends. In front of the congregation she is asked to make what seems to be an impossible choice.

He turned to Melanie.

“Do you promise to give up this sin and beg the Lord to forgive you?”

“Yes.” She was trembling uncontrollably. I hardly heard what she said.

“Then go into the vestry with Mrs White and the elders will come and pray for you. It’s not too late for those who truly repent.”

He turned to me.

“I love her.”

“Then you do not love the Lord.”

“Yes, I love both of them.”

“You cannot.”

“I do, I do, let me go.” But he caught my arm and held me fast.

“The church will not see you suffer, go home and wait for us to help you.”

I ran out onto the street, wild with distress. Miss Jewsbury was waiting for me.

“Come on,” she said briskly, “let’s go and get some coffee and decide what you’re going to do.” I went along with her, not thinking of anything but Melanie and her loveliness. (*Oranges*, 103)

Going crazy with the turmoil of feeling forced to choose between two deep loves, Jeanette is prayed for, the day after spending the night in hiding at Miss Jewsbury’s. It turns out Miss Jewsbury is also a lesbian, and comforts Jeanette in her anguish with a kindred spirit and a love making massage, “We made love and I hated it and hated it, but would not stop” (*Oranges*, 104). Understandably Jeanette arrives home even more confused.

My mother absently passed me a plate of biscuits. It was 8.30 a.m.

It was 10 p.m. that same night before the elders went home. They had spent the day praying over me, laying hands on me, urging me to repent my sins before the Lord. “Renounce her, renounce her,” the pastor kept saying, “it’s only the demon.”

My mother made cups of tea and forgot to wash the dirty ones. The parlour was full of cups. Mrs White sat on one and cut herself, someone else spilt theirs, but they didn’t stop. I still couldn’t think, could only see Melanie’s face and Melanie’s body, and every so often the outline of Miss Jewsbury bending over me.

At 10 p.m. the pastor heaved a great sigh and offered me one last chance.

“I can’t,” I said. “I just can’t.” (*Oranges*, 105)

Realising the fix she is in, Jeanette fakes a confession to get the church elders off her back and returns to her ministry in the church. Her choice to fake it, is made easier by a revelation from her personal demon.

I knew that demons entered wherever there was a weak point. If I had a demon my weak point was Melanie, but she was beautiful and had loved me.

Can love really belong to the demon? What sort of demon? The brown demon that rattles the ear? The red demon that dances the hornpipe? The watery demon that causes sickness? The orange demon that beguiles? Everyone has a demon like cats have fleas . . .

“If I let them take away my demons, I’ll have to give up what I’ve found.”

“You can’t do that,” said a voice at my elbow.

Leaning on the coffee table was the orange demon.

“I’ve gone mad,” I thought.

“That may well be so,” agreed the demon evenly. “So make the most of it.” . . .

“Everyone has a demon as you so rightly observed,” the thing began, “but not everyone knows this, and not everyone knows how to make use of it.”

“Demons are evil, aren’t they?” I asked, worried.

“Not quite, they’re just different, and difficult. You know what auras are?”

I nodded.

“Well the demon you get depends on the colour of your aura, yours is orange which is why you’ve got me. Your mother’s is brown, which is why she’s so odd, and Mrs White’s is hardly a demon at all. We’re here to keep you in one piece, if you ignore us, you’re quite likely to end up in two pieces, or lots of pieces, it’s all part of the paradox.”

“But in the Bible you keep getting driven out.”

“Don’t believe all you read.” . . .

“If I keep you, what will happen?”

“You’ll have a difficult, different time.”

“Is it worth it?”

“That’s up to you.”

“Will I keep Melanie?”

But the demon had vanished.

When the pastor and the elders came back, I was calm, cheerful, and ready to accept.

“I’ll repent,” I said, as soon as they came in the parlour. The pastor seemed surprised.

“Are you sure?”

“Sure.” I wanted to get it over with as soon as possible; besides, I hadn’t eaten for two days. All the elders knelt down to pray, and I knelt down beside them. One of them began to speak in tongues, and it was then I felt a prickle at the back of my neck.

“Go away,” I hissed. “They’ll see you.” I opened an eye to check.

“Not them,” replied the demon, “they talk a lot but they don’t see nothing.”

“I’m not getting rid of you, this is the best way I can think of.”

“Oh, that’s fine,” trilled the demon, “I was just passing.” (*Oranges*, 106-107)

The biblical story of Joshua traces the movement of God’s children through the desert into Canaan, the Promised Land. Winterson’s Joshua chapter traces Jeanette’s move from the desert of her spiritual experience into her promised land, a new sexual identity. In this way Winterson inhabits the language of Biblical narrative in order to turn it inside out for her own fictional purposes. The notion of a new earthly paradise is linked to the idea of a new land, the promise pursued and the hope of finding one’s way into Canaan.

On the banks of the Euphrates find a secret garden cunningly walled. There is an entrance, but the entrance is guarded. There is no way in for you. Inside you will find every plant that grows growing circular-wise like a target. Close to the heart is a sundial and at the heart an orange tree. This fruit had tripped up athletes while others have healed their wounds. All true quests end in this garden, where the split fruit pours forth blood and the halved fruit is a full bowl for travellers and pilgrims. To eat

of the fruit means to leave the garden because the fruit speaks of other things, other longings. So at dusk you say goodbye to the place you love, not knowing if you can ever return, knowing you can never return by the same way as this. It may be, some other day, that you will open a gate by chance, and find yourself again on the other side of the wall. (Oranges, 120)

This reference to a “hortus conclusus,” a secret garden where we find our heart’s desire is an old theme, a symbol with deep resonance which Winterson appeals to.

Now the Lord God had planted a garden in the east, in Eden; and there he put the man he had formed. And the Lord God made all kinds of trees grow out of the ground - trees that were pleasing to the eye and good for food. In the middle of the garden were the tree of life and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.

A river watering the garden flowed from Eden; from there it was separated into four headwaters. The name of the first is the Pishon; it winds through the entire land of Havilah, where there is gold. . . The name of the second river is the Gihon; it winds through the entire land of Cush. The name of the third river is the Tigris; it runs along the east side of Asshur. And the fourth river is the *Euphrates* [My emphasis]. (Genesis 2:8-11; 13-14, NIV)

Why is this Garden of Eden a parallel symbol in both the Biblical accounts and Winterson’s narrative? Joseph Campbell presents an answer in the following extract from an interview with journalist Bill Moyers before Campbell’s death in October 1987. The two are discussing why the serpent is portrayed as an evil agent in Genesis and as a giver of life in other mythologies of the area, and how the woman is typecast in the Judeo biblical world-view as the sinner, who entices Adam to sin with her.

Campbell: There is actually a historical explanation based on the coming of the Hebrews into Canaan and their subjugation of the people of Canaan. The principal divinity of the people of Canaan was the Goddess, and associated with the Goddess is the serpent. This is the symbol of the mystery of life. The male-god-oriented group rejected it. In other words, there is a historical rejection of the Mother Goddess implied in the story of the Garden of Eden.

Moyers: It does seem that this story has done women a great disservice by casting Eve as responsible for the Fall. Why are women the ones held responsible for the downfall?

C: They represent life. Man doesn’t enter life except by woman, and so it is woman who brings us into this world of pairs of opposites and suffering.

M: What is the myth of Adam and Eve trying to tell us about the pairs of opposites? What is the meaning?

C: It started with the sin, you see - in other words, moving out of the mythological

dreamtime zone of the Garden of Paradise, where there is no time, and where men and women don't even know that they are different from each other. The two are just creatures. God and man are practically the same. God walks in the cool of the evening in the garden where they are. And then they eat the apple, the knowledge of the opposites. And when they discover they are different, the man and woman cover their shame. You see, they had not thought of themselves as opposites. Male and female is one opposition. Another opposition is the human and God. Good and evil is a third opposition. The primary oppositions are the sexual and that between human beings and God. Then comes the idea of good and evil in the world. And so Adam and Eve have thrown themselves out of the Garden of Timeless Unity, you might say, just by that act of recognising duality. To move out into the world, you have to act in terms of pairs of opposites.

There is a Hindu image that shows a triangle which is the Mother Goddess, and a dot in the centre of the triangle which is the energy of the transcendent entering the field of time. And then from this triangle there comes pairs of triangles in all directions. Out of one comes two. All things in the field of time are pairs of opposites. So this is the shift of consciousness from the consciousness of identity to the consciousness of participation in duality. And then you are into the field of time.

M: Is the story trying to tell us that, prior to what happened in this Garden to destroy us, there was a unity of life?

C: It's a matter of planes of consciousness. It doesn't have to do with anything that happened. There is the plane of consciousness where you can identify yourself with that which transcends pairs of opposites.

M: Which is?

C: Unnameable. Unnameable. It is transcendent of all names.

M: God?

C: "God" is an ambiguous word in our language because it appears to refer to something which is known. But the transcendent is unknowable and unknown. God is transcendent, finally, of anything like the name "God". God is beyond names and forms. Meister Eckhart said that the ultimate and highest leave-taking is leaving God for God, leaving your notion of God for an experience of that which transcends all notions.

The mystery of life is beyond all human conception. Everything we know is within the terminology of the concepts of being and not being, many and single, true and untrue, We always think in terms of opposites. But God, the ultimate, is beyond the pairs of opposites, that is all there is to it. (Campbell 1989, 48-49)

Winterson exposes the problematic attempts to define and label the experience of what is *transcendent* in human life. One of the most difficult concepts to adequately explain in words

is the *spiritual*, precisely because it is an experience which lies beyond, outside, the explored boundaries of language. In one sense this entire novel seeks to expose the ambiguity of the term “God” - how one community of people (Jeanette’s fundamentalist church) seeks to enforce their definition of God on a young woman. As Campbell seeks to explain, people concerned with stories are continually caught up in an argument about opposites.

Jeanette as a woman exploring alternative ways of loving is living in direct opposition to the patriarchal church system maintained by Pastor Finch and his devotees (not least of all, Jeanette’s fanatically self-righteous mother). Her opposition takes place on number of levels: woman versus man; youth versus the older generation; lesbian versus heterosexual; individual versus community; “unnatural” versus natural (sanctioned) passion; one woman’s interpretation of love versus the church’s official position; and what is hidden versus what is openly celebrated.

If as Campbell asserts, “The primary oppositions are the sexual and that between human beings and God” then Jeanette violates both relationships. Her walk into a homosexual love relationship sets her against a male ordered existence, and her active defiance of Biblical standards for expressing sexual love (before and outside of marriage, and same sex) sets her radically against her church’s formulation of what is acceptable. From this realisation of duality, of movement out of a Garden of Eden, eating the fruit of the knowledge of good and evil, eating Melanie (a play on “Melon”), a young woman’s sense of her unique self is emerging. Jeanette asks her first lover why she has such a funny name. “She blushed. ‘When I was born I looked like a melon’ ” (*Oranges*, 81). This is the first significant way in which Jeanette tastes and sees that oranges are not the only fruit.

Katy is Jeanette’s second lover. This is a love she cultivates while carrying on with her service in the church into which she has been reabsorbed.

We weren’t cold, not that night nor any of the others we spent together over the years that followed. She was my most uncomplicated love affair, and I loved her because of it. She seemed to have no worries at all . . .

“Are you sure this is what you want?” I murmured, not intending to stop.

“Oh yes,” she cried, “yes.”

We stopped talking about it quickly because the dialogue was getting too embarrassing. She was blissful. I took care never to look at her when I preached, though she always sat in the front row. We did have a genuinely spiritual dimension. I

taught her a lot, and she put all her efforts into the church, quite apart from me. It was a good time. To the pure all things are pure . . . (Oranges, 120)

The sardonic undertone of Jeanette's self-assured statement that "To the pure all things are pure" underlines her position in radical opposition to the mindsets of her church. Winterson evokes the Biblical language of church sermons and shows how context is everything. From the church's point of view, "purity" is pinned to Biblically defined sexual purity while in Jeanette's mind "purity" means being true to herself, to the authenticity of her thoughts and deepest feelings.

By keeping her love for Katy undercover, Jeanette is able to carry on with her religious lifestyle. In her heart she remains unconvinced that homosexual love is wrong - so for her, expressing a public love for God, and in private celebrating a love for another woman is no burden on her conscience. As she declares, "We did have a genuinely spiritual dimension. I taught her a lot, and she put all her efforts into the church, quite apart from me". However, even though Jeanette is at peace with this way of living, she is still in direct violation of the laws of her community and it is only a matter of time before this balance must be upset. The Joshua chapter offers a temporary respite, before her accusers close in for the kill.

The author of Judges is unknown but biblical tradition attributes this text's authorship to Samuel. During the course of this narrative we discover the history of Israel during the times of fourteen judges. The book portrays a series of relapses into idolatry by God's people, followed by invasions of the Promised Land and oppression by their enemies. The narrative centres around the personalities of the judges, who were raised up to be deliverers of Israel. The dark side of the picture is especially emphasized in the record. A study of the dates seems to show that the people maintained outward loyalty to the Lord a larger part of the time than a casual reading of the book might indicate.

From the outset of Winterson's Chapter Seven, Judges, the character Jeanette risks the wrath of her spiritual elders. Having grown more reckless in her celebration of love, she has grown complacent to the threat of a religiously biased net closing around her.

"Now I give you fair warning," shouted the Queen, stamping on the ground as she spoke; "Either you or your head must be off." (Oranges, 125)

Finally the inevitable happens. Jeanette's lesbian relationship is brought into the light of her judges, and she is in deep religious trouble. Her social "abnormality" has been discovered again. She is a fallen woman. Her name should probably be changed to Eve. But as we read of the accusations against her we may well ask: what is Jeanette's crime exactly?

It all seemed to hinge around the fact that I loved the wrong sort of people. Right sort of people in every respect except this one; romantic love for another woman was a sin. "Aping men," my mother had said with disgust . . .

At that point I had no notion of sexual politics, but I knew that a homosexual is further away from a woman than a rhinoceros. Now that I do have a number of notions about sexual politics, this early observation holds good. There are shades of meaning, but a man is man, wherever you find it. My mother has always given me problems because she is enlightened and reactionary at the same time. She didn't believe in Determinism and Neglect, she believed that you made people and yourself what you wanted. Anyone could be saved and anyone could fall to the Devil, it was their choice. While some of our church forgave me on the admittedly dubious grounds that I couldn't help it (they had read Havelock Ellis and knew about Inversion), my mother saw it as a wilful act on my part to sell my soul. At first, for me, it had been an accident. That accident had forced me to think more carefully about my own instincts and others' attitudes. After the exorcism I had tried to replace my world with another just like it, but I couldn't. I loved God and I loved the church, but I began to see that as more and more complicated. It didn't help that I had no intention of becoming a missionary. (*Oranges*, 126)

Jeanette realises that the problem lies deeper than sexual preferences. It seems to lie at the core of her, in her being a woman. The pastor is summoned again, to consider another spiritual exorcism. Jeanette retreats to her room and tries to hide her head under her pillow.

The pastor snatched it away and explained to me as quietly as he could that I was the victim of a great evil. That I was afflicted and oppressed, that I had deceived the flock. "The demon," he announced very slowly, "had returned sevenfold." (*Oranges*, 129)

We know that the demon was never actually cast out. Jeanette and her orange friend kept each other's true identities hidden from the church authorities. Yet the pastor's belief is scriptural enough, according to the recorded teachings of Jesus.

When an evil spirit comes out of a man, it goes through arid places seeking rest and does not find it. Then it says, "I will return to the house I left." When it arrives, it finds the house swept clean and put in order. Then it goes and takes seven other spirits more wicked than itself, and they go in and live there. And the final condition of that man is worse than the first. (*Luke* 11: 24-26, NIV)

Convinced that Jeanette is badly possessed by a gang of evil spirits, the pastor admits that he will have to refer this case to the church council.

By Sunday the pastor had word back from the council. The real problem, it seemed, was going against the teachings of St Paul, and allowing women power in the church. Our branch of the church had never thought about it, we'd always had strong women, and the women organised everything. Some of us could preach, and quite plainly, in my case, the church was full because of it. There was uproar, then a curious thing happened. My mother stood up and said she believed this was right: that women had specific circumstances for their ministry, that the Sunday School was one of them, the Sisterhood another, but the message belonged to the men. Until this moment my life had still made some kind of sense. Now it was making no sense at all. My mother droned on about the importance of missionary work for a woman, that I was clearly such a woman, but had spurned my call in order to wield power on the home front, where it was inappropriate. She ended by saying that having taken on a man's world in other ways I had flouted God's law and tried to do it sexually. This was no spontaneous speech. She and the pastor had talked about it already. It was her weakness for the ministry that had done it. No doubt she'd told Pastor Spratt months ago. I looked around me. Good people, simple people, what would happen to them now? I knew my mother hoped I would blame myself, but I didn't. I knew now where the blame lay. If there's such a thing as spiritual adultery, my mother was a whore.

So there I was, my success in the pulpit being the reason for my downfall. The devil had attacked me at my weakest point: my inability to realise the limitations of my sex. (*Oranges*, 131-132)

The patriarchal system against which Jeanette "rebels" is maintained by a religious devotion to Paul's Biblical directives particularly in terms of women in positions of authority. Jeanette considers her mother to be a spiritual whore who has sold her sex to give in to the needs of the church's male authority structure. This seems to be a betrayal on a profound level - Jeanette is betrayed by another woman, by her own mother. Such is the strength of belief - it allows the believer to alter his or her perception of reality in order to meet the needs of that belief system. Jeanette's mother is prepared to sacrifice her own daughter (a bizarre reworking of Abraham sacrificing Isaac perhaps) to secure her own status as a woman of God in Pastor Spratt's church.

From here the theological implications of Jeanette's crumbling belief system become profoundly political. She is thrown from the pedestal of daughter of God, to that of fallen sinner, to that of fallen woman no longer fit for Godly service. Rejected by both of her families, her adopted one and the church, Jeanette walks out into an unknown freedom.

The book of Ruth is considered to be a literary gem in the Old Testament. It is one of only two books in the Bible in which a woman is the principal character. Here Ruth, a Moabite, marries a Hebrew husband and is accepted into the family of God. In the other story, Esther, a Jew marries a Gentile king and saves her nation from genocide. The author is unknown but is possibly Samuel. The story is set in the time of the judges of Israel.

The story narrates the ways in which a young Moabite woman's life is enriched through several key factors. Ruth's character typifies constancy and wise choices in following her mother-in-law to a new land, choosing the God of the Israelites, and in seeking Boaz as her kinsman-redeemer and as her husband. She displays humble industry by carrying out her duties as a faithful daughter-in-law, and is praised for accepting counsel from an older friend by taking Naomi's advice on how to win Boaz's affection. She seeks a providential alliance by obtaining Boaz as a husband and is exalted to Jewish royalty. Ruth and Boaz have a son called Obed. He will have a son, Jesse who will be King David's father. So through Ruth, the line of Christ is secured.

The main lesson of the text has been interpreted as showing how a Gentile woman becomes one of the ancestors of Christ. In narrative terms, this text tells the following story. Naomi and her husband flee famine in Israel and settle in Moab. Their two sons marry Moabite women. Naomi and Ruth are both widowed. The young Moabite woman chooses to remain with Naomi, her mother-in-law. The two women return, heart-broken to Israel, Naomi's country of birth. There, to survive as a destitute widow, Ruth gleanes grain from the men harvesting the fields of Boaz. Ruth follows Naomi's advice and is successfully married to Boaz, her kinsman-redeemer, by which means Naomi also finds peace in her old age. Ruth bears a son, who becomes the grandfather of King David. The line of David secures a royal line for Jesus as eventual messiah.

What the story of Ruth demonstrates are the ways in which a gentile woman (both factors should count against her) moves through sadness and despair to find divine blessing and new hope. She is noble in character and her choices repeatedly show love and compassion for her mother-in-law. The text shows God's love and compassion for Ruth, blessing her beyond her expectations, and welcoming her into his family. The story displays a situation where God's

blessings transcend the human obstacles which life presents.

Winterson's Chapter Eight, *Ruth*, is based on a folktale like foundation where we discover that once upon a time there lived a strong and fiercely independent woman called Jeanette. Perhaps the strongest move Winterson's concluding chapter makes is a 180 degree turn away from the patriarchal heroine of the Bible. Through her profound friendship with Naomi, Ruth loses a bad husband and discovers a new kinsman-redeemer in the person of Boaz.

Winterson's "Ruth", however leaves her home alone - there has never been a man in her life, nor an older woman friend she can follow to a new and better destiny. However Jeanette must leave and in so doing she begins to understand the newness of living her life as honestly as she knows how. She carries something unique within her, knowing that however much the external environment might change, perhaps the most important climate to monitor is internal, within oneself.

Eventually Jeanette returns home to consider what her life might have been, had she chosen differently.

I could have been a priest instead of a prophet. The priest has a book with the words set out. Old words, known words, words of power. Words that are always on the surface. Words for every occasion. The words work. They do what they're supposed to do; comfort and discipline. The prophet has no book. The prophet is a voice that cries in the wilderness, full of sounds that do not always set into meaning. The prophets cry out because they are troubled by demons...

If the demons lie within they travel with you.
Everyone thinks their own situation most tragic. I am no exception.
(*Oranges*, 156-157)

Winterson asks us, amongst other things, why words are important, particularly the words wielded by an artist. In her essay "Art & Life" she begins by noting:

I grew up not knowing that language was for everyday purposes. I grew up with the Word and the Word was God. Now, many years after a secular Reformation, I still think of language as something holy. (*Art Objects*, 153)

Her comment on creativity appeals directly to the inter-textual link with the opening lines of John.

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. Through him all things were made; without him

nothing was made that has been made. In him was life, and that life was the light of men. The light shines in the darkness, but the darkness has not understood it. . . The true light that gives light to every man was coming into the world. (John 1:1-5, 9 NIV)

In an interview with journalist Nicci Gerrard in 1989, Winterson revealed the following:

The priests “have all the words written out already and only have to read them”. The prophets, on the other hand, “are always on the edge, crying in the wilderness - and often what they say isn’t wanted. Art should be shocking - otherwise, all you are left with is entertainment - like a baby with a dummy.” (Gerrard 1989, 13)

The introductory paragraph of the same article is perhaps more insightful,

Evangelists don’t lose their zeal, they just find other causes. At 12, the formidable young novelist Jeanette Winterson was preaching from the hustings and saving souls; at 16 she was found in bed with another woman and thrown out of her home and the Pentecostal Church. (Gerrard 1989, 13)

What Winterson presents through her writing is a radical re-presentation of the role of the prophet in mainstream Christianity. Even as an outsider looking in, she sees the parallels between the prophet’s voice, and the artist’s. Both occupy a special place, bringing revelations of transcendent truth back from the edges of human experience to a world of others/Others not gifted with special sight. In the present-day Charismatic church, for instance, prophets are both revered and feared - they can bring words of wisdom, encouragement and hope in times of spiritual angst, or they can bring stinging words of divine discipline and rebuke when people disobey God. The prophet, like the artist, speaks of what is unknown - both are witnesses to hidden knowledge. Their words, however, are not spoken into a vacuum. The responsibility for making meanings from these words, and acting on the wisdom they convey, lies with those who listen, and with us who read.

As this final chapter continues, Jeanette moves into a deeply reflexive moment. She asks about the nature of self, what it might begin to look, and feel, like.

I have a theory that every time you make an important choice, the part of you left behind continues the other life you could have had. Some people’s emanations are very strong, some people create themselves afresh outside of their own body. This is not fancy. If a potter has an idea, she makes it into a pot, and it exists beyond her, in its own separate life. She uses a physical substance to display her thoughts. If I use a metaphysical substance to display my thoughts, I might be anywhere at one time, influencing a number of different things, just as the potter and her pottery can exert influence in different places. There’s a chance that I’m not here at all, that all the parts

of me, running along all the choices I did and didn't make, for a moment brush against each other. That I am still an evangelist in the North, as well as the person who ran away. Perhaps for a while these two selves have become confused. I have not gone forward or back in time, but across in time, to something I might have been, playing itself out. (Oranges, 164)

What is happening here? What is Winterson saying to us about art and the act of creative imagination? Every so often, when one catches a glimpse of the thoughts in her mind presented in another way, the light catches an unexpected angle and suddenly gleams.

It is the poet who goes further than any human scientist. The poet who with her dredging net must haul up difficult things and return them to the present. As she does this, the reader will begin to recognise parts of herself so neatly buried that they seem to have been buried from birth. She will be able to hear clearly the voices that have whispered at her for so many years. Some of those voices will prove false, she will perhaps learn to fear her own fears. The attendant personalities that are labelled as schizophrenia, can be brought into a harmonious balance. It is not necessary to be shut up in one self, to grind through life like an ox at a mill, always treading the same ground. Human beings are capable of powered flight; we can travel across ourselves and find that self multiple and vast. The artist knows this; at the same time that art is prising away old dead structures that have rusted almost unnoticed into our flesh, art is pushing at the boundaries we thought were fixed. The convenient lies fall; the only boundaries are the boundaries of our imagination. ("The semiotics of sex" in Art Objects, 115-116)

This observation on Winterson's part seems nurtured in a contemporary world-view which up until now has been seen to favour the value of a strict scientific mindset.

Leaping ahead to our day, the postmodern mind is similarly optimistic about creating new worlds through imaginative power. Kirk Varnadoe, director of the department of painting and sculpture at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, made the following statements in his commencement address last year [1992] to Stanford graduates:

[The] reassuring distinction between what's true and what's merely interpretive - between, say, particle physics and poetry - turns out to be damned near impossible to establish with any finality. Even within science itself, data and dogma, truth and conjecture, have been shown to be so tied together there's no final way to separate them. And the attempt to transfer science's ideals of mastery and the predictability to other parts of human life seems more and more to be a misuse of our intellectual energy. We are going to dance to the tunes we make for ourselves, regardless of how the atoms move.

I'm trying to suggest that you are entering a changed world, where the relationship between life and art is going to be more problematic and more important. As the "machine age," the century of hardware, draws to a close, it's the software - the contingent conditioning, from language on up - that dominates our notion of what

defines human activity. The ways people represent the world to themselves - what they like, their styles of seeing, more than what their genes or jobs are - have become the key factors in our reckoning of social identities.

This is in part what philosopher Richard Rorty means when he argues that the twin models of science and philosophy that shaped our aspirations for so long are now being displaced by the twin models of politics and art: pursuing permanent truth seems less critical than learning to negotiate with irreducible pluralism; and the imagination, as the source of the other, alternative worlds, seems closer to the center of the mind's most important, most determining work. (Hurd⁵ 1993, electronic document)

Through the use of a narrated mystical quest, Winterson's text argues through the intensity of Jeanette's longing for something, anything, which makes sense of the agonising confusion which sets in at some moments in life.

I didn't go straight home. I went on up the hill. No one else was there, with the weather like this. If I still lived there, I'd be indoors too. It's a visitor's privilege to be foolish. Right to the top I climbed, where I could watch the circling snow fill up the town till it blotted it out. All the black blotted out, I could have made a very impressive sermon . . . "My sins like a cloud hung over me, he blotted them out when he set me free . . ." that sort of thing. But where was God now, with heaven full of astronauts, and the Lord overthrown? I miss God. I miss the company of someone utterly loyal. I still don't think of God as my betrayer. The servants of God, yes, but servants by their very nature betray. I miss God who was my friend. I don't even know if God exists, but I do know that if God is your emotional role model, very few human relationships will match up to it. I have an idea that one day it might be possible, I thought once it had become possible, and that glimpse has set me wandering, trying to find *the balance between earth and sky* [my emphasis]. If the servants hadn't rushed in and parted us, I might have been disappointed, might have snatched off the white samite to find a bowl of soup. As it is I can't settle, I want someone who is fierce and will love me until death and know that love is as strong as death, and be on my side for ever and ever. I want someone who will destroy and be destroyed by me. There are many forms of love and affection, some people can spend their whole lives together without knowing each other's names. Naming is a difficult and time-consuming process; it concerns essences, and it means power. But on the wild nights who can call you home? Only the one who knows your name. Romantic love has been diluted into paperback form and has sold thousands and millions of copies. Somewhere it is still in the original, written on tablets of stone. I would cross seas and suffer sunstroke and give away all I have, but not for a man, because they want to be the destroyer and never be destroyed. That is why they are unfit for romantic love. There are exceptions and I hope they are happy. (*Oranges*, 164-165)

In Winterson's text is a heart cry, the cry of deep longing for an Other/other who understands the ache inside.

The unknownness of my needs frightens me. I do not know how huge they are, I only know that they are not being met . . .

One thing I can be certain of, I do not want to be betrayed, but that's quite hard to say, casually, at the beginning of a relationship. It's not a word people use very often, which confuses me, because there are different kinds of infidelity, but betrayal is betrayal wherever you find it. By betrayal, I mean promising to be on your side, then being on somebody else's. (*Oranges*, 165-166)

What is the price we pay for the fragments of wisdom we glean in the course of a lifetime? Dare we pay the price which Winterson suggests such knowledge might cost? Through her story about a young woman who risks everything which might have given her some sense of security through early adulthood in order to follow her heart, Winterson begins to show us that wisdom comes with a profound price. The price varies with each person's lived experience, but it is always costly - demanding something of us which we have come to value, sometimes demanding more than we ever feel able to give. Jeanette loses the support of an entire community, and has to endure the rejection of those who have been such an integral part of her spiritual upbringing. She does this to gain the wisdom of being true to herself, of discovering who she really is (as Winterson would have us believe) no matter what the cost.

Winterson claims that readers of *Oranges* "tend to come down resolutely on the side of the heroine even though she challenges the three things many people hold most dear - the normality of heterosexuality, the sanctity of the family, and the notion that the church is about love and not about power" (Scott and Constantine interview 1990, 25). In the same interview Winterson says she believes this sympathetic reaction occurs "precisely because *Oranges* isn't bitter" and that in the novel, there is "enough space left for people to think it through." When asked if "space" is a hallmark of her novels, Winterson said:

I hope so, because I think that reading is not a passive act. It's a creative act. It's a relationship between the writer and a person the writer will probably never meet. I think it's very wrong to write in a way that leaves no room for the reader to manoeuvre. I don't want to get in the way. What I'd really like to do is to perform the Indian Rope Trick - go higher and higher and eventually disappear. (Scott and Constantine interview 1990, 26)

In *Oranges*, Winterson crafts her narrative in a manner which foregrounds the mystical quest

for identity, for a cogent sense of who one really is. This is a question faced by anyone who would really search through life for wisdom and self-knowledge. Unless one is content to accept an allusion to “wisdom” through second-hand illustration, the answer which truly satisfies those who quest after personal truth, in true postmodern fashion is one which the reader must discover, or write, for himself.

The central moral in this text might seem obscure, but may be related to the earlier references to a Levinasian other/Other. For Winterson, one ideology has been challenged by personal need bringing in its wake a second ideology, challenging the first (previously dominant) ideology but not displacing it entirely. Lesbianism in Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit thus becomes the necessary “trace of the Other”. In the main character Jeanette, the disturbance of settled complacencies becomes, precisely in view of the unsettled and still unresolved elements, an opening and opened disposition analogous to a widened spiritual awareness of the sort a redefined Christianity (in radical opposition to a settled, hardened fundamentalism as described in Winterson’s text) might at least find affinities with.

/oranges.ends

Endnotes to Chapter One.

1. The term *hermeneutics* was originally used specifically to designate Biblical interpretation, including both the formulation of rules governing a valid reading of the biblical text and *exegesis*, or commentary on the application of the meanings expressed in the text. Since the nineteenth century, however, “hermeneutics” has come to designate the general theory of interpretation; that is, a formulation of the procedures and principles involved in getting at the meaning of all written texts, including legal, expository, and literary, as well as biblical texts. (Abrams 1993, 85)

2. In the film version of Winterson’s novel, the central character is called Jess, not Jeanette as she appears in the novel of the same name. Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit was first transmitted on BBC TV in January 1990, in three episodes.

3. I wish to explicitly distance myself from Solomon’s views, in case I may be misunderstood as seeking to espouse his radical claims to absolutised truth. In Solomon’s pleas for consistency of being and for logical non-contradiction he seems to be choosing one faith (his version of the Christian world view) because “They cannot all be true”. His criterion for that position rests on a radical belief in the absolute Truth (the capital T is deliberate) of his Christian beliefs. Critics might well claim that individual human beings are a contradictory mixture of outlooks and values which are called up (evoked) inconsistently by context and circumstance. Every person is to some extent shuffling their options in the absence of definitive proof, trying on this or that idea in perpetual thinking motion. On the readings offered thus far, Winterson seems fully aware of this condition – but Solomon in this instance does not.

4. In her introduction to Great Moments in Aviation, Winterson makes the comment:

My work is always concerned with journeys; the space travelled, physical and metaphysical, between two points of beginnings. There are no endings, there are pauses, rests, redirections, revelations, but the journey continues, even for those who are convinced that the only important thing is to get from A to B (Introduction, Great Moments in Aviation, vii).

5. This document is an online resource and no fixed page reference apart from the Uniform Resource Locator (World Wide Web address) can be given.

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Chapter Two: Making sense of Owen and Piggy in John Irving's A Prayer for Owen Meany and Trying to Save Piggy Sneed.

John Irving's writing, like that of many contemporary artists, seems to include postmodern elements in what is undoubtably a problematic genre. It may of course be impossible to avoid elements of the postmodern if one attempts to write in this part of the 20th century. Raymond Wilson notes that a list of postmodern characteristics in Irving's The World According to Garp should include the following:

(1) a propensity to contain and reuse all previous forms in a literature of exhaustion and replenishment; (2) a zone of the bizarre, where fantasy best expresses our sense of reality; (3) a turning away from penetration into the psychological depth of character as the primary goal of fiction; and (4) a propensity for metafiction, in which writing draws attention to the techniques and processes of its own creation. (1992, 50)

What this article by Wilson points to are postmodern elements at work in all of Irving's writing. Interrogating Irving's work as a *possible* site of postmodern textualisation is superfluous because Irving *is* a member of a family of postmodern writers in the contemporary world, and his work is by necessity exploring aspects of postmodernism. Reading Irving's work, one can understandably ask: What elements of postmodernism does Irving's writing explore and/or contain?

Irving's collection of short stories entitled Trying to Save Piggy Sneed (hereafter PS) can be seen as a reservoir of postmodern pieces, with the title story laying the foundation.

This is a memoir, but please understand that (to any writer with a good imagination) all memoirs are false. A fiction writer's memory is an especially imperfect provider of detail; we can always imagine a better detail than the one we can remember. The correct detail is rarely, exactly, what happened; the most truthful detail is what *could* have happened, or what *should* have. Half my life is an act of revision; more than half the act is performed with small changes. Being a writer is a strenuous marriage between careful observation and just as carefully imagining the truths you haven't had the opportunity to see. The rest is the necessary, strict toiling with the language; for me this means writing and rewriting the sentences until they sound as spontaneous as good conversation. (PS, 9)

What seems to characterise elements of the postmodern genre as demonstrated through this text, is its playfulness (Hassan¹ in Cahoon 1996, 397), the teasing meaning-making games played between writer, text, and reader. From the start we are made well aware of the nature

of fiction - a milkshake of truth and untruth - the subjective views of what happened mixed up with what could have or should have happened. In fact one implication of the postmodern project is that there is no directly accessible “what happened”. Events within the story or stories told by a self-reflexive narrating voice are open to interpretation in texts which deliberately resist closure, which invite multiple readings. Yet embedded in Irving’s story-telling is another story - the search for connection beyond oneself. As Irving’s narrator Johnny (the writer retelling a story from childhood about Sneed, the despicable pig farmer and garbage collector) tells his story he is acknowledging his own debt to another:

. . . I think that I have become a writer because of my grandmother’s good manners and - more specifically - because of a retarded garbage collector to whom my grandmother was always polite and kind. (PS, 9)

Who is this man, this character who helps to create a writer? We are told bluntly:

His name was Piggy Sneed. He smelled worse than any man I *ever* smelled - with the possible exception of a dead man I caught the scent of, once, in Istanbul . . . There were many reasons for calling him “Piggy”. I wonder why one of us didn’t think of a more original name. To begin with he lived on a pig farm . . . more importantly he lived *with* his pigs . . . he had absorbed, by the uniqueness of his retardation and by his proximity to his animal friends, certain piglike expressions and gestures . . . But the *piggist* thing about him was that he couldn’t talk . . . Piggy Sneed didn’t talk. He grunted. He squealed. He *oinked* - that was his language; he learned it from his friends, as we learn ours. (PS, 10-12)

Mixed in with the story-telling are the narrator’s comments on the lessons learned by writers as they attempt to tell stories. The narrator tells how as a youngster, he and a group of friends who served in the Stratham community’s Volunteer Fire Department were called out one night to Piggy Sneed’s farm. The Stratham Volunteers arrive too late to do anything except watch the blazing fire. The writer recounts:

It might be dramatic to say that we heard squeals, to say that we heard the pigs’ intestines swelling and exploding - or before that, their hooves hammering on the stall doors. But by the time we arrived, those sounds were over; they were history; we could only imagine them.

This is a writer’s lesson: to learn that the sounds we imagine can be the clearest, loudest sounds of all. By the time we arrived, even the tires on Piggy’s truck had burst, the gas tank had exploded, the windshield had caved in. Since we hadn’t been present for those events, we could only guess at the order in which they had taken place. (PS, 19-20.)

Not wanting to confront the horror of Piggy’s being roasted to death, Johnny begins to play

with the meaning-making possibilities of his story. He suggests to those watching the fire that Piggy has staged the fire, to pay back all those who have hurt him, that actually he is safe and far away, spending his carefully saved money.

This made us Front Street children thoughtful, and in that thoughtful moment I started my first act of revision; I tried to make the story better, and more believable. It was essential to rescue Piggy Sneed, of course, but what would a man who couldn't talk do in *Florida*? I imagined they had tougher zoning laws than we had in New Hampshire - especially regarding pigs . . . So, I thought, Piggy was in Florida, after all. In stories you must make the best thing that *can* happen (or the worst if that's your aim), but it still has to ring true. (PS, 22-23.)

The narrator now tells us of the lessons learned from this experience, about writing.

What I would realise, later, is that the writer's business is *both* to imagine the possible rescue of Piggy Sneed *and* to set the fire that will trap him. It was *much* later - but before my grandmother was moved to the old people's home, when she still remembered who Piggy Sneed was - when Grandmother asked me, "Why, in heaven's name, have you become a *writer*?" (PS, 24).

Johnny tries to explain his feelings about Piggy, that if he "could have made up something truthful enough - that [he] could have (in some sense) saved Piggy Sneed. At least saved him for another fire - of [Johnny's] own making" (PS, 24.) However his grandmother cuts him short and says:

"Johnny, *dear*. You surely could have saved yourself a lot of *bother*, if you'd only treated Mr Sneed with a little human decency when he was alive." (PS, 25).

In sheer frustration the narrator confesses his conclusion of the matter, "Failing that, I realise that a writer's business is setting fire to Piggy Sneed - *and* trying to save him - again and again; forever" (PS, 25). Johnny's grandmother, apart from her habitual politeness and kindness towards a maligned character in her community, can also be seen as a voice for the moral, didactic, "value" laden dimensions of literature. The story of Piggy Sneed's demise contains a triangle of characters: Piggy, as a character whom Irving attempts to gain our sympathy for; Johnny, the self-conscious writer-in-development who is engrossed in the complexities of artistic creation; and grandmother offering her very certain views of the much abused Mr Sneed.

Through all the games being played here in this story, Irving is presenting a writer's attempts to connect with a significant other/Other through language (Levinas 1989, 290). From the

outset Johnny tries to re-connect with Piggy. In fact he tries to re-connect with Mr Sneed, to locate the person behind the nickname, to somehow save the pig farmer from the fire. The fire has two identities: one as the flames that burn Mr Sneed to death, and the other as the flames of scorn and rejection heaped on the retarded garbage collector. A writer, in this narrator's view, aims to set fire to the multiple mutations of Piggy Sneed scattered throughout the metatextual world and then to try and save him/them from these textual flames in perpetuity. Every story needs a Piggy Sneed, a character a writer can set alight, and perhaps the goal of every story is to try and "save" Piggy Sneed from the flames of the imagination. Of course, the notion of saving an imaginary character from the imaginary flames of the imagination is a curious one - but for a writer such as Irving, gaining the reader's sympathy for a character is vital, it gives him space to make the tragedies which befall that person that much more powerful. If we can be convinced as readers that a character deserves our sympathy - when that character is threatened with pain or death - then Irving succeeds in doing more than just toying with our emotions, his fiction still carries the power to move us.

From the confined space of this short story, one realises that Irving's concerns with Piggy Sneed are also the meatier stuff of his longer novels, like A Prayer for Owen Meany (hereafter OM). In summing up the meanings embodied by Owen, one could quite easily adapt the sentence which closed the former paragraph: *Every story needs an Owen Meany, a character a writer can set alight, and perhaps the goal of every story is to try and save Owen Meany from the flames of the imagination.*

The opening lines of Chapter One in A Prayer for Owen Meany, "THE FOUL BALL" set the rules of play for this ball-game Irving is urging us to take part in.

I am doomed to remember a boy with a wrecked voice - not because of his voice, or because he was the smallest person I ever knew, or even because he is the reason I believe in God; I am a Christian because of Owen Meany. I make no claims to have a life in Christ, or with Christ - and certainly not *for* Christ, which I've heard some zealots claim . . . What faith I have I owe to Owen Meany, a boy I grew up with. It is Owen who made me a believer. (OM, 13)

Irving's own stance on religion is never made clear. Assuming the distance of any writer hiding behind the many masks of postmodern writing, all we can expect to help us negotiate this ground is the text before us. A prime objective of postmodernism is a search for

connection with an Other (Levinas 1989, 290). It comes as no surprise then that A Prayer For Owen Meany is filled with such searches. From the moment in the opening chapter when he hits a foul ball in a Little League game, Owen is aware that the search has begun.

Misunderstood by all his peers, and aware that he possesses a different way of knowing, Owen seems surrounded by mystery and awe from our very first encounter with him. Johnny Wheelwright is Owen's childhood friend and the narrator of this story. As such he is a focaliser, a locus of narration. In this way he also becomes the reader's "double". We read Owen through Johnny's reading of him. The counter-point from which the story is told, where Johnny looks back into his past for clues to understand his present view on God and himself, is set in a time and space which foreground the novel's macro concerns. At the heart of the novel is a subtext of power dynamics: Canada and its indifference to the United States's own search for identity, draft-dodging and the ones (like Johnny) who get away, and the United States/Vietnam crisis. From the place in the novel's narrated "present", in the America of 1987, the Iran-Contra hearings, and Reagan politics, John Wheelwright (who we are told is a direct descendent of the founding father of Owen and Johnny's hometown Gravesend) is a virulent anti-American Canadian.

Why does Irving present a character with such an anti-American view? As Irving says in another interview, quoting from this novel:

Every American should be forced to live outside the United States for a year or two. Americans should be forced to see how ridiculous they appear to the rest of the world. They should listen to someone else's version of themselves. Every country knows more about America than Americans know about themselves. And Americans know absolutely nothing about any other country. (Wiggins, 1989)

In A Prayer For Owen Meany, the narrator, John Wheelwright, is what the author John Irving calls an "Amex". This does not stand for American Express. It is an anachronism that developed during the Vietnam war to refer to American draft resisters who had drifted across the border into Canada. It stands for "American in Exile" (Wiggins 1989, newspaper article). As the novel demonstrates, some of Irving's deepest feelings are towards the changes which he believes have taken place in the United States, in the time between the Sixties and the novel's "present" - the mid to late Eighties.

In the Wiggins' interview Irving reveals that he originally had two parallel stories in mind. The first was the story of a "someone who bears witness to something, a man who is made a believer by something that only he could have known" and Irving sees such a character as "a hapless soul". In the novel Irving uses the example of the nativity story, the children's performance of the Christmas play, to make Johnny Wheelwright into "just another Joseph". Irving admits he is also a type of disciple, like "Mark or Matthew" but John is specifically linked with Joseph as an example to say that he is given the "bystander" role. Irving says that "in an age of such suspicion as ours we would not be terribly receptive of a second coming, should one fall into our laps. I wanted, therefore, in advance, to make Owen Meany not a Christ figure or a kind of mock Christ, as some reviewers call him. He isn't resurrected, he doesn't walk on water and yet he has that unfortunate burden that Christ carried, that chilling piece of precognition, that he knows how he's going to die and who's going to do it to him" (Wiggins 1989). As Irving points out, the parallel between Owen as a cartoon Christ and the real Christ is intended to be funny at times: "I always thought that was the cunning and heroic moment in the life of Christ, when he gets the disciples together and says to them, 'This is what's going to happen to me, and you guys are going to be part of it' " (Wiggins 1989).

The other story which Irving says he wanted to write in parallel with Owen's is a story about America's situation, from the time a character like Owen would have been born. As Irving says: "I wanted to write a story about coming of age in the time of the Vietnam war because really, for me, that was the period in our history that began the discrediting of what our government says" (Wiggins 1989).

In the novel, Johnny remembers as a child, how he and the other Sunday school kids would make a game of lifting the tiny doll-like Owen up above their heads, and passing him around the room whenever their teacher left the room. Owen's voice is always delivered in capital letters. It looks as strange on the textual page as we are led to believe it sounds.

In Sunday school, when we held Owen up in the air - especially in the air! - he protested so uniquely. We tortured him I think, in order to hear his voice; I used to think his voice came from another planet. Now I'm convinced it was a voice not entirely of this world.

"PUT ME DOWN!" he would say in a strangled, emphatic falsetto. "CUT IT

OUT! I DON'T WANT TO DO THIS ANYMORE. ENOUGH IS ENOUGH. PUT ME DOWN! YOU ASSHOLES!" (OM, 17)

Written in large capital letters, Owen's voice grates as much visually as we are led to believe his voice grates on his listeners' ears. Irving uses these capital letters to indicate Owen's voice, as noteworthy as the words attributed to Christ which appear in some editions of the Bible in red. From the lessons in the Sunday school classroom, we are told that Mrs Walker, the teacher, has quite a few lessons of her own still to learn.

Inevitably Mrs Walker would return to the room when Owen was in the air. Given the biblical nature of her instructions to us: "to think *very* hard . . ." she might have imagined that by an extreme act of our combined and hardest thoughts we had succeeded in levitating Owen Meany . . .

But Mrs Walker's response was always the same - brutish and unimaginative and incredibly dense. "Owen!" she would snap. "Owen Meany, you get back to your seat! You get *down* from up there!"

What could Mrs Walker teach us about the Bible if she was stupid enough to think that Owen Meany had put himself up in the air?

Owen was always dignified about it. He never said, "*THEY DID IT. THEY ALWAYS DO IT! THEY PICK ME UP AND LOSE MY MONEY AND MESS UP MY BASEBALL CARDS - AND THEY NEVER PUT ME DOWN WHEN I ASK THEM TO! WHAT DO YOU THINK, THAT I FLEW UP HERE?*" (OM, 17)

Years later, when Owen is dead, and John looks through his Army duffel bag, searching for answers to all the questions his strange friend has generated, he finds Owen's diary, a Bible, and a well-worn paperback of *Selections from the writings of St Thomas Aquinas* (OM, 553). John is actually looking for the baseball which killed his mother, the ball which disappeared on the day Owen so unexpectedly clouted it.

The baseball, the so-called "murder weapon", the so-called "instrument of death" - it never was in Owen Meany's room! I read the passage Owen had underlined most fervently in his copy of St Thomas Aquinas - "Demonstration of God's existence from Motion." I read the passage over and over, sitting on Owen Meany's bed.

Since everything that is moved functions as a sort of instrument of the first mover, if there was no first mover, then whatever things are in motion would be simply instruments. Of course, if an infinite series of movers and things moved were possible, with no first mover, then the whole infinity of movers and things moved would be instruments. Now, it is ridiculous, even to unlearned people, to suppose that instruments are moved but not by any principal agent. For, this would be like supposing that the construction of a box or bed could be accomplished by putting a saw or a hatchet to work without any carpenter to use them. Therefore, there must be a first mover

existing above all - and this we call God. (OM, 553-554)

From the beginning of the novel, the narrator John Wheelwright is trying to tell us why he is a Christian, and why he believes in an external “first mover existing above all” (to use Aquinas’s phrase) - whom he calls God.

Stepping out of this novel, onto a page of quotations lodged between the table of contents and Chapter One, Irving invokes our spiritual perceptions (a spiritual/religious frame of reference) with a number of quotations from other writers. We are presented with three key thoughts:

1. Have no anxiety about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be known to God. - The Letter of Paul to the Philippians [Chapter 4, verse 6]
2. Not the least of my problems is that I can hardly even imagine what kind of an experience a genuine, self-authenticating religious experience would be. Without somehow destroying me in the process, how could God reveal himself in a way that would leave no room for doubt? If there were no room for doubt, there would be no room for me. - Frederick Buechner
3. Any Christian who is not a hero is a pig. - Leon Bloy

Making an intertextual link between these thoughts and Owen’s own, what meanings has Irving set out? Here we see three contesting quotations, three fragments of text vying for our attention even before the novel begins. In the same way the title of a poem, or an epigraph, alerts us to the likely grain or flow of thoughts within that poem, so these pieces of text mark out the areas for our mindwalk.

From the outset we are aware of Irving’s gameplay. How do we read this scripture, in the context of this novel? Prayer forms a major contributor to the events within the Owen Meany narrative. The title of the novel invokes the continuous prayer offered for Owen throughout the novel, and particularly by Rev. Lewis Merrill during the school service which proves to be Owen’s undoing, because it features Owen’s public humiliation of Randy White, the much loathed headmaster.

It was very quiet in the Great Hall, and although our heads were bowed, our eyes were on the headmaster. We waited for Mr Merrill to begin. Perhaps he was *trying* to begin, I thought; then I realised that - awkward as ever - he had meant for *us* to pray for Owen. What he’d meant was that we were to offer our silent prayers for Owen Meany;

and as the silence went on , and on, it became clear that the Rev. Lewis Merrill had no intention of hurrying us. He was not a brave man, I thought; but he was trying to be brave. On and on, we prayed and prayed; and if I had known about Owen's dream, I would have prayed much harder. (OM, 432)

Much later in the novel, when John Wheelwright discovers the true identity of his father - a search which has occupied a major part of the narrative - his own prayer is answered. For most of his life John has wanted to know who his biological father is. This search for a mysterious father is John's prayer, a sub-textual parallel to Owen's search for the meaning of the dream about an heroic death. When John discovers who his father is, another layer of praying is opened up. We discover that moments before Owen hits the fateful baseball which kills his best friend's mother, she waved to someone in the spectator seats. John Wheelwright is convinced that this mysterious *someone* is his father. John is also careful to note that from that moment the fateful baseball disappears. Years afterwards, John is speaking with Rev. Merrill and believes that The Voice of Owen (whose funeral is due to be conducted the following day) speaks.

In the darkness of the vestry office, I suddenly felt that Owen Meany was very near . . . When the Rev. Mr Merrill spoke, he spoke not with his own voice - he spoke in the exact falsetto, the "permanent scream," of Owen Meany. It was Mr Merrill's mouth that formed the words, but it was Owen Meany's voice that spoke to me: "LOOK IN THE THIRD DRAWER, RIGHT-HAND SIDE." Then the Rev. Mr Merrill's right hand flew down to the third desk drawer on the right-hand side; he pulled the drawer out so far that it came free of the desk - and the baseball rolled across the cool, stone floor of the vestry office. When I looked into Pastor Merrill's face, I had no doubt about which baseball it was.

"Father?" I said.

"Forgive me, my s-s-s-son!" said the Rev. Lewis Merrill . . .

Owen promised me that God would tell me who my father was . I always suspected that *Owen* would tell me - he was always so much more interested in the story than I was. It's no surprise to me that when God decided it was time to tell me who my father was, God chose to speak to me in Owen's voice.

"LOOK IN THE THIRD DRAWER, RIGHT-HAND SIDE," God said.

And there was the ball that Owen Meany hit; and there was my wretched father, asking me to forgive him. (OM, 560-561)

Set against the quotation from Philippians about prayer as a means out of anxiety, is Buechner's criterion for belief in God. Somehow the notion of doubt must play a key role in any believer's relationship with God. The three quotations end with the juxtaposition of

Christianity and hero status in the quotation from Leon Bloy - whether being a Christian and being a hero are mutually exclusive states of being.

Clearly these beginning quotations are insightful benchmarks against which to read Irving's text: 1) Prayer and Anxiety - The Philippians text; 2) Doubt and Belief - The Buechner text; and 3) Christianity and the status of hero - The Bloy text. Each in its own way illuminates the central concerns which the story containing Owen Meany explores.

1. Prayer and Anxiety.

Have no anxiety about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be known to God. - The Letter of Paul to the Philippians

The novel is packed full of prayers and pray-ers, that is to say we frequently encounter prayers offered by people who pray. The dominant prayer is the one offered in silence in the School Hall for Owen. Yet that prayer ripples out from the stage where Pastor Merrill stands silently and becomes John Wheelwright's continuous prayer for his absent friend, for the Owen who has convinced him to be a Christian. In John's mind that school hall prayer for a delinquent Owen [whose pranks are the nemesis of the headmaster's career] becomes transformed into a perpetual prayer for the impossible return of Owen from the grave. In fact, it is John's prayer for Owen which concludes the text.

In a playful postmodern mirror, John Wheelwright's Book of Common Prayer, has in a sense become one flesh with John Irving's A Prayer for Owen Meany. At the narrative starting point, John Wheelwright tells us: "I'm somewhat more familiar with the passages from the Bible that appear in The Book of Common Prayer; I read my prayer book often, and my Bible only on holy days - the prayer book is so much more orderly" (OM, 13). The word "orderly" is a clue to understanding how much John Wheelwright needs to be able to contain the "Owen-event" in his mind. It is a huge event because it is the reason for John's leap-of-faith, and must be contextualised, framed in some way. John reads The Book of Common Prayer more often than his Bible, it is "so much more orderly", so less problematic in terms of multiple narrators, multiple memories and multiple perspectives.

As the novel concludes we again draw alongside John, kneel with him, and read his thoughts:

There's a prayer I say most often for Owen. It's one of the little prayers he said for my mother, the night Hester and I found him in the cemetery - where he'd brought the flashlight, because he knew how my mother had hated the darkness.

"INTO PARADISE MAY THE ANGELS LEAD YOU," he'd said over my mother's grave; and so I say that one for him - I know it was one of his favourites. I am always saying prayers for Owen Meany . . .

When we held Owen Meany above our heads, when we passed him back and forth - so effortlessly - we believed that Owen weighed nothing at all. We did not realise that there were forces beyond our play. Now I know they were the forces that contributed to our illusion of Owen's weightlessness; they were the forces we didn't have the faith to feel, they were the forces we failed to believe in - and they were also lifting up Owen Meany, taking him out of our hands.

O God - please give him back! I shall keep asking You. (OM, 636-637)

This is an epiphanic moment which elevates the notion of uncovering the truth in a given situation to the level of realising that such a truth is a personal part of one's self-identity, not merely an idea or a law of nature. "Reality" for those seeking to understand Owen becomes verified by what each character accepts. The story of what really happened to Owen, why it happened, is so open to multiple readings that each of the characters have to decide for themselves.

The most immediate character trying to read Owen, is John Wheelwright. Yet his "reading" is a problematic one - he is typecast by Irving as "an apostle blinded by the light - facetious and faintly ironic", as a person trying to make sense of three dynamics: "sex and death"; and "political/power posturing versus personal religious faith" which Irving admits is "a brave and lonely thing" (Irving 1990, interview with Davies). In the same interview Irving says that the novel was a process of explaining the possibilities of spiritual belief in his own life because after witnessing formal Christianity in his childhood, Irving admits: "I was left doubting much more than I believe". He says he wanted to write a story which, in his words, would be "enough of a miracle to make a believer of me - but realising it would also make a wreck of me" (Irving 1990, radio interview with Davies).

As the story of Owen Meany unfolds we discover that the Rev. Merrill was also praying at the moment Owen hit his fateful baseball. John has just discovered the true identity of his father.

The prayer *has* been answered, but ironically God's answer to prayer is not always the answer we desire.

Like so many things in the last twenty years: it got worse. The Rev. Mr Merrill confessed that he had no faith at all; he had lost his faith he told me, when my mother died. God had stopped speaking to him then; and the Rev. Mr Merrill had stopped asking to be spoken to. My father had sat in the bleacher seats at the little league game, and when he saw my mother strolling carelessly along the third-base line - when she had spotted him in the stands and waved to him, with her back to home plate - at that moment, my father told me, he had prayed to God that my mother would drop dead.

Infuriatingly, he assured me that he hadn't really meant it - it had only been a "passing thought." More often, he wished that they could be friends, and that the sight of her didn't fill him with self-disgust for his long ago transgression. When he saw her bare shoulders at the baseball game, he hated himself - he was ashamed that he was still attracted to her. Then she spotted him, and - shamelessly, without an ounce of guilt - she waved to him. She made him feel so guilty, he wished her dead. (OM, 562-563)

It is at this moment that John realises the effect a twisted worldview has on those who pray and do not know how to deal with traumatic events in their lives. The rage with which John reacts to the revelation of his father's identity within the context of watching his mother die, is common enough, but its intensity is fuelled by a private quest: to get to the bottom of a spiritual search, to make sense of God and man, to make sense of Owen Meany. John's comment regarding Merrill's "confession": "Like so many things in the last twenty years: it got worse" stands as a subtext to John's angry feelings towards an America he believes has decayed, broken down. On a macro level, telling a parallel story of the betrayed Vietnam generation, Irving's novel is also an allegory for America in the late twentieth century. In this way John's prayers in Canada become a prayer for his former country, like the perpetual prayer for his childhood friend, for the possibilities both of them represented. These remembered feelings find their genesis in that first baseball game.

Oh just drop dead! [Rev. Merrill] thought.

At that precise moment, that is what he'd prayed. Then Owen Meany hit the next pitch. This is what a self-centered religion does to us: it allows us to use it to further our own ends. How could the Rev. Lewis Merrill agree with me - that Mr and Mrs Meany were "monsters of superstition" - if he himself believed that God had listened to his prayer at that Little League game: and that God had *not* "listened" to him since? Because he'd wished my mother dead, my father said, God had punished him; God had taught Pastor Merrill not to trifle with prayer. And I suppose that was why it had been so difficult for Mr Merrill to pray for Owen Meany - and why he had invited us all to offer up our silent prayers to Owen, instead of speaking out himself.

And *he* called Mr and Mrs Meany “superstitious”! Look at the world, look at how many of our peerless leaders presume to tell us that they know what *God* wants! It’s not God who’s fucked up, it’s the screamers who say they believe in Him and who claim to pursue their ends in His holy name! (OM, 563)

Trying to understand John’s rage is not as difficult as it might seem. As he wrestles with the hypocrisy of a Christian leader in his community, Pastor Merrill, he is forced to confront the hypocrisy of many other Christians, those “screamers who say they believe in Him and who claim to pursue their ends in His holy name”. What John articulates is the anger frequently expressed in conversations about organised religion, that the hypocrisy of people who say they believe in and serve a Christian God is evidenced by the great abyss between what they say and what they do. Ironically, given the nature of humankind, this gap will always be there. The anxiety which accompanies this anger, this prayer for understanding, is burdened by the desperation to find some way out of the anguish. Individual men and women who base their lives and choices on an active relationship with God, still have to wrestle with the notion of free will, of being “condemned to be free”² (Sartre in Cahoon 1996, 259, 263).

Throughout this novel, we are presented with characters who make difficult, life-changing choices: John Wheelwright has to choose to believe in the miracle of Owen Meany, and on the basis of that make a choice to believe in God; Pastor Merrill has to choose to accept the existence of God, and respond to God, even though he will never understand the work of God in his life; and Owen Meany has to choose to believe that he is an instrument of God, with a destiny to fulfill, and a mission to accomplish.

Owen grows increasingly aware that his life does have meaning. From the moment he hits the fated baseball, he is investing his life with a central premise: he is an instrument of God; more importantly his hands are the specific instruments of God. As the story develops, as Owen learns more about what he believes is a bizarre calling on his life, the prayer for Owen Meany intensifies. He has a specific recurring dream, where he believes the nature of his death is revealed. The dream does not go away, and Owen begins to shape the course of his life towards fulfilling that dream. At the conclusion of chapter seven, “THE DREAM”, Pastor Merrill has just led the school in a collective silent prayer for Owen. John, as he narrates the event, confronts his own thoughts about that prayer.

Oh God, how often I have wished that I could relive that moment; I didn't know how to pray very well then - I didn't even believe in prayer. If I were given the opportunity to pray for Owen Meany now, I could do a better job of it; knowing what I know now, I might be able to pray hard enough.

It would have helped me, of course, if I could have seen his diary; but he wasn't offering it - he was keeping his diary to himself. . .

Owen believed he knew when he was going to die. . . and after the dream, he believed he knew more. The certainty of his convictions was always a little scary, and his diary entry about the dream is no exception.

YESTERDAY I WAS KICKED OUT OF SCHOOL. LAST NIGHT I HAD A DREAM. NOW I KNOW FOUR THINGS. I KNOW THAT MY VOICE DOESN'T CHANGE - BUT I STILL DON'T KNOW WHY. I KNOW THAT I AM GOD'S INSTRUMENT. I KNOW WHEN I'M GOING TO DIE - AND NOW A DREAM HAS SHOWN ME *HOW* I'M GOING TO DIE. I'M GOING TO BE A *HERO*! I TRUST THAT GOD WILL HELP ME, BECAUSE WHAT I'M SUPPOSED TO DO LOOKS VERY HARD. (OM, 432-433)

For Owen, the dream sets a purpose in motion. He practises with intensely focused devotion, developing the skills he has to, in order to be ready for what he believes is the *chairoi*, the exact timing of God's predestined moment. As John reflects on the past, on the uncanny feeling that Owen was always a couple of steps ahead of him in every stage of learning about life, he must choose what to do with the evidence presented to him.

2. Doubt and Belief.

Not the least of my problems is that I can hardly even imagine what kind of an experience a genuine, self-authenticating religious experience would be. Without somehow destroying me in the process, how could God reveal himself in a way that would leave no room for doubt? If there were no room for doubt, there would be no room for me. - Frederick Buechner

Thrown into the Meany story, and adding to the crises faced by its characters, is an age old battle between doubt and belief. When the two young friends, Owen and John, are faced by antithetical versions of Christian men - the two ministers in the community, Rev. Dudley Wiggin and Rev. Lewis Merrill - it is Rev. Merrill's doubt which singles him out as the more theologically interesting man of God. Rev. Wiggin used to be an aeroplane pilot. His bouncy, irritatingly blonde wife Barb, was a stewardess. We learn the following about Wiggin:

[S]ome difficulty with his eyesight had forced his early retirement from the skies, and

he had descended to our wary town with a newfound fervour - the zeal of the convert giving him the healthy but frantic appearance of one of those “elder” citizens who persist in entering vigorous sporting competitions in the over-fifty category. Whereas Pastor Merrill spoke an educated language - he’d been an English major at Princeton; he’d heard Niebuhr and Tillich lecture at Union Theological - *Rector Wiggins* spoke in ex-pilot homilies, he was a pulpit thumper who had no doubt. (OM, 124)

Pastor Merrill, in contrast, is popular precisely because he is unafraid to articulate his doubt about God.

What made Mr Merrill infinitely more attractive was that he was *full* of doubt; he expressed *our* doubt in the most eloquent and sympathetic ways. In his completely lucid and convincing view, the Bible is a book with a troubling plot, but a plot that can be understood: God creates us out of love, but we don’t want God, or we don’t believe in Him, or we pay very poor attention to Him. Nevertheless God continues to love us - at least He continues to try to get our attention. Pastor Merrill made religion seem *reasonable*. And the trick of having faith, he said, was that it was necessary to believe in God *without* any great or even remotely reassuring evidence that we don’t inhabit a godless universe.

Although he knew all the best - or, at least, the least boring - stories in the Bible, Mr Merrill was most appealing because he reassured us that doubt was the essence of faith, and not faith’s opposite. (OM, 124)

In contrast to the Bible, John will find refuge in The Book of Common Prayer because it has no “troubling plot”. It has set passages of scripture for every Sunday of the year, with special readings for religious feasts as well as life’s rites of passage: baptism, marriage, and death. This experience of listening to a doubtful man who is unafraid to articulate the problematic aspects of belief becomes a model for John to make sense of his own journey towards belief.

To readers living at this end of the twentieth century, the notion of a godless universe is taken as a given. Yet what of those readers and writers who still make a choice to believe in God, albeit with doubt? By invoking a frame of reference which still allows room for the concepts of faith and doubt, and tries to juggle wary belief against radical scepticism, Irving appeals to the old fashioned idea of God at work in the affairs of everyday men and women. When a child like Owen, brought up with a severe Roman Catholic worldview and having been told that his birth was “miraculous”, hits his first solid baseball shot and kills his best friend’s mother - it is inevitable that the event becomes loaded with spiritual symbolism.

One problem which such discussion provokes is whether a reader might confuse belief,

experienced reality, and the surviving terminology from a time when “God” was a more accepted term for the transcendent, lived moments in our lives which escape definition through language. The word “God” is problematic for a contemporary reader - living as he does in an increasingly sceptical, anti-theist world. Irving invokes the idea of God to probe the possibilities for finding belief in today’s world, asking what it would take to push a person from scepticism into belief. One cannot forget that belief in God is as much an act of fiction (and of narrative imagination) as the creation of a character in a text. If a person claims to believe in God, he is saying that he believes in the story told about a Christian God. He believes the story to the extent that it radically changes his way of interpreting, and experiencing, reality. How then can one escape the accusation of begging the question: looking for evidence to support a foregone personal conclusion (belief in God)? What postmodernism offers is a means of questioning those previously held beliefs - asking if they are valid, if they offer a meaningful, and cogent, method of reading reality. Irving is asking what belief in God consists of - whether it is a fiction worthy of belief.

On the day his mother dies, John tries to find a way of telling Owen that he is still his best friend. When Owen drops off a box containing his entire collection of precious baseball cards, John realises he needs to *show* Owen that John still considers him trustworthy. Dan Needham, John’s step-father, suggests that Owen should be given John’s stuffed armadillo, as a sign of trust. Young John struggles to give Owen something so precious - the armadillo is his first memory of Dan, brought into the house the first time Dan took his mother on a date. In giving over the armadillo, John realises the importance of symbols.

That was when I first began to think about certain events or specific things being “important” and having “special purpose”. Until then, the notion that anything had a designated, much less a special purpose would have been cuckoo to me. I was not what was commonly called a believer then, and I am a believer now; I believe in God, and I believe in the “special purpose” of certain events or specific things. I observe all holy days, which only the most old-fashioned Anglicans call red-letter days. It was a red-letter day, fairly recently, when I had reason to think of Owen Meany - it was January 25, 1987, when the lessons proper for the conversion of St Paul reminded me of Owen. The Lord says to Jeremiah,

Before I formed you in the womb
 I knew you,
 and before you were born
 I consecrated you;

I appointed you a prophet to the nations. (OM, 96-97)

The older John, the voice who narrates, is a believer because of Owen. As a younger man, as an angry, searching adolescent, as the Little Leaguer who loses his mother, John narrates himself as a Thomas - a doubter - drawn to the thoughts of Pastor Merrill before absorbing the truth of a "gospel" made personal for him. It is the experience of growing up with Owen, knowing that somehow his peculiar friend is set apart for some divine mission, that becomes John's Damascus road experience. It could be said that Owen transforms the ordinary into the transcendent: that it is Owen who addresses John's search for an unknown father and tells him that God will tell him who his father is, and that it is Owen who creates religious icons from everyday events and objects. Consider Owen's reaction to a film like *The Robe*.

The Robe, to be fair, had hit Owen and me one Saturday afternoon at The Idaho with special force . . . Richard Burton is a Roman tribune who converts to Christianity after crucifying Christ; both Burton and Jean Simmons take turns clutching Christ's *robe* a lot.

"WHAT A BIG FUSS ABOUT A *BLANKET*!" Owen said. "THAT'S SO CATHOLIC," he added - "TO GET VERY RELIGIOUS ABOUT *OBJECTS*." This was a theme of Owen's - the Catholics and their adoration of *OBJECTS*. Yet Owen's habit of collecting objects that *he* made (in his own way) RELIGIOUS was well known: I had only to remember my armadillo's claws. In all of Gravesend, the object that most attracted Owen's contempt was the stone statue of Mary Magdalene, the reformed prostitute who guarded the playground of St Michael's - the parochial school. (OM, 285)

The Buechner quotation at the beginning of the book reinforces the need for a Damascus road experience: "Without somehow destroying me in the process, how could God reveal himself in a way that would leave no room for doubt?" The story told to us by John is an older man's attempt to explain the reason for his belief, why Owen Meany has had such a profound and bewildering effect on him. The original Damascus experience appealed to, is that of Paul, the New Testament missionary writer whose words are often evoked in the novel. Paul's own radical transformation is narrated, almost as an answer to the Buechner challenge. In a typically postmodern fashion, perhaps Paul's conversion experience offers an answer to counter Irving's question, before it is asked. Part of Irving's answer lies in a text which pre-exists A Prayer for Owen Meany. As we re-read the original Damascus road account, we learn of a moment when Buechner's request has already been answered:

Meanwhile, Saul was still breathing out murderous threats against the Lord's

disciples. He went to the high priest and asked him for letters to the synagogues in Damascus, so that if he found any there who belonged to the Way, whether men or women, he might take them as prisoners to Jerusalem. As he neared Damascus on his journey, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. He fell to the ground and heard a voice say to him, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?"
 "Who are you, Lord?" Saul asked.
 "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting," he replied. (Acts 9: 1-5, NIV)

The original Saul is dramatically changed when God reveals himself to him. Saul is struck blind and undergoes a radical change of identity. His name is changed to Paul, and from this moment he renounces his former identity as a Pharisee bounty-hunter in search of Christians, and becomes a missionary *for* Christ to unbelievers. Like Paul before his existential moment, John is at first a doubter, as is Pastor Merrill. Contrasted with their inability to believe is Owen, who is convinced that God is directing his life. Owen is convinced that he is an instrument in the hands of God. His life has purpose, and even the apparently meaningless rituals in his life are all part of a greater plan which Owen glimpses fragments of. For years Owen has been pushing John to practise a crazy basketball shot, where with John's help Owen slam-dunks a basketball in the quickest time possible. It is only in the last moments of the novel that we realise how important this shot is. It forms an integral part of Owen and John's destiny.

For Owen, hands are important. They are important because they are the means through which the divine works. When Owen as a child removes the stuffed armadillo's paws, we are being told that hands are important. Owen becomes obsessed with John's mother's dressmaking dummy which is armless and headless. When he removes the statue of Mary Magdalene from the local Catholic school and secures it to the high school stage, he significantly removes its arms and its head. At moments throughout the story John narrates, John assures us that Owen was continually trying to communicate a message which would only become clear *after* the event they predicted: Owen's heroic death. As John narrates at the beginning of "THE DREAM" chapter.

Owen and I were nineteen-year-old seniors at Gravesend Academy - at least a year older than the other members of our class - when Owen told me, point-blank, what he had expressed to me, symbolically, when he was eleven and had mutilated my armadillo.

"GOD HAS TAKEN YOUR MOTHER," he said to me, when I was

complaining about practising the shot; I thought he would never slam-dunk the ball in under four seconds, and I was bored with all our trying. “MY HANDS WERE THE INSTRUMENT,” he said, “GOD HAS TAKEN MY HANDS. I AM GOD’S INSTRUMENT.” (OM, 354)

The novel attempts to exploit a paradoxical relationship between doubt and belief. The maxim: “Credo quia absurdum est” (I believe it because it is so unlikely) dovetails neatly with Owen’s story. The phrase is adapted from Tertullian³ (c.160 - c.220) and is originally expressed as “Certum est quia impossibile est” (It is certain because it is impossible). It is precisely within the absurdity of Owen’s life and death that John finds the reason for his belief in an external God. The postmodern focus on absurdity is here transferred into the ground basis of faith. John argues with Pastor Merrill, before he realises that Merrill is his long sought father.

“Look at me, I never was a believer, not until this happened. If I can believe it why can’t you?” I asked Mr Merrill. He began to stutter.

“It’s *easier* for you to j-j-j-just accept it. Belief is not something you have felt, and then *not* felt; you haven’t l-l-l-lived with belief, and with *unbelief*. It’s *easier* for you,” the Rev. Mr Merrill repeated, “You haven’t ever been f-f-f-full of faith, *and* full of d-d-d-doubt. Something just strikes you as a miracle, and you believe it. For me it’s not that s-s-s-simple,” said Pastor Merrill . . .

“ . . . miracles don’t c-c-c-cause belief - real miracles don’t make m-m-m-make faith out of thin air; you have to *already have faith* in order to believe in *real* miracles. I believe that Owen was extraordinarily g-g-g-gifted - yes, gifted and powerfully sure of himself. No doubt he suffered some powerfully disturbing visions, too - and he was certainly emotional, he was very emotional. But as to knowing what he appeared to ‘know’ - there are other examples of p-p-p-precognition; not every example is necessarily ascribed to *God*. Look at you - you never even believed in G-G-G-God; you’ve said so, and here you are ascribing to the h-h-h-hand of God *everything* that happened to Owen M-M-M-Meany!” (OM, 542-543)

This is a conversation which occurs after Owen’s death and before John learns his father’s identity. It is a belief based on faith, the mere willingness to accept the possibility of God’s existence, the minute seed Jesus speaks about in the Matthew gospel, and the faith commended in Hebrews:

I tell you the truth, if you have faith as small as a mustard seed, you can say to this mountain, “Move from here to there” and it will move. Nothing will be impossible for you. (Matthew 17: 20, NIV)

And without faith it is impossible to please God, because anyone who comes to him

must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him.
(Hebrews 11: 6, NIV)

The intertextual links between Irving's dialogues on doubt and belief and these key passages in the Bible, suggest that faith in a significant other/Other is a valid path out of the existential crises of the postmodern self. Owen appeals to faith in someone larger than the substance of his life, to a God whom he believes has chosen him to be an instrument. John, through belief in the miracle of Owen's life and death, is also exercising that "mere kernel of faith" which allows him access to an interface with the divine other/Other. Even Pastor Merrill, whose doubt permeates the text like the yeast of the Pharisees, will make his radical leap of faith when John jump-starts his father's lost belief, by manufacturing a vision of his dead mother. On the night before Owen's funeral John creates a ghostly vision using an old dress-making dummy and one of his mother's dresses which he places in the shadows of the church. Then John throws the "fated baseball" through a stained-glass window while Merrill is praying inside. Merrill sees the baseball, and the "ghost" of his former lover, and loudly repents for his lack of belief.

Years before the fulfilment of Owen's dream and Pastor Merrill's change of heart, while Owen and John are still in their last college year, they are practising "the shot". For the first time the two best friends manage to set a record. Owen speaks straight into the situation, as if reaching through its skin into the meat of the matter.

I held the ball; he held out his hands.

"READY?" Owen said. On that word the janitor started the clock. I passed Owen the ball; he jumped into my hands; I lifted him; he reached higher and higher, and - pivoting in the air - stuffed the stupid basketball through the hoop. He was so precise, he never touched the rim. He was midair, returning to earth - his hands still above his head but empty, his eyes on the scorer's clock at midcourt - when he shouted, "TIME!" The janitor stopped the clock.

That was when I would turn to look; usually our time had expired.

00:00

But this time when I looked, there was one second left on the clock.

00:01

He had sunk the shot in under four seconds!

"YOU SEE WHAT A LITTLE FAITH CAN DO?" said Owen Meany. The

brain-damaged janitor was applauding. "SET THE CLOCK TO *THREE* SECONDS!" Owen told him.

"Jesus Christ!" I said.

"IF WE CAN DO IT IN UNDER FOUR SECONDS, WE CAN DO IT IN UNDER THREE," he said. "IT JUST TAKES A LITTLE MORE FAITH."

"It takes more *practice*," I told him irritably.

"FAITH TAKES PRACTICE," said Owen Meany. (OM, 357-358)

If faith takes practice then the characters in Irving's novel display a deep need to put their faith into practice. Pastor Merrill's spin on spiritual belief is one which we are confronted with time and time again. In John and Owen's final year at Gravesend Academy, the old gouty Religion and Scripture teacher Mr Scammon, "cracked his head on the icy steps of Hurd's Church and failed to regain consciousness" (OM, 324) and Pastor Merrill is his replacement. The contrasts between the two men's systems of Christian belief is stark and revolutionary.

Owen and I had suffered through Religion One together in our ninth-grade year: Old Mr Scammon's sweeping, Caesar-to-Eisenhower approach to the major religions of the world. We had been suffering Scammon's Scripture course - and his Religion Two - when the icy steps of Hurd's Church rose to meet him. The Rev. Mr Merrill brought his familiar stutter and his almost-as-familiar doubts to both courses. In Scripture he set us to work in our Bibles - to find plentiful examples of Isaiah 5:20: "Woe unto them that call evil good and good evil." In Religion Two - a heavy-reading course in "religion and literature" - we were instructed to divine Tolstoy's meaning: "There was no solution," Tolstoy writes in *Anna Karenina*, "but the universal solution that life gives to all questions, even the most complex and insoluble. That answer is: one must live in the needs of the day - that is forget oneself." (OM, 324-325)

For two young men trying to understand themselves, Pastor Merrill's course in applied thinking is a real challenge. John confesses that he was one of the atheistic mob of uninterested listeners, while Owen tried to work within his own private belief system. Unknown to them both at the time, Pastor Merrill himself must have still been agonising over his secret one-off affair with John's mother which had resulted in John's illegitimate appearance. The angst Lewis Merrill dragged through the tenth-grade class was a very real struggle between radical doubt in the power of God's grace and an overwhelming ache to hold onto his belief in a loving, forgiving God.

In both classes, Pastor Merrill preached his doubt-is-the-essence-of-and-not-the-opposite-of-faith philosophy; it was a point of view that interested Owen more than it had once interested him. The apparent secret was "belief without miracles"; a faith that needed a miracle was not a faith at all. Don't ask for proof - that was Mr Merrill's

routine message.

“BUT EVERYONE NEEDS A *LITTLE* PROOF,” said Owen Meany.

“Faith itself is a miracle, Owen,” said Pastor Merrill. “The first miracle that I believe is in my own faith itself.”

Owen looked doubtful, but he didn’t speak. (OM, 325)

What we realise as we continue to read, is that Irving has involved us in the meaning-making struggles of each of these characters. We find ourselves asking their questions before they do, before we even really know the reason for their questions. This is a fundamental trait of the postmodern condition. People born after the Sixties revolution in thinking and new approaches to relative morality, are still asking the same questions as their parents did. Unlike their parents, however, this new generation no longer knows why it is asking them. They believe, categorically, in Nothing with a capital N - uncharacteristic for the postmodern ethos of uncategorical concepts. *Nothing*, as a core belief, really exists. In place of God, the postmodern mind posits *Nothing*. In place of Truth, it offers *Nothing*. In place of any of the answers of previous generations, those Grand Narratives we smile politely at now (like communism, organised religion, the myths of social progress), we find *Nothing*. In Irving’s text, Owen is aware of the approaching belief in Nothingness. On New Year’s Eve 1961, Owen and John are in John’s cousin Hester’s apartment swopping thoughts. Hester is drunk and asleep as the two friends talk.

“Why does she drink so much?” I asked Owen.

“HESTER’S AHEAD OF HER TIME,” he said.

“What’s that mean?” I asked him. “Do we have a generation of *drunks* to look forward to?”

“WE HAVE A GENERATION OF PEOPLE WHO ARE *ANGRY* TO LOOK FORWARD TO,” Owen said. “AND MAYBE TWO GENERATIONS OF PEOPLE WHO DON’T GIVE A SHIT,” he added.

“How do *you* know?” I asked him.

“I DON’T KNOW HOW I KNOW,” said Owen Meany. “I JUST KNOW THAT I KNOW,” he said. (OM, 379)

Owen bears an heroic burden, the weight of uncomfortable foreknowledge. Irving as a writer has acknowledged the fact that he always begins his novels knowing how they will end (Irving 1990, radio interview with Davies). In terms of writing he is a believer in predestination. So like Irving the writer, Owen the central character is gifted with hindsight aforehand. Part of Irving’s style acknowledged in that same interview is to create a character

worthy of the reader's emotional sympathy, and then subject that character - that good victim - to tragedy after tragedy. Both Owen and John become mutilated and damaged victims - Owen in the moment of his death and John through the fragments of belief which constitute his religious faith.

Returning with Owen to a school class, we find the debate on faith and belief already in process, as John narrates:

Our Religion Two class - and our Scripture class, too - was an atheistic mob; except for Owen Meany, we were such a negative, anti everything bunch of morons that we thought Jack Kerouac and Allen Ginsberg were more interesting writers than Tolstoy. And so the Rev. Lewis Merrill, with his stutter and his well-worn case of doubt, had his hands full with us. He made us read Greene's *The Power and the Glory* - Owen wrote his term paper on "THE WHISKEY PRIEST: A SEEDY SAINT." We also read Joyce's *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* and Lagerkvist's *Barabbas* and Dostoevski's *The Brothers Karamazov* - Owen wrote my term paper on "SIN AND SMERDYAKOV: A LETHAL COMBINATION." Poor Pastor Merrill! My old Congregationalist minister was suddenly cast in the role of Christianity's defender - and even Owen argued with the terms of Mr Merrill's defense. The class loved Sartre and Camus - the concept of "the unyielding evidence of a life without consolation" was thrilling to us teenagers. The Rev. Mr Merrill countered humbly with Kierkegaard: "What no person has a right to is to delude others into the belief that faith is something of no great significance, or that it is an easy matter, whereas it is the greatest and most difficult of all things." (OM, 325-326)

What is at issue here seems to be the process by which individuals attempt to make contact with others. Within this school situation John is trying to understand Owen; Owen is trying to understand the machinations of God and the thoughts inside Lewis Merrill's mind; and Pastor Merrill is wrestling with his private doubts using intellectual grappling hooks. Through the struggle to understand the spiritual relationship between God and individual people, Irving exploits the intensity of that search for the questions it raises about being human, that is to say, the existential status of being. In Owen's arguments and defense of theological free-thinking, we see the writer exploring beneath the floorboards of our own minds.

Owen, who'd had his doubts about Pastor Merrill, found himself in the role of the minister's defender. "JUST BECAUSE A BUNCH OF ATHEISTS ARE BETTER WRITERS THAN THE GUYS WHO WROTE THE BIBLE DOESN'T NECESSARILY MAKE THEM *RIGHT*!" he said crossly. "LOOK AT THOSE WIERDO TV MIRACLE-WORKERS - THEY'RE TRYING TO GET PEOPLE TO BELIEVE IN MAGIC! BUT THE *REAL* MIRACLES AREN'T ANYTHING YOU CAN SEE - THEY'RE THINGS YOU HAVE TO BELIEVE WITHOUT SEEING. IF

SOME PREACHER'S AN ASSHOLE, THAT'S NOT PROOF THAT GOD DOESN'T EXIST!"

"Yes, but let's not say 'asshole' in class, Owen," Pastor Merrill said.

And in our Scripture class, Owen said, "IT'S TRUE THAT THE DISCIPLES ARE STUPID - THEY NEVER UNDERSTAND WHAT JESUS MEANS. THEY'RE A BUNCH OF BUNGLERS, THEY DON'T BELIEVE IN GOD AS MUCH AS THEY WANT TO BELIEVE, AND THEY EVEN BETRAY JESUS. THE POINT IS, GOD DOESN'T LOVE US BECAUSE WE'RE SMART OR BECAUSE WE'RE GOOD. WE'RE STUPID AND WE'RE BAD AND GOD LOVES US ANYWAY - JESUS ALREADY TOLD THE DUMB-SHIT DISCIPLES WHAT WAS GOING TO HAPPEN. 'THE SON OF MAN WILL BE DELIVERED INTO THE HANDS OF MEN, AND THEY WILL KILL HIM...' REMEMBER? THAT WAS IN MARK - RIGHT?"

"Yes, but let's not say 'dumb-shit disciples' in class, Owen," Mr Merrill said; but although he struggled to defend God's Holy Word, Lewis Merrill for the first time, in my memory - appeared to be enjoying himself. To have his faith assailed perked him up; he was livelier and less meek. (OM, 326)

We can laugh nervously as John relates the story, but it is with the uncomfortable knowledge that Owen himself, as a parallel-Christ character, has also been trying to tell his "dumb-shit" disciple John what is going to happen as Owen fulfils God's plan for his life. Owen applies this same zeal to all his thinking: it is not only an intellectual game as far as theology is concerned. What seems critical within Owen's paradigm is the project of engaging with significant others: be they the ambiguous Rev. Lewis Merrill, the sexually charged potential of John's quasi-nympho-cousin Hester the Molester, or what Owen believes is a mysterious divine plan in the mind of God to which Owen, as an instrument, must choose to submit. Even as Owen charges his best friend to take his academic work seriously, we grow aware of the ludic nature of this particular tirade. In the nature of postmodern intertextuality it seems that the text itself makes fun of the reader-critic, even as Owen derides John for his intellectual laziness in failing to unpack Thomas Hardy's Tess of the D'Urbervilles.

"YOUR BOREDOM IS YOUR PROBLEM," said Owen Meany. "IT'S YOUR LACK OF IMAGINATION THAT BORES YOU. HARDY HAS THE WORLD FIGURED OUT. TESS IS DOOMED. FATE HAS IT IN FOR HER. SHE'S A VICTIM, THE WORLD WILL USE YOU. WHY SHOULD SOMEONE WHO'S GOT SUCH A WORKED-OUT WAY OF SEEING THE WORLD BORE YOU? WHY SHOULDN'T YOU BE INTERESTED IN SOMEONE WHO'S WORKED OUT A WAY TO SEE THE WORLD? THAT'S WHAT MAKES WRITERS INTERESTING! MAYBE YOU SHOULD BE AN ENGLISH MAJOR. AT LEAST,

YOU GET TO READ STUFF THAT'S WRITTEN BY PEOPLE WHO CAN WRITE! YOU DON'T HAVE TO DO ANYTHING TO BE AN ENGLISH MAJOR, YOU DON'T NEED ANY SPECIAL TALENT, YOU JUST HAVE TO PAY ATTENTION TO WHAT SOMEONE WANTS YOU TO SEE - TO WHAT MAKES SOMEONE ANGRIST, OR THE MOST EXCITED IN SOME OTHER WAY. IT'S SO EASY; I THINK THAT'S WHY THERE ARE SO MANY ENGLISH MAJORS."

"It's not easy for me!" I cried. "I *hate* reading this book!"

"DO YOU HATE TO READ MOST BOOKS?" Owen asked me.

"Yes!" I said.

"DO YOU SEE THAT THE PROBLEM IS NOT *TESS*?" he asked me.

"Yes," I admitted.

"NOW WE'RE GETTING SOMEWHERE," said Owen Meany - my friend, my teacher. (OM, 331)

As Philip Page observes, the relationship between Owen and John is the crux of the novel's commentary on understanding and belief. By extension their relationship becomes the representation of the problematic ties that bind writers to the characters they bring to life.

The grown-up John Wheelwright, having failed to mature beyond his youthful adoration of Owen, is tedious, sententious and obsessive, and/but he has unshakeable faith in Owen's divinity. Irving thus problematizes the relationship between author and character/narrator, raises necessary but unresolvable questions about the validity of claims of intuitive understanding and thereby questions faith at the same time as he affirms it. (Page 1995, 153)

Owen's insights, his peculiar spin on reality, is what compels John to make sense of his life and death. In wrestling against both his doubt in Owen's miraculous death and a belief in his supernatural personality, John must confront the paradoxical nature of human existence. In the very place we least expect to find answers, the truth begins to emerge. As in the telling of a story, the real possibilities for making meaning lie in the journey of reading, not so much as in reaching the destination of the story's conclusion.

Irving's craft lies in sustaining this prayer for Owen Meany. As long as we read Irving's thoughts as they move through the text, we are involved in an active prayer life for Owen. When the text ends, when we finish reading, the prayer ceases, or is sustained in the metatextual spaces outside of this one book's textual boundaries. In exploiting intertextual games with characteristic (postmodern and personal) playfulness, John Irving speaking through Owen as "The Voice" in this text, begins explaining his relationship with another textual playground - the mindspace invoked by a discussion with John on Thomas Hardy. It is

1967, and Owen has used his father's diamond wheel (a granite precision cutting blade) to amputate John's trigger finger to keep his best friend out of the Vietnam war.

I remember the summer of 1967, when my finger was healing - how that summer slipped away. That was the summer Owen Meany was promoted....He would also help me begin my Master's thesis on Thomas Hardy. I had much trouble beginning anything - and, according to Owen, even more trouble seeing something through.

"YOU MUST JUST PLUNGE IN," Owen wrote to me. "THINK OF HARDY AS A MAN WHO WAS ALMOST RELIGIOUS, AS A MAN WHO CAME SO CLOSE TO BELIEVING IN GOD THAT WHEN HE REJECTED GOD, HIS REJECTION MADE HIM FEROCIOUSLY BITTER. THE KIND OF FATE HARDY BELIEVES IN IS ALMOST LIKE BELIEVING IN GOD - AT LEAST IN THAT TERRIBLE, JUDGEMENTAL GOD OF THE OLD TESTAMENT. HARDY HATES INSTITUTIONS: THE CHURCH - MORE THAN FAITH OR BELIEF - AND CERTAINLY MARRIAGE (THE INSTITUTION OF IT), AND THE INSTITUTION OF EDUCATION. PEOPLE ARE HELPLESS TO FATE, VICTIMS OF TIME - THEIR OWN EMOTIONS UNDO THEM, AND SOCIAL INSTITUTIONS OF ALL KINDS FAIL THEM.

"DON'T YOU SEE HOW A BELIEF IN SUCH A BITTER UNIVERSE IS NOT UNLIKE RELIGIOUS FAITH? LIKE FAITH, WHAT HARDY BELIEVED WAS NAKED, PLAIN, VULNERABLE. BELIEF IN GOD, OR A BELIEF THAT - EVENTUALLY - *EVERYTHING* HAS TRAGIC CONSEQUENCES. . . EITHER WAY, YOU DON'T LEAVE YOURSELF ANY ROOM FOR PHILOSOPHICAL DETACHMENT. EITHER WAY, YOU'RE NOT BEING VERY CLEVER. NEVER THINK OF HARDY AS *CLEVER*; NEVER CONFUSE FAITH, OR BELIEF - OF ANY KIND - WITH SOMETHING EVEN REMOTELY INTELLECTUAL.

"PLUNGE IN - JUST BEGIN. I'D BEGIN WITH HIS NOTES, HIS DIARIES - HE NEVER MINCED WORDS THERE. EVEN EARLY WHEN HE WAS TRAVELLING IN FRANCE, IN 1882 - HE WROTE: 'SINCE I DISCOVERED SEVERAL YEARS AGO, THAT I WAS LIVING IN A WORLD WHERE NOTHING BEARS OUT IN PRACTICE WHAT IT PROMISES INCIPIENTLY, I HAVE TROUBLED MYSELF VERY LITTLE ABOUT THEORIES. I AM CONTENT WITH TENTATIVENESS FROM DAY TO DAY.' YOU COULD APPLY THAT OBSERVATION TO EACH OF HIS NOVELS! THAT'S WHY I SAY HE WAS 'ALMOST RELIGIOUS' - BECAUSE HE WASN'T A GREAT THINKER, HE WAS A GREAT *FEELER*!

"TO BEGIN, YOU SIMPLY TAKE ONE OF HIS BLUNT OBSERVATIONS AND PUT IT TOGETHER WITH ONE OF HIS MORE *LITERARY* OBSERVATIONS - YOU KNOW ABOUT THE CRAFT. I LIKE THIS ONE: 'A STORY MUST BE EXCEPTIONAL ENOUGH TO JUSTIFY ITS TELLING. WE STORYTELLERS ARE ALL ANCIENT MARINERS, AND NONE OF US IS JUSTIFIED IN STOPPING WEDDING GUESTS, UNLESS HE HAS SOMETHING MORE UNUSUAL TO RELATE THAN THE ORDINARY EXPERIENCES OF EVERY AVERAGE MAN AND WOMAN.'

"YOU SEE? IT'S EASY. YOU TAKE HIS HIGH STANDARDS FOR STORIES THAT ARE 'EXCEPTIONAL' AND YOU PUT THAT TOGETHER WITH HIS BELIEF THAT 'NOTHING BEARS OUT IN PRACTICE WHAT IT

PROMISES INCIPIENTLY,' AND THERE'S YOUR THESIS! ACTUALLY THERE IS *HIS* THESIS - ALL YOU HAVE TO DO IS FILL IN THE EXAMPLES. PERSONALLY I'D BEGIN WITH ONE OF THE BITTEREST - TAKE ALMOST ANYTHING FROM *JUDE THE OBSCURE*. HOW ABOUT THAT TERRIBLE LITTLE PRAYER THAT JUDE REMEMBERS FALLING ASLEEP TO, WHEN HE WAS A CHILD?

TEACH ME TO LIVE, THAT I MAY DREAD
THE GRAVE AS LITTLE AS MY BED
TEACH ME TO DIE. . .

"WHAT COULD BE EASIER?" wrote Owen Meany.
And thus - having cut off my finger and allowed me to finish graduate school - he started my Master's thesis for me, too. (OM, 536-538)

Even as we read Owen's thoughts on Hardy's writing we are taking part in Irving's word game. Owen could just as easily be speaking about Irving's writing, speaking to John (Wheelwright) about John (Irving) in fact. In keeping with postmodernism's insistence on textual games, here we find a textual character, speaking intertextually, about the very textual process in which he is involved. In other words, here is text (the words we read on the page) speaking about text (Owen, the character), speaking within text (inside the book A Prayer for Owen Meany), about another text (Thomas Hardy's Jude the Obscure), about the creator of that text (Thomas Hardy) but also talking about its own creator (John Irving as the author of this text). In typical postmodern fashion, Irving is engrossed in playing textual games with the reader - a propensity for metafiction, in which his writing draws attention to the techniques and processes of its own creation.

3. Christianity and the status of hero

Any Christian who is not a hero is a pig. - Leon Bloy

In a review of Kathryn Harrison's autobiographical novel The Kiss, the reviewer Susan Cheever speaks about a writer's relationship with the past. Her thoughts, loaded with religious icons, supply an insight on John Wheelwright's narrative voice.

The past is a dangerous place. One look backward can turn you into salt, or cause the loss of the woman you love. For a writer, memory is treacherous and precious at the same time. Every now and then, though, a writer looks back with such bold clarity that it's as if we were living right along with the story. The work reverberates with

similarities to our own experience, and with differences from our own experience, so that in the end it gives us a new way of looking at the world . . .

Even God can't change the past, Aristotle said, but with enough skill and courage we can look back on it and mourn, and rejoice, and understand. (Cheever 1997, 11)

Looking back on an event is the only way for us to confront the depth of its impact on us. As John Wheelwright looks back, from the distance of two decades, he continues to realise how profoundly Owen Meany has affected his life, his world-view. For John, the experience of knowing Owen has been his "Damascus road" encounter with the Christ, although it cannot categorically "prove" that Christ has any reality. Is John left doubting much more than he believes? Has his encounter with Owen been enough of a miracle to make a believer of him - with the realisation that it has also made a wreck of him? From his narrated present, John looks back to Gravesend.

Let me pause there. Even that name "Gravesend" suddenly becomes loaded with iconography - the town symbolises, becomes, the space where the immensity of the grave ends. Perhaps in that little community, the *grave* does *end* and becomes translated into the experience of *grace* for both John Wheelwright and Pastor Merrill.

John is looking back to his childhood, through the years, for clues to the belief he now carries.

Toronto: April 12, 1987 - a rainy Palm Sunday . . .

Owen hated Palm Sunday; the treachery of Judas, the cowardice of Peter, the weakness of Pilate.

"IT'S BAD ENOUGH THAT THEY CRUCIFIED HIM," Owen said, "BUT THEY MADE FUN OF HIM TOO!"

Canon Mackie read heavily from Matthew: how they mocked Jesus, how they spit on him, how he cried, "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?"

I find that Holy Week is draining; no matter how many times I have lived through his crucifixion, my anxiety about his resurrection is undiminished - I am terrified that this year, it won't happen; that, that year it didn't. Anyone can be sentimental about the Nativity; any fool can feel like a Christian at Christmas. But Easter is the main event; if you don't believe in the resurrection, you're not a believer.

"IF YOU DON'T BELIEVE IN EASTER," Owen Meany said, "DON'T KID YOURSELF - DON'T CALL YOURSELF A CHRISTIAN." (OM, 293-294)

Here, the core of John's belief system is problematised. He needs to understand the

importance of Christ's death and resurrection to make sense of his faith; he also needs to make sense of Owen's death and its impact on John's life after his death, to understand his world, to understand himself. If the Leon Bloy quotation at the beginning of the book, "Any Christian who is not a hero is a pig" is valid, then John Wheelwright is trying to understand whether he is a hero or a pig. Bloy's target is the Christian and not Christ.

At Owen's funeral service, Pastor Merrill speaks to the congregation and says "Oh God - how we miss Owen Meany!" (OM, 584) before he begins his final Bible reading from a passage in Mark 9. The passage is quoted in full in A Prayer for Owen Meany, and is reproduced here from the New International Version.

When they came to the other disciples, they saw a large crowd around them and the teachers of the law arguing with them. As soon as all the people saw Jesus, they were overwhelmed with wonder and ran to greet him. "What are you arguing with them about?" he asked. A man in the crowd answered, "Teacher, I brought you my son, who is possessed by a spirit that has robbed him of speech. Whenever it seizes him, it throws him to the ground. He foams at the mouth, gnashes his teeth and becomes rigid. I asked your disciples to drive out the spirit, but they could not."

"O unbelieving generation," Jesus replied, "how long shall I stay with you? How long shall I put up with you? Bring the boy to me." So they brought him. When the spirit saw Jesus, it immediately threw the boy into a convulsion. He fell to the ground and rolled around, foaming at the mouth. Jesus asked the boy's father, "How long has he been like this?" "From childhood," he answered. "It has often thrown him into fire or water to kill him. But if you can do anything, take pity on us and help us."

" 'If you can?' " said Jesus. "Everything is possible for him who believes." Immediately the boy's father exclaimed, "I do believe; help me overcome my unbelief!" When Jesus saw that a crowd was running to the scene, he rebuked the evil spirit. "You deaf and mute spirit," he said, "I command you, come out of him and never enter him again." The spirit shrieked, convulsed him violently and came out. The boy looked so much like a corpse that many said, "He's dead." But Jesus took him by the hand and lifted him to his feet, and he stood up. After Jesus had gone indoors, his disciples asked him privately, "Why couldn't we drive it out?" He replied, "This kind can come out only by prayer." (Mark 9: 14-29, NIV)

The central message of this biblical text seems to be pointing to the faith one requires to receive a miracle from God's hand. The father who brings his possessed son for healing knows that he battles between both doubt and belief. His cry to Jesus is that the anointed one, the teacher, will see his belief and then help him overcome his doubts. John, in narrating the

story of Owen, also seems to be crying out to God, to us the readers, to acknowledge his own belief and help him overcome his doubts. The notion of helping a fictional character overcome his doubts might be difficult to grasp. Yet if the reader is actively involved in making meanings from the questions raised by this novel, then he needs to address John's cry. Irving provides a character caught in a crisis of belief, who appeals to anyone to help him overcome his disbelief. As readers, we can play deaf to his request, or we can respond from our own life experience. However we do so knowing that for eternity, John's doubts will be trapped in text. Fictional characters exist in the time space of a text's narrative. For the time we actively read, John's existence is assured. When the novel is closed, when we leave the text closed on a table, beside the bed or the favourite armchair, and leave the room - John's voice is silenced. Yet the memory of his questions - his doubt and his belief - may well survive in our minds.

Another question raised by Irving's use of this particular gospel narrative is: Why should Pastor Merrill choose this passage? What is it about Mark's story which feeds into his and our deeper understanding of Owen? The closing phrase: "This kind can come out only by prayer" could refer to Owen's "true nature" - the meaning at the core of him which can only be liberated, set free, through prayer - the perpetual prayer for Owen Meany:

When he finished reading this passage, Pastor Merrill lifted his face to us and cried out, "I believe; help my unbelief!" Owen Meany helped *my* "unbelief," my father said. "Compared to Owen Meany, I am an amateur in my faith." Mr Merrill said. "Owen was not just a hero to the United States Army - he was *my* hero," my father said. "He was *our* hero - over and over again, he was our hero; he was *always* our hero. And we will always miss him," the Rev. Lewis Merrill said. (OM, 585)

Lewis Merrill is articulating his own struggle between belief and doubt, and his public articulation of that struggle is goaded by Owen's hero-death. He continues to speak, from inside John's re-telling of that story:

"As often as I feel certain that God exists, I feel as often at a loss to say what difference it makes - that He exists - or even: that to believe in God, which I do, raises more questions than it presents answers. Thus, when I am feeling my most faithful, I also feel full of a few, hard questions that I would like to put to God - I mean *critical* questions of the How-Can-He, How-Could-He, How-Dare-You variety.

"For example, I would like to ask God to give us *back* Owen Meany," Mr Merrill said; when he spread his arms wide, the fingers of his right hand were dancing again in the beam of light. "O God - give him back, give him back to us!" Pastor

Merrill asked. It was so quiet in Hurd's Church, while we waited to see what God would do. I heard a tear fall - it was one of my grandmother's tears, and I heard it patter upon the cover of the Pilgrim Hymnal, which she held in her lap. "Please give us back Owen Meany," Mr Merrill said. When nothing happened, my father said: "O God - I shall keep asking You!" (OM, 585)

Merrill's words here also become his son John's closing words of the novel, setting "the prayer" in perpetual motion: "O God - I shall keep asking You!" It is Owen's life and his death which affect the community of characters so deeply. Unlike Christ, Owen will never rise from the grave (although some readers will ask: why isn't the story of Christ also a fiction?) but the ripples moving out from his life have a far-reaching effect. Why is Owen a hero? What great thing has he done? Perhaps the answer lies in that as Owen responds to his sense of calling, as he responds to the "still small voice of God" (so unlike his own tormented voice) Owen walks into his destiny. From an early age he has sensed something different about his life, that he is not like other ordinary people. His vocation seems set apart, almost holy. But what does he do?

Joseph Campbell, in discussing mythology and its links with contemporary society, offers his insights on what a hero is by discussing the two types of deed a mythological hero has traditionally performed.

One is the physical deed, in which the hero performs a courageous act in battle or saves a life. The other kind is the spiritual deed, in which the hero learns to experience the supernatural range of human spiritual life and then comes back with a message.

The usual hero adventure begins with someone from whom something has been taken, or who feels there's something lacking in the normal experiences available or permitted to the members of his society... It's usually a cycle, a going and a returning. (Campbell 1989, 124)

This is a fundamental psychological transformation that everyone has to undergo. We are in childhood in a condition of dependency under someone's protection and supervision for some 14 to 21 years - and if you're going on for your PhD, this may continue to perhaps 35. You are in no way a self-responsible, free agent, but an obedient dependant, expecting and receiving punishments and rewards. To evolve out of this position of psychological immaturity to the courage of self-responsibility and assurance requires a death and a resurrection. That's the basic motif of the hero's journey - leaving one condition and finding the source of life to bring you forth into a richer or mature condition. (Campbell 1989, 125)

In the light of what Campbell says, Owen has to learn to let go of his dependent obligations to

the world (good son, hard worker at school) to enter the hazardous world of responsible self-existence and the choice to act on an heroic impulse which he believes comes from God. Owen guards what he knows of his calling carefully. From the time John's mother is killed by the baseball, he seems to hand his life over to God, to do with what he will. Much of his motivation for carrying on with his divine mission is based on "The Dream" which keeps coming back to him. Through the experience of the dream, Owen realises that he is going to be a hero. His logic seems to tell him that if he is going to be a hero then he has an obligation to prepare himself to the best of his ability. He also realises that "The Jump" which he keeps practising with John is a vital aspect of the projected success of his mission.

In his university years, Owen starts dating John's cousin Hester. However, his insistence on going to Vietnam infuriates Hester, and perplexes John; they both think he is throwing his life away, that it has no value to him. Yet Owen does value his life, passionately, because it becomes part of a much larger process which John can only begin to understand in the decades following Owen's death. It is as if Owen has been given a fragment of God's mind, through divine revelation, and that one fragment sets him utterly apart from the world of others.

Owen chooses God as his ultimate significant other/Other. The process of understanding his relationship with God, and the things God has asked him to do, will occupy most of his hurried life. Owen walks the journey of his life with purpose, and a sense of destiny - the hero's realisation that he is set apart from other men to accomplish something only he can do. Owen tries to explain his thoughts to John who, like one of the fumbling disciples - like the disciple we are told loved Jesus the most, can only respond with bewilderment. John essentially writes a gospel, proclaiming the good news about Owen, but a story which only makes sense as he writes it into being. And, as we pick up John's gospel, proclaiming the news about Owen, we need to anticipate how we will respond to this story.

"I DON'T WANT TO BE A HERO," said Owen Meany. "IT'S NOT THAT I WANT TO BE - IT'S THAT I AM A HERO. I KNOW THAT'S WHAT I'M SUPPOSED TO BE."

"How do you know?" I asked him.

"IT'S NOT THAT I WANT TO GO TO VIETNAM - IT'S WHERE I HAVE TO GO. IT'S WHERE I'M A HERO. I'VE GOT TO BE THERE," he said.

“Tell him how you ‘know’ this, you asshole!” Hester screamed at him.

“THE WAY YOU KNOW SOME THINGS - YOUR OBLIGATIONS, YOUR DESTINY OR YOUR FATE,” he said. “THE WAY YOU KNOW WHAT GOD WANTS YOU TO DO.”

“God wants you to go to Vietnam?” I asked him.

Hester ran out of the kitchen and shut herself in the bathroom; she started running the water in the bathtub. “I’m not listening to this shit, Owen - not one more time, I told you!” she cried. (OM, 489)

Here we get a sense of John learning for the first time the profound implications of Owen’s unshakeable faith in himself, or his perception of his calling to something heroic, to his mission. The integration of the Vietnam context with Owen’s personal perspective, adds the traditional sphere of war and the heroic actions made possible in war. John Irving will deconstruct this delusion of war as grand or noble, because Owen’s heroic deed is done in response to Vietnam, to the traumas associated with that war, and its troubling effect on the minds and spiritual life of America. John, at this point in the story, is still trying to make sense of his friend’s perceived insanity.

“It’s this dream, isn’t it?” I asked him. He stirred the tomato sauce as if he knew what he was doing. “Does Pastor Merrill tell you that God wants you to go to Vietnam?” I asked him. “Does Father Findley tell you that?”

“THEY SAY IT’S JUST A DREAM,” said Owen Meany.

“That’s what *I* say - and I don’t even know what it is, but I say it’s just a dream,” I said.

“BUT YOU HAVE NO FAITH,” he said. “THAT’S YOUR PROBLEM.”

Owen Meany could manifest a certain calmness that I had never quite liked; when he got like that when we were practicing the shot, I didn’t want to touch him - when I passed him the ball, I felt uneasy; and when I had to put my hands on him, when I actually lifted him up, I always felt I was handling a creature that was not exactly human, or not quite real. I wouldn’t have been surprised if he had twisted in the air, in my hands, and bitten me; or if - after I’d lifted him - he’d just kept flying. (OM, 489-490)

An underlying theme in the novel is that of the uncanny, from the wet-your-pants-with-laughter ridiculous to the unsettling. When Owen plays the Baby Jesus in a Sunday school nativity play, and denounces his parents from the stage, “WHAT DO YOU THINK YOU’RE DOING HERE?” the angry Lord Jesus had screamed at them. “YOU SHOULDN’T BE HERE! . . . IT’S A SACRILEGE FOR YOU TO BE HERE!” (OM, 234, 579) we laugh. As the “Ghost of Christmas Yet to Come” in Charles Dickens’s “A Christmas Carol”, Owen is so terrifyingly supernatural when he coughs that Maureen Early, a girl in the audience,

“abandoning all hope of containing her urine, opened her eyes wide and stared at the source of such an unearthly bark” (OM, 258, 581). We laugh at these moments even as our perceptions of reality are upended, when we learn through the story that Owen has a vision where he sees his own name and date of death on Scrooge’s gravestone in the Dickens play: “I SAW MY NAME - ON THE GRAVE,” said Owen Meany... “IT WAS MY NAME NOT SCROOGE’S” (OM, 260). John describes Mr Meany showing him the gravestone which Owen carved before his death:

The gravestone was unusually large but properly simple.

1LT PAUL O. MEANY, JR.

Under the name were the dates - the correct dates of his birth, and of his death - and under the dates was the simple Latin inscription that meant “forever.”

IN AETERNUM

[Mr Meany] said, “That ain’t *my* work - that’s *his* work! He done it when he was home on leave. He covered it up - and told me not to look at it, not so long as he was alive, he said....

“I added *nothin’!*” said Mr Meany. “He *knew* the date. I thought you knew that much.” I knew “that much,” of course - and I’d already looked at the diary and satisfied myself that he’d always known the *exact* date. But to see it so strongly carved in his gravestone left no room for doubt - he’d last been home on leave for Christmas, 1967; he’d finished his own gravestone more than half a year before he died! (OM, 557-558)

The story of Owen’s life is impregnated with mystery. What follows is a selection of beliefs Owen held about his own life versus the metaphysical things others thought about his life in retrospect. Speaking for himself Owen says:

THEY SAY IT’S JUST A DREAM. IT’S NOT *YOUR* DREAM. I’M NOT PLAYING AROUND, WOULD I REQUEST A COMBAT ASSIGNMENT IF I WERE PLAYING AROUND? I SAVE THE CHILDREN, I SAVE LOTS OF CHILDREN. IN THE DREAM THEY’RE NOT SOLDIERS, THEY’RE CHILDREN. THAT’S HOW I KNOW WHERE I AM - THEY’RE DEFINITELY VIETNAMESE CHILDREN, AND I SAVE THEM. I WOULDN’T GO TO ALL THIS TROUBLE IF I WAS SUPPOSED TO SAVE *SOLDIERS*! I DON’T BELIEVE EVERYTHING THAT *POPS* INTO MY HEAD - FAITH IS A LITTLE MORE SELECTIVE THAN THAT. (OM, 490-491)

Referring to Owen’s dream, John says:

This is so childish. You can't believe that everything that pops into your head *means* something! You can't have a dream and believe that you "know" what you're *supposed* to do! (OM, 490)

The Rev. Merrill speaking with hindsight says:

Owen M-M-M-Meany didn't exactly believe he was Jesus - but he said to me that if I could believe in one v-v-v-virgin birth, why not in another one? Owen b-b-b-believed there was a purpose to everything that h-h-h-happened to him - that G-G-G-God meant for the story of his life to have some m-m-m-meaning. God had p-p-p-picked Owen. It is obvious that Owen was g-g-g-gifted with certain *precognitive* p-p-p-powers - visions of the f-f-f-future are not unheard of you know. (OM, 558-559)

After Owen's death, John becomes a believer. John also uses the original "fated baseball" and his mother's dressmaking dummy to stage a vision for Pastor Merrill, to force his father to acknowledge his illicit relationship with John's mother. The event is so traumatic for the minister that it frightens him back into believing in God. Before Merrill's religious faith is restored and before John discovers who his father is, John is furious with Merrill's inability to believe in the miracle of Owen's birth, life, and death. Owen's parents have told him that he was not conceived by natural sex - his was a virgin birth. The important thing is that Owen believes this, and because of the baseball accident, begins to believe he is God's instrument. At some point our own disbelief is challenged - we begin to ask, well what exactly is going on here? John speaks:

I was angry with the Rev. Mr Merrill for making of Owen Meany what Mr Merrill so often made of Jesus Christ - a subject for "metaphysical speculation." He turned Owen Meany into an intellectual problem, and I told him so.

"You want to call Owen, and everything that happened to him, a m-m-m-miracle - don't you?" Mr Merrill asked me.

"Well, it is 'miraculous' isn't it?" I asked him. "You must agree it is at least *extraordinary*!"

"You sound positively *converted*," Mr Merrill said condescendingly. "I would be careful not to confuse your g-g-g-grief with genuine, religious *belief* . . ."

"You don't sound to me as if you believe very much!" I said angrily.

"About Owen?" he asked me.

"Not just about Owen," I said. "You don't seem to me to believe very much in God - or in any of those so-called miracles. You're always talking about 'doubt as the essence and not the opposite of faith' - but it seems to me that *your* doubt has taken control of you. I think that's what Owen thought about you, too."

"Yes, that's true - that's what he thought about m-m-m-me," the Rev. Lewis Merrill said. (OM, 560-561)

When John relates Owen telling him about the dream, he speaks with the life-changing awe of one of the disciples who witnessed Jesus's life, his crucifixion and eventually his resurrection too. After their debate about the validity of Owen's dream, Owen fetches his diary from Hester's bedroom.

He didn't show it to me; he simply found the part he was looking for, and he began to read to me. I didn't know I was hearing an edited version. The word "dream" was never mentioned in his writing, as if it were not a dream he was describing but rather something he had seen with much more certainty and authority than anything appearing to him in his sleep - as if he were describing an order of events he had absolutely witnessed. Yet he remained removed from what he saw, like someone watching through a window, and the tone of the writing was not at all as urgent as the tone so often employed by The Voice [Owen's pen-name for the Gravesend Academy paper]; rather, the certainty and authority that I heard reminded me of the plain, less-than-enthusiastic report of a documentary, which is the tone of voice of those undoubting parts of the Bible. (OM, 490)

After this clinical analysis of Owen's voice (John's distant observations seem those of a narrator trying too hard to tell us what he feels), the dream is delivered in Owen's unbelievable reading voice.

I NEVER HEAR THE EXPLOSION. WHAT I HEAR IS THE AFTERMATH OF AN EXPLOSION. THERE IS A RINGING IN MY EARS, AND THOSE HIGH PITCHED POPPING AND TICKING SOUNDS THAT A HOT ENGINE MAKES AFTER YOU SHUT IT OFF; AND PIECES OF THE SKY ARE FALLING, AND BITS OF WHITE - MAYBE PAPER, MAYBE PLASTER - ARE FLOATING DOWN LIKE SNOW. THERE ARE SILVERY SPARKLES IN THE AIR, TOO - MAYBE IT'S SHATTERED GLASS. THERE'S SMOKE, AND THE STINK OF BURNING; THERE'S NO FLAME, BUT EVERYTHING IS SMOULDERING.

WE'RE ALL LYING ON THE FLOOR. I KNOW THE CHILDREN ARE ALRIGHT BECAUSE - ONE BY ONE - THEY PICK THEMSELVES UP OFF THE FLOOR. IT MUST HAVE BEEN A LOUD EXPLOSION BECAUSE SOME OF THE CHILDREN ARE HOLDING THEIR EARS; SOME OF THEIR EARS ARE BLEEDING. THE CHILDREN DON'T SPEAK ENGLISH, BUT THEIR VOICES ARE THE FIRST HUMAN SOUNDS TO FOLLOW THE EXPLOSION. THE YOUNGER ONES ARE CRYING; BUT THE OLDER ONES ARE DOING THEIR BEST TO BE COMFORTING - THEY'RE CHATTERING AWAY, THEY'RE REALLY BABBLING, BUT THIS IS REASSURING.

THE WAY THEY LOOK AT ME, I KNOW TWO THINGS. I KNOW THAT I SAVED THEM - I DON'T KNOW HOW. AND I KNOW THAT THEY'RE AFRAID FOR ME. BUT I DON'T SEE ME - I CAN'T TELL WHAT'S WRONG WITH ME. THE CHILDREN'S FACES TELL ME SOMETHING IS WRONG.

SUDDENLY, THE NUNS ARE THERE; PENGUINS ARE PEERING DOWN AT ME - ONE OF THEM BENDS OVER ME. I CAN'T HEAR WHAT I SAY TO HER, BUT SHE APPEARS TO UNDERSTAND ME - MAYBE SHE

SPEAKS ENGLISH. IT'S NOT UNTIL SHE TAKES ME IN HER ARMS THAT I SEE ALL THE BLOOD - HER WIMPLE IS BLOOD-STAINED. WHILE I'M LOOKING AT THE NUN, HER WIMPLE CONTINUES TO BE SPLASHED WITH BLOOD - THE BLOOD SPATTERS HER FACE, TOO, BUT SHE'S NOT AFRAID. THE FACES OF THE CHILDREN - LOOKING DOWN AT ME - ARE FULL OF FEAR; BUT THE NUN WHO HOLDS ME IN HER ARMS IS VERY PEACEFUL.

OF COURSE IT'S MY BLOOD - SHE'S COVERED WITH MY BLOOD - BUT SHE'S VERY CALM. WHEN I SEE SHE'S ABOUT TO MAKE THE SIGN OF THE CROSS OVER ME, I REACH OUT TO TRY TO STOP HER. BUT I CAN'T STOP HER - IT'S AS IF I DON'T HAVE ANY ARMS. THE NUN JUST SMILES AT ME. AFTER SHE'S MADE THE SIGN OF THE CROSS OVER ME, I LEAVE ALL OF THEM - I JUST LEAVE. THEY ARE STILL EXACTLY WHERE THEY WERE, LOOKING DOWN AT ME; BUT I'M NOT REALLY THERE. *I'M* LOOKING DOWN AT ME, TOO. I LOOK LIKE I DID WHEN I WAS THE BABY JESUS - YOU REMEMBER THOSE STUPID SWADDLING CLOTHES? THAT'S HOW I LOOK WHEN I LEAVE ME.

BUT NOW ALL THE PEOPLE ARE GROWING SMALLER - NOT JUST ME, BUT THE NUNS AND THE CHILDREN, TOO. I'M QUITE FAR ABOVE THEM, BUT THEY NEVER LOOK UP; THEY KEEP LOOKING DOWN AT WHAT *USED* TO BE ME. AND SOON I'M ABOVE EVERYTHING; THE PALM TREES ARE VERY STRAIGHT AND TALL, BUT SOON I'M HIGH ABOVE THE PALM TREES, TOO. THE SKY AND THE PALM TREES ARE SO BEAUTIFUL, BUT IT'S VERY HOT - THE AIR IS HOTTER THAN ANY PLACE I'VE EVER BEEN. I KNOW I'M NOT IN NEW HAMPSHIRE. (OM, 491-492)

From the space of the dream, Owen moves into the fulfilment of his personal prophecy. Yet even as he is flying to Phoenix to meet John, there is a profound wrestling match going on between his belief in the prophecy and his doubts about its interpretation.

All the way from San Francisco to Phoenix, Owen was writing in his diary; he wrote pages and pages - he knew he didn't have much time.

"THERE'S SO MUCH I KNOW," he wrote, "BUT I DON'T KNOW EVERYTHING. ONLY GOD KNOWS EVERYTHING. THERE ISN'T TIME FOR ME TO GET TO VIETNAM. I THOUGHT I KNEW I WAS GOING THERE. I THOUGHT I KNEW THE DATE, TOO. BUT IF I'M RIGHT ABOUT THE DATE, THEN I'M WRONG ABOUT IT HAPPENING IN VIETNAM. AND IF I'M RIGHT ABOUT VIETNAM, THEN I'M WRONG ABOUT THE DATE. IT'S POSSIBLE THAT IT REALLY IS 'JUST A DREAM' - BUT IT SEEMS SO *REAL*! THE *DATE* LOOKED THE MOST REAL, BUT I DON'T KNOW - I DON'T KNOW ANYMORE.

"I'M NOT AFRAID, BUT I'M VERY NERVOUS. AT FIRST, I DIDN'T LIKE KNOWING - NOW I DON'T LIKE *NOT* KNOWING! GOD IS TESTING ME," wrote Owen Meany. (OM, 604)

On the day of his death, as the dream is unfolding, Owen is confused. The dream has kept

him going ever since the baseball shot killed his best friend's mother. Now he is confronted by the moment of revelation and certain pieces of the jig-saw dream puzzle are not fitting together. In his dream there are Vietnamese children whom he saves, John is there, and the shot they have practised for years is vitally important. Owen is a man with a mission, and too many unanswered questions. Suddenly, in the space of thirty minutes, every last piece of the prophecy falls into place. Owen's last diary entry is joyously expectant, like a child waking up on Christmas morning.

TODAY'S THE DAY! "...HE THAT BELIEVETH IN ME, THOUGH HE
WERE DEAD, YET SHALL HE LIVE, AND WHOSOEVER LIVETH AND
BELIEVETH IN ME SHALL NEVER DIE."

It was Monday, July 8, 1968 - the date he had seen on Scrooge's grave.
(OM, 626)

Owen and John are waiting for John's plane home to Boston, which is due to take off in half an hour, and "Owen [is] grinning from ear to ear. 'THIS MAY BE THE HAPPIEST DAY OF MY LIFE!' he said. 'MAYBE NOTHING'S GOING TO HAPPEN!'" (OM, 628). This is the anti-climax, the still eye at the centre of the hurricane, the moment of prayer for Owen Meany when everyone breathes a sigh of relief. Then Owen gasps and says, "HERE THEY ARE!" and he and John watch as a group of Vietnamese orphans, refugee children from the war, are led off the plane which has just landed to a group of nuns from the Catholic Relief Service. Inside the airport one of the nuns asks Owen if he will go with the boys to a nearby men's room. Of course Owen says yes - this is the moment he has been anticipating for years.

Owen has been on military business in Phoenix, delivering the dead body of an American serviceman killed in Vietnam. The dead man's younger brother, Dick Jarvits, is psychologically "on the edge", obsessed with the stories he has heard about the war and the prospect of killing Vietcong when his tour of duty starts. As Owen leads the group of children, Dick is watching and waiting.

There is only a "Men's Temporary Facilities" in the airport, a basement room, with one small window ten feet high. While John helps the children use the toilet, Owen, expecting something to happen, is guarding the door. As if in slow motion, the real-life dream begins.

“STAND BESIDE ME,” [Owen] said. I was moving toward him when the door was kicked wide open and Dick Jarvits stood there, nearly as tall and thin as the tall, thin room; he held a Chicom grenade - carefully - in both hands.

“HELLO DICK,” said Owen Meany.

“You little *twit!*” Dick said. One of the children screamed; I suppose they’d all seen men in jungle fatigues before - I think that the little boy who screamed had seen a Chicom grenade before, too. Two or three of the children began to cry.

“DOONG SA,” Owen Meany told them. “DON’T BE AFRAID,” Owen told the children. “DOONG SA, DOONG SA,” he said. It was not only because he spoke their language; it was his *voice* that compelled the children to listen to him - it was a voice like *their* voices . . . “NOW I KNOW WHY MY VOICE NEVER CHANGES,” Owen said to me. “DO YOU SEE WHY?” he asked me . . .

“WE’LL HAVE JUST FOUR SECONDS,” Owen told me calmly. “YOU’LL NEVER GET TO VIETNAM, DICK,” Owen told the terrible, tall boy - who ripped the fuse cord and tossed the bottle-shaped grenade, end over end, right to me.

“Think fast - Mister Fuckin’ *Intelligence* Man!” Dick said.

I caught the grenade, although it wasn’t as easy to handle as the [basketball] - I was lucky. I looked at Owen, who was already moving toward me.

“READY?” he said; I passed him the Chicom grenade and opened my arms to catch him. He jumped so lightly into my hands; I lifted him up - as easily as I had always lifted him.

After all: I had been practising lifting up Owen Meany - forever.
(OM, 631-632)

In this short space of text, suddenly all the other text in the novel makes sense. In the narrative, what actually happened in Owen’s dream is revealed in these very last pages. John Wheelwright and John Irving take an entire novel to explain their version of the textual reality. We have been waiting for this revelation for over 600 pages. Finally it is here.

When Owen Meany said “READY?” I figured we had about two seconds left to live. But he soared far above my arms - when I lifted him, he soared even higher than usual; he wasn’t taking any chances. He went straight up, never turning to face me, and instead of merely dropping the grenade and leaving it on the window ledge, he caught hold of the ledge with both hands, pinning the grenade against the ledge and trapping it there safely with his hands and forearms. He wanted to be sure that the grenade couldn’t roll off the ledge and fall back in the room. He could just manage to wriggle his head - his whole head, thank God - below the window ledge. He clung there for less than a second . . . then the grenade detonated (OM, 633)

In the explosion, Owen loses both his arms, but is injured nowhere else. Like the stuffed armadillo without paws, and John’s amputated trigger finger, like the dressmaking dummy without arms, and the headless, armless statue of Mary Magdalene - Owen’s arms are symbolically removed - by an external agent. All the other arms or parts of arms are removed

by Owen - but here, his arms are removed by God, if God is the external agent at work. There on the floor, surrounded by a nun, his best friend, and the children he has saved - Owen bleeds to death, but dies in peace: “. . . he left us; he was gone. I could tell by his almost cheerful expression that he was at least as high as the palm trees” (OM, 635).

Owen Meany dies a hero, awarded the Soldier's Medal rating above the Bronze Star but below the Legion of Merit: “For heroism that involves the voluntary risk of life under conditions other than those of conflict with an opposing armed force” (OM, 636). However through his death, Owen also becomes a miracle - the meaning of his life is transcended, and through this miracle John believes he discovers God. In dying Owen fulfils his destiny, he makes contact with a significant other/Other, himself in that dream, and presumably God who has organised the details of his death with the meticulous precision of an author, of the creator he must be if he is God.

To return to the beginning, the three quotations take on a new meaning. Paul's instruction to the Philippians, becomes John's prayer for Owen. Buechner's proof of God's existence, a divine revelation which leaves no room for doubt, becomes John's reason for belief; and in Bloy's analysis, Owen escapes the fate of becoming a Christian pig, by being a hero. The words used to make sense of the retarded pig-farmer ring in Piggy Sneed are prophetic: Every story needs a Piggy Sneed, a character a writer can set alight. Perhaps the goal of every story is to try and save Piggy Sneed from the flames of the imagination. In A Prayer for Owen Meany Owen escapes those flames, and escapes Leon Bloy's flames - Owen lays down his life selflessly - and becomes (although problematically conceived) a natural born hero.

The intention behind this analysis is specifically not to seem to be offering itself merely as conventional apologetic/evangelical “witness” or literary “missionary evangelism”. The *fictional* form of this novel's plot (which carefully reveals that no miracle has “really” happened) is revealed through moments such as John's staging of his mother's ghost to bring about Merrill's conversion. What this “means” for the Irving project is that any “witness” to miraculous events has no objective validity. This is a positive conclusion, not a failing, if we recognise that everywhere our lives are held unresolved between incompatible fictions by

their very nature. The real “miracle” here is the nature of the Imagination which opens the doorway to meaningful possibilities, making the postmodern person’s divided condition a *hopeful* state of being, and not simply a despairing place after all.

/owen.ends

Endnotes to Chapter Two.

1. In a comparison of “Modernist Rubrics” and “Postmodernist Notes”, Ihab Hassan writes the following under the section “Dehumanization”: “At the same time, Irony becomes radical, self-consuming play, entropy of meaning. Also comedy of the absurd, black humor, insane parody and slapstick, Camp. Negation.” (Hassan 1975, 39-59)

2. Jean-Paul Sartre isolates this central concern of existentialism, the perpetual wrestling with anguish:

Man is nothing else but what he makes of himself. Such is the first principle of existentialism. It is also what is called subjectivity, the name we are labelled with when charges are brought against us So, in the bright realm of values, we have no excuse behind us, nor justification before us. We are alone, with no excuses.

That is the idea I shall try to convey when I say that man is condemned to be free. Condemned, because he did not create himself, yet, in other respects is free; because, once thrown into the world, he is responsible for everything he does (Sartre 1985, 15-24; 46-51).

3. Attributed to Tertullian, author of De Carne Christi part ii, chapter 5. Tertullian’s “rule of faith” is sometimes delivered in the alternate form *Credo quia impossibile est* (I believe because it is impossible).

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Chapter Three: Meaningful possibilities in Jeanette Winterson's Gut Symmetries and Art Objects.

Jeanette Winterson begins early in the text of Gut Symmetries (hereafter GS) with the knowledge that her writing will ask unsettling questions. She throws us a hook and reels in the beginnings of an answer: "What is it that you contain?" (GS, 2). As her text opens, a theory of Correspondences is awakened, and Winterson suggests through the voice of Paracelsus, " 'As above, so below.' The zodiac in the sky is imprinted in the body. 'The galaxa [sic] goes through the belly' " (GS, 2). From the start Winterson wants to provoke a response to matters which at the very least awaken questions about the problematic nature of spiritual inquiry in postmodern literature.

Drawing on the experiences of the character Jeanette in Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit and John Irving's Owen in A Prayer for Owen Meany, one can see that the links between a writer's theological views - the presuppositions which form the skeleton of her understanding of the world - and the views she presents through her creative expression are fundamentally interconnected. As you attempt to plot the geography of the microcosm you call your self, you realise that the macrocosm - the world and worlds outside this self - are intimately connected. The notion of "self" in Winterson's writing is a provisional, deconstructible concept; thus in Gut Symmetries she uses the terminology of particle/quantum physics to suggest that in the context of a post-Einsteinian world, an infinitely randomly constituted self is the only self possible.

The title of her text is explicitly playful. Symmetries are technical conditions very important in particle physics, the Yang-Mills investigation of weak force symmetries, for example. "Gut" ironically alludes to GUTs (Grand Unifying Theories), of which several have been advanced in recent decades, but none so far sustained. It is obvious Winterson intends to find analogies (or anti-analogies) in the personal realm.

Through engaging with science and particularly "research" physics¹ Winterson seems to be venturing into a realm which many writers have been afraid of. The perceived gap between

science and the arts has often created tension, dislike, and guarded animosity, not least of all because of the difference between the models of thinking which each discipline advocates. A mind trained in each respective discipline relies on a specific model of reasoning; each is trained to analyse information within the world in a specific way.

Winterson brings these two worlds together by merging the lives of Alice, a physicist who lectures on “Paracelsus and the new physics” (GS, 15); Jove, her lover, a New York Italian who is “working on a new model of the cosmos, dimensionality of hyperspace, ghost universes symmetrical with ours” (GS, 15); and Jove’s Jewish wife Stella, who also becomes Alice’s lover. This triangle of love and sexuality generates and gathers together the particles of Winterson’s narrative - her questions on life and love, the universe and traces of universal truth. In negotiating love and physics simultaneously, Winterson suggests a means of tackling the question of selfhood.

The place to begin the search for an identifiable self begins to be answered through Winterson’s frequent use of questions:

What is it that you contain?

The Dead. Time. Light patterns of millennia. The expanding universe opening in your gut. Are your twenty-three feet of intestines loaded with stars?

The Miracle of the One that the alchemists sought is not so very far from the infant theory of hyperspace, where all the seeming dislocations and separations of the atomic and sub-atomic worlds are unified into a co-operating whole. (GS, 2)

As Winterson shows us in what ways art can “open us to the dimensions of the spirit and of the self that normally lie smothered under the weight of living” (GS, 135-137) she engages a postmodern sensibility in presenting us with many characters’ thoughts at once. Inserted into the dialogues, which her chapters become, are the multiple voices of interconnected characters through the use of conversational pieces, and textual sound-bites. Instead of being confronted with what any one character is saying or feeling at a particular moment, we are presented with at least two speakers fighting for textual power over each other.

Consider Winterson’s conversations as textual sites where characters are moulded together in the confines of her word matrix. Gut Symmetries consists of twenty-two separate conversations, in the form of dramatic dialogues which present the concerns at each stage of

the unfolding narrative. In the textual analysis which follows, a phrase from the text close to each dialogue has been extracted to contextualise each conversation, seeing each dialogue as a textual interface between writer, character, and reader.

The novel's narrative time progresses with the emotional swings of Winterson's characters, from the moment we first encounter Alice's stream of consciousness on board the ocean liner where her affair with Jove begins - through to Alice's concluding thoughts as she walks through New York contemplating the nature of time. A number of key dialogues demonstrate how these textual relationships are developed through the novel.

The first key dialogue occurs between Jove and Alice (GS, 13-15).

It began on a boat.

The QE2, Southampton to New York and on to Los Angeles via the Panama Canal....

I said in my lecture this morning that the dining rooms of the QE2 were proof positive of a fourth spatial dimension; there can be no ordinary human explanation for the daily loss of so much matter....

Inevitably it is not only the gastric juices that are stimulated by luxury and fresh air. What could be nicer than pre-prandial fellatio in a foreign tongue?

The Exotic, the Other, the orient of interest that floats at sea. Where else could one have access to a Thai chambermaid, a bored Countess, a fading rock star and a briny boy, all for the effort of a stroll on deck?

Here is a Faustian world of self-gratification. Set outside of time, it looks real, it tastes real, inevitably it vanishes. If that brings bitterness it also removes responsibility. Outside of time there is no responsibility.

HE (Jove): Are you married?

ME (Alice): No.

ME: Are you married?

HE: Yes.

There was a long pause.

HE: My wife and I live on different planets.

ME: Are you separated?

HE: We have our own bathrooms . . .

The world of physics has few places more prestigious than the Institute for Advanced Studies, Princeton, New Jersey. This man, Jove, was based there, working on a new model of the cosmos, dimensionality of hyperspace, ghost universes

symmetrical with ours. He was the future.
 I said "You are the future."
 He said "Does time wear a watch?"

From the start Winterson offers conversation in two dimensions. She allows us access to the narrating mind, in this case Alice's, but also gives us access to the conversation between essential characters at this point in the narrative. The textuality of the narrative situation is foregrounded. Conversations are trapped on the page, ensnared within the fine mesh of text. This dialogue is teased into existence through Winterson's clues. The narrator indulges in textual foreplay, even to that deliciously loaded question, "What could be nicer than pre-prandial fellatio in a foreign tongue?" The answer for Alice might well be "pre-prandial cunnilingus" but at this stage of the story we are unaware that Alice will, before the end of this chapter, become Jove's wife's lover too.

Winterson creates a narrative play-ground within the novel, documenting thoughts from a nostalgic perspective, out of time, with no responsibility. Then suddenly we are back in time, back to the immediacy of the conversation as it happened. The textual jokes, and the linguistic flirtation are suddenly thrown aside and we realise that an infidelity is about to occur. Winterson drops us there in the space between Alice and Jove, in the path of the message passing from mouth to ear and back. The text on the page before us becomes the actual message, the very air across which the sound waves are travelling, converted from sound to text. Jove rationalises this affair by saying he and his wife live on different planets but when we learn that Jove is studying "a new model of the cosmos, dimensionality of hyperspace, ghost universes symmetrical with ours" then his amusing answer kicks into another level. In terms of text, Jove and his wife live on different planets - they speak from different planets, different pages and chapters in the interconnected systems of Winterson's textual universe.

Alice opens her lectures with Paracelsus and the new physics. Jove lectures on Time Travel. Together they meet on the Cunard Line's QE2 spring cruise which has the theme "The World and Other Places" (GS, 15). It is also within the cruising parameters of Winterson's text that we meet her characters. Gut Symmetries could also be called "The Text and Other Places". In

the terminology of the World Wide Web, Winterson's novel becomes a home-page and as we double-click on the hypertext of each new character we are linked to other pages, other systems of thought.

The second key dialogue occurs between Jove and Alice (GS, 18-19).

"Ice?" Jove handed me my drink . . .

ME (Alice): What will you do with your old age?

HE (Jove): What I have done with my youth and middle age.

ME: Your work?

HE: *Purch  porti la gonnella, Voi sapete quel che fa.* (He sang.)

ME: If she wears...? *La gonnella?*

HE: A petticoat.

ME: You know what he does.

HE: *Don Giovanni.* I'll take you to the Met. I'll take you everywhere.

That's how it was/is. The story falters. The firm surface gives way. Nine months ago I was on this boat sailing towards my future. Nine months later and I am balanced on it as precariously as if it were a raft. On this raft I am trying to untangle my past. My past/our past. Jove had a wife. I was in love with them both.

At this point in the narrative we know that Alice is in love with two people, at the heart of a triangular affair. This however is no simple *m nage   trois* because this affair lives in the house of this text. Even the sex, strictly speaking, is textual, and the orgasms breath-taking moments of textasy. Here, Alice asks Jove what will happen at the end of the text called life, and hints at her own fears of a sinking ship syndrome. Jove is unperturbed. He lectures on immortality after all and simply brushes off Alice's angst-filled concerns by saying that old age will follow the patterns of youth and middle age. Perhaps he hints at chaos theory, because both Winterson and Alice know that love is as subject to chaos theory as the mind-boggling complexity of the inner universes of fractal sets. Jove has no way of knowing that old age will follow time-honoured traditions. As any student of physics or history could tell him, only the past is certain - the foot-prints of time lie behind us. What is continually uncertain (but sometimes predictable) is where we will next place our feet. Jean Baudrillard ends his reflections on the "Hysteresis of the millennium" (Baudrillard 1994, 122-123) with this thought:

In this way, we enter beyond history, upon pure fiction, upon the illusion of the world. The illusion of our history opens on to *the greatly more radical illusion of the world*. Now we have closed the eyelids of the Revolution, closed our eyes on the Revolution, now we have broken down the Wall of Shame, now that the lips of protest are closed (with the sugar of history which melts on the tongue), now Europe - and memories - are no longer haunted by the spectre of communism, nor even by that of power, now the aristocratic illusion of the origin of the end are increasingly receding, we no longer have the choice of advancing, of persevering in the present destruction, or of retreating - but only of facing up to this radical illusion.

For Baudrillard, and I suggest in Winterson's texts too, it is this illusion of reality - the postmodern presentations of pure fiction - which allow us a chance to re-negotiate history. As we realise in retrospect, as we laugh with joy, or recoil in shock, horror and dismay, we have the choice to re-present history, to examine its events, its narrative in the present moment of vision and to empty its contents into the next illusion, that of the world we daily construct around us. Winterson seems to respond with her own textual reassurances, consoling us with smooth phrases, even as Alice longs to be consoled by each of her dual lovers.

Walk with me . . .

The story of my day, the story of my life, the story of how we met, of what happened before we met. And every story I begin to tell talks across a story I cannot tell. And if I were not telling this story to you but to someone else would it be the same story? . . .

The probability of separate worlds meeting is very small. The lure of it is immense. We send starships. We fall in love. (GS, 24-25).

And that, Winterson seems to be saying, is that.

The third key dialogue occurs between Stella and Jove (GS, 29; 31; 32-34).

My husband has started an affair. *Cherchez la femme*. Where is she? . . .

Where was she? . . . Her dust, her molecules, the air was fat with her, the droppings and gatherings of a living body.

Purge the place, purge it.

I opened the windows of his study and conducted an experiment in gravity. If I drop a cd player and a lap top out of the same window at the same time which one will hit the ground first?

Blood and tears and crumbled words and words not fit for human use. Without love what does humaneness mean?

YOU (Jove): Of course I love you.
 ME (Stella): And someone else.
 YOU: Sex . . .
 ME: You talk as if it were an incurable disease.
 ME: I am the one who is suffering.
 YOU: My feelings for you have never changed.
 ME: How can you keep alive what is caught in its own death?
 YOU: Words, words.
 ME: Would you prefer I spoke in numbers? How many times have you slept with her? How many months have you been seeing her? How old is she? What are her measurements? Does she reach orgasm quickly?
 YOU: Stop it.
 ME: Or not at all?
 YOU: Calm down.
 ME: Wife as walking Valium.
 YOU: Look at this place . . .
 ME: All my own work.
 YOU: So I see.
 ME: But you don't understand.
 YOU: Men and women are different.
 ME: You think I don't desire other men?
 YOU: Who?
 ME: Who, who, for a theoretical physicist you have a solid concrete brain. I desire other men. I don't sleep with them because I love you.
 YOU: You should have been born a Catholic.
 ME: For comfort.
 YOU: For ambition. You might have been the first woman Pope.
 ME: Cruel man.
 YOU: Sorry just a joke.
 ME: My husband the bedroom humorist.
 YOU: Let me go into my study for a while. I have to think.
 ME: Take a chair.

Stella has discovered her husband's affair, and reacts with extreme pain and extreme rage. Winterson speaks directly into the human experience of betrayal, of the way it rips into the heart. In identifying a common gene running through the DNA of her texts, Winterson continually leaves the fingerprints of betrayal. She opens Written on the Body with the haunting question "Why is the measure of love loss?" (9). In the heart of Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit she points a hardened finger at the same space in which she has just spoken of God.

The unknownness of my needs frightens me. I do not know how huge they are, I only know that they are not being met . . .

One thing I can be certain of, I do not want to be betrayed, but that's quite hard to say, casually, at the beginning of a relationship. It's not a word people use very often, which confuses me, because there are different kinds of infidelity, but betrayal is betrayal wherever you find it. By betrayal, I mean promising to be on your side, then being on somebody else's. (Oranges, 165-166)

It is from this hurt Winterson articulates the agony of her characters falling through their experiences of love. Stella loves her husband but the intensity of her feelings at learning of his betrayal are too much for her to bear sanely. She must commit an act of catharsis, ridding her intimate space of any possibility of contamination by the malevolent Other, who will become her lover.

The fourth key dialogue occurs between Jove and Stella (GS, 34-35).

Is it crazy to act crazy in a crazy situation?

YOU (Jove): What have you done?

ME (Alice): I have thrown all of your things out of the window.

YOU: Why?

ME: To make me feel better.

YOU: You could have killed someone.

ME: I could have killed you.

YOU: This isn't making sense.

ME: There is no sense to what you have done. You didn't think about me when you were touching her. You threw me out of the window.

YOU: You jumped.

ME: What?

YOU: You have lived in your own world for years.

ME: You mean I haven't lived entirely in your's.

YOU: I don't expect that, I just expect . . .

ME: A little love and understanding.

YOU: Yes, love and understanding.

ME: Then go and find it.

YOU: I'd better pack a bag.

He went back into the exploded bedroom and returned with half a suitcase.

"What do you expect me to do with this?"

"Put it on your head."

He flung it down and walked back through the doorway. Then he hesitated.

"What happened to the door?"

"It had an affair and left home."

Winterson shows how this fight between Jove and Stella is steeped in the pain of betrayal, and betrayal discovered. It is immediate and "in our face". Winterson's narrated conversation (he said, she said) is fused with the immediacy of dramatic dialogue (ME: and YOU:) which heightens the emotion, the gut reactions, inherent in the scene. Stella learns about Alice because she receives what she believes is a letter from her husband's lover explaining the affair. Much later it emerges that Jove has written the confession letter "from Alice":

Perhaps it was a mistake to write to her [Stella] about Alice. That is, to write as though Alice were writing. To reveal an affair. To shock her. I wanted to bring her to her senses. (GS, 193)

Stella reacts to the letter's revelations with terror and a pain which itself "is as total as a lover" (GS, 36). She cries out "What corner of my insect world does pain not possess? The walls are smeared with it, sticky, slightly sweet" (GS, 36). The direct dialogue between a betrayed wife and her husband exposes the nakedness of two lovers who are no longer together, their intimacy torn apart by the intrusion of an Other. The reported conversation attempts to introduce humour in the joke about the half suit-case and the missing door but we

laugh painfully. We know the anguish Stella must be going through. It seems unusual for Winterson to be so blunt about the pain in a heterosexual love betrayed, yet her focus is intent on the human connection. If you love, regardless of the thrust of your passion, and if your love is betrayed, you will suffer deeply.

Winterson alludes to this technique of hetero-homo-acrobatics in her essay “The semiotics of sex”.

In any discussion of art and the artist, heterosexuality is backgrounded, whilst homosexuality is foregrounded. What you fuck is much more important than how you write. This may be because reading takes more effort than sex. It may be because the word “sex” is more exciting than the word “book”. Or is it? Surely that depends on what kind of sex and what kind of book? I can only assume that straight sex is so dull that even a book makes better reportage. No-one asks Iris Murdoch about her sex life. Every interviewer I meet asks me about mine and what they do not ask they invent. I am a writer who happens to love women. I am not a lesbian who happens to write.

What is it about? Prurience? Stupidity? And as Descartes didn’t say, “I fuck therefore I am”? (AO, 103-104)

Perhaps the point being made by reading these two pieces of textual commentary in parallel is how one can see that Winterson’s concerns transcend mere sexuality. She tracks the emotional spaces of sexual and emotional love but continually invokes a space which even gender or queer studies struggle to compartmentalise - that of spiritual longing for connection with an other/Other, and the spiritual death triggered through betrayal by one to whom everything has been sacrificed.

The fifth key dialogue occurs between Alice and Stella (GS, 113-116).

While [Stella] was talking I wondered why Jove wanted me . . .

ME (Alice): I am sorry.

SHE (Stella): This isn’t the first time.

ME: I know that.

SHE: They always do.

ME: I thought I might be the one.

SHE: They always do.

ME: You could leave him.

SHE: To you?

ME: To himself.

SHE: Simple in books.

ME: Not in your books.
 SHE: Words, words, he says.
 ME: Safety in numbers.
 SHE: Even the hairs of your head are numbered...
 ME: What number am I?
 SHE: Five.
 ME: That's lucky.
 SHE: Said to ward off the Evil Eye.
 HE: I thought that was you.
 SHE: Little round glasses?
 ME: Socks and sandals.
 SHE: Fat, beery.
 ME: Out of touch.
 SHE: Give me your hand.
 ME: What?
 SHE: I'll read it for you.
 ME: What do you see?
 SHE: Beauty and fear.
 ME: You aren't looking.
 SHE: I used to say that to Papa.
 ME: What did he say?
 SHE: What you see is not what you think you see.
 ME: Sound science.
 SHE: Doesn't that depend on the scientist?
 ME: I wouldn't depend on the scientist...
 SHE: If I were you?
 ME: It isn't a warning.
 SHE: A threat?
 ME: Do I look like a threat?
 SHE: You look exactly like the previous four threats.
 ME: What are you going to do?
 SHE: What would you like me to do?

Alice and Stella are having a show-down. For the first time, Stella can confront the woman who is sleeping with the man she loves (her husband), and Alice can confront the woman who is sleeping with the man she loves. Stella, as the betrayed wife, has to face the fourth woman to betray her in this way. Alice has to face the guilt as Stella's betrayer and confesses, "I had come out dressed to kill and I was the one being murdered. My self-esteem is a jigsaw I cannot complete" (GS, 113). Winterson plays the textbook ludic move as she foregrounds the textuality of this loaded situation and her characters debate their own fictionality. Stella tells Alice that leaving a man is "simple in books" and Alice retorts "not in your books" (114). The joke is on us, for we know that Alice and Stella are caught in a text, and still their

experience of love is no easier than in the world outside the text, our world.

The sixth and seventh key dialogues occur between Alice and Stella (GS, 116-117).

She was still holding my hand and what I did was outside of anything I had imagined I would do.

I leaned across the narrow table and kissed her.

SHE (Stella): Women as well?

ME (Alice): No.

Cowardice bedshares with arrogance. I was afraid and wanted to bluff my way out. The kiss was a smoke-bomb to cause confusion and distract attention. I thought she might slap me. I thought she would rush away. In fact she did nothing... I would have been glad to climb into the plate and cover myself in clam sauce.

ME: I'm working on antiquarks.

SHE:

ME: They are the antiparticles corresponding to the quarks.

SHE:

ME: They haven't been discovered yet.

SHE:

ME: That makes them quite difficult to work on.

SHE:

(Say something please say something.)

*

ME: Did you know I was born on a tug-boat in the River Mersey?

SHE:

ME: My father wanted to call me Mersey but my mother wouldn't let him. My real name is Alluvia. I shortened it to Alice.

SHE: Alluvia?

ME: That which is deposited by the river.

SHE: Shall I call you Moses?

ME: If I grow a beard.

SHE: Jove calls you Rivelletto.

ME: Little River?

SHE: I call him a Mamzer.

ME: Mamzer?

SHE: Yiddish. Look it up under Bastard.

ME: I know.

SHE: Come on.

I did not mean my words to poison you.

Alice realises in this space that an unspoken line has been crossed. Winterson exploits the emotively charged tension of this space across the table as one woman kisses another. Two enemies kiss, and suddenly an already complex situation is thrown into an abyss of new, unexplored complexity. Stella's silence is inserted right here in the text as her dramatic line cues indicate nothing, an empty space (SHE:

) and we know the angst which rushes in to fill that white space. Alice voices her acute anxiety.

When Stella kissed me I remember thinking, "This is not allowed." . . . I knew that if anyone saw us, the totality of our lives; history, complexity, nationality, intelligence, age, achievement, status would be shrunk up to the assumption of our kiss. Whoever saw us would say, "There's a couple of . . .", and this kiss, tentative, ambivalent, would become a lock and key.

I had seen it happen to others. I did not want it to happen to me. . . .

So complicated. My first serious emotion was for a married man. My first experience of authentic desire was with a married woman. (GS, 118)

The complexity of a triangular love is - as Winterson seems to suggest by her constant textual-sexual jokes - as complicated as the relationship between Winterson the writer, Gut Symmetries the text, and myself as reader. This is an instance where the limits of fiction are pushed to their boundaries; how can this three-way relationship be resolved? Winterson might appreciate the joke that now another problematic relationship exists. The affair has grown into a group situation, a textual orgy. I am now the writer, this is my text, and you are the problematic reader. Our reading triangle is intimately linked with Winterson's, the hypertextual link has been created. Winterson's comments on Alice's move into deeper water is linked to our own as we move deeper into the relationship with her bi-textuality.

Deeper now where the water is not clear. What patterns do the numbers make? One plus one is not necessarily two. I do the sum and the answer is an incipient third. Three pairs of two: Jove and Stella, Jove and Alice, Alice and Stella, and under the surface of each the head of the other. (GS, 119-120)

Moulded into this textual space are Winterson's reflections on time and the physical laws she attempts to discover at the heart of our existential concerns.

I want to feel but with feeling comes pain. I could advise myself to keep out of complications and I won't pretend that I have had no choice in any of this. I have noticed that choices seem to be made in advance of what is chosen. The time gap in between the determining will and the determined event is a handy excuse to deny causality. In space-time there is always a lag between prediction and response (synchronicity is a higher dimension phenomenon where the rules of space-time do not apply), sometimes of seconds, sometimes of years, but we programme events far more than we like to think. I do not say this is conscious, usually it is not, and there lies the difficulty. I have seen my father pushing the world, he is quite unaware of

what was pushing him. He did not believe in the unconscious, except as a soup of fantasy and half-memories that entertained his sleep. To suggest, as I did, that the mind is a self-regulating system, where consciousness and unconsciousness work as load-balancing pulleys, roused anger enough to make me think I had touched something relevant. I continued my reading: Paracelsus, Jung, Einstein, Freud, Capra, and although I still know nothing, I am no longer a disciple of Fate. (GS, 120)

Winterson may be writing in the 90's but her concerns are as timeless as any human endeavour to understand selfhood in a world of others/Others, and existential in a way which both Nietzsche and Sartre would have understood. Her view that the conscious and unconscious states of our lives operate on the hinge of the mind's self-regulating system leads one to ask what the nature of such a system would be. To be thrown into love, tossed about in its crazy arms, is to dabble in deep water, to push beyond the shallows of loneliness and self-autonomy into the stretches of still water running deep with the risk of trusting an other/Other with the most precious aspects of our selves. To make your self vulnerable, by opening up the areas of your inner life which you regard as being most valuable, is to trust the other/Other with material you consider priceless. Thrown into the complexity of three-way love Winterson's characters try to comprehend the intricacies of loving and being loved, of betraying and being betrayed, and beyond all this of trying to love and not betray the innermost self, the self of selves within each of us.

The eighth key dialogue occurs between Jove and Alice (GS, 128).

Am I rehearsing my arguments? Yes. My accuser is approaching.

HE: You went to bed with my wife?

ME: With Stella, yes.

HE: What did you think you were playing at?

ME: I didn't think we were playing chess.

HE: I don't believe it.

ME: It was sex not a miracle. (It was a miracle.)

HE: How could you?

ME: I didn't plan it.

Jove walked towards me, he walked away from me, he circled me as a shark does a pool of blood. Then he rang up Stella and shouted down the phone in Italian, for two hours sixteen minutes without a pause. For the following three months he behaved like a character amalgam of Bluebeard and Coco the Clown. (GS, 128)

Jove, Stella, and Alice are caught in a revolving, incongruous triangle which Winterson

seems to be using to extract the honesty from the gloss and superflux of sexual/love relationships. Alice is the hinge on which the passion in Jove and Stella is continually turning. She describes both of her lovers as performing their displays in a competition to possess her, “Emotionally balletic by nature, both were practising their lutz; in figure skating, a jump, with rotation, from the back outer edge of one skate to the back outer edge of the other. Their ice rink was my heart” (GS, 128-129). She sums up her growing sense of the ominous with the comment, “Utterly unnerved, I could not stop myself asking. . . ‘Would anyone like a cup of coffee?’ I must stop saying that. World War Three is about to begin and I will be pushing the hostess trolley” (GS, 129).

Winterson places Alice at the heart of anguish - a lover caught in the dilemma of a tragedy worthy of ancient Greek drama. If tragedy entails an essentially good character who falls short of the perfect mark, then Alice is caught in her having to choose between two lovers. If part of an existential concern is the angst involved in kicking oneself out of isolated individual freedom through a transcendent experience into self-definition through an encounter with the other/Other, then Alice’s acute sense of losing hold of herself lies in having to make meaning from intimate encounters with two others/Others.

Thrown together with this choice is the feeling of being trapped between two other/Other bodies, hard and soft options, hard and soft realities. Her heart cries out, “Every month I offered up an identical cup of coffee and had lost all trace of whatever definite sexuality I might have had. A man. His wife. The mistress of both of them. If I was tongue-tied, Jove and Stella were the ropes” (GS, 130). Her tragic choice, the one she cannot make without acute anguish or pain, is between serious emotion and authentic desire. Serious emotion pushed her to a place she has never been before - a space where she feels sensations she has never felt before. Yet authentic desire compels her deeper and deeper towards a place where the promise of her deepest longings might be fulfilled.

The ninth key dialogue occurs between Jove, Alice and Stella (GS, 130-131).

THE MOOT. ROUND ONE.

The minutes of the meeting, as taken by me, read as follows:

- 1) Jove insists on the rights of his penis; that is he has fucked Stella and Alice and ought to be allowed to continue to do so.
- 2) Stella says that all marital rights are forfeited by an affair.
- 3) Jove says he is not the only one having an affair.
- 4) Stella disagrees:
 - a) Jove is no longer having an affair. (I nod.)
 - b) She, Stella, is not having an affair. She is exploring the possibilities of an alternative relationship.
(Here there is usually a pause while they use the last of the spring rolls to mop up the prune sauce.)
- 5) Jove says he is not threatened by our relationship. . . .

Stella says, "Why don't you ask Alice how she feels?"

Jove says, "How do you feel, Alice?"

This is the beginning of my terror. It is as though I were back at school and the hairy-nosed-tweed-bodied head-master has said to the class, "Alice will tell us the answer."

After five minutes Jove says, "Why the hell don't you talk?"

Stella says, "Why should she talk to you, you bully?"

The debate rages between a man, his wife, and their mistress. As she is fond of doing, Winterson exploits the humour of the situation to make us laugh, but nervously and painfully. The sexual politics of this scene are prickly and painful. Jove argues for the rights of his penis, the essential phallogocentric argument, whilst Stella appeals to her right to declare bilateral sexual independence, and explore new territory, extend her sexual empire to a new domain. The new territory, Alice, is disputed by both parties. Alice, whom we have been led to think initiated, allowed and actively led both conquests, has become the twice-colonised body. She has lost all but her speaking rights (she remains the undisputed narrative power) but perhaps she has just become Winterson's mouth-piece. Is Winterson saying that in sexual power games, whether one is male or female is an irrespective concern? What matters is that one party must win, and always at the expense of the other/Other.

The tenth key dialogue occurs between Jove, Alice and Stella (GS, 131-132).

THE MOOT: ROUND TWO

Jove stalks the apartment throwing things into a canvas bag. Stella circles him and picks them out again. This is symbolic only. Jove wants her to know that everything is his, she wants him to realise that it all belongs to her. Eventually . . . "We should get a divorce."

One or the other of them uses this gambit at 9 p.m. precisely. The food has

been eaten, the contents of the apartment have been packed and unpacked.

“I’m a reasonable man,” says Jove.

“I have suffered enough,” says Stella. . .

While he performed, I washed up and Stella did the crossword .

One month, Stella looked up from One Across Two Down and said to Jove,
“Before I met you I had a different man every night.”

“Now that I am through with you I could have a different woman every night.”

I stood in the doorless kitchen doorway and looked at them both and it was at
that second that I had a queasy feeling of being nothing but a tie-beam; a beam
connecting the lower ends of rafters to prevent them moving apart.

These moots throw the bare essentials of wounded people together. When the crunch comes in each of these lives, Winterson asks whether this love is strong enough to survive all that life is throwing at it; whether it will grow stronger, better, or bitterly weaker. The picture of a household of disenchanted, embittered, betrayed lovers is one which Winterson paints with all the colour of a “Punch and Judy show of the groin” where “Limbs and noises were pantomimed” with “the seriousness of a travelling porno booth”; and Jove is presented with “the *commedia dell’arte* in his blood” (GS, 132). In this mess of bodies and confused genitalia Alice is realising how she has become Jove and Stella’s middle-ground, the benchmark of their failed love and the end-point of whatever togetherness they tried to create.

The eleventh and final key dialogue in this analysis occurs between Jove and Stella (GS, 133-134).

(Pause here for their monthly word-game. Jove to accuse, Stella to counter in her own defence.)

HE: Braggart.

SHE: Story-teller.

HE: Liar.

SHE: Inventor.

HE: Fantasist.

SHE: Fictioneer.

HE: Madwoman.

SHE: Poet.

HE: Deluded.

SHE: Deluder.

HE: Faker.

SHE: Illusionist.

HE: Printer’s devil.

SHE: Genii.

HE: Schizophrenic.
 SHE: Genius.
 HE: Fork-tongued.
 SHE: Mercuric.
 HE: Gobbledegooker.
 SHE: Runic.
 HE: Legerdemain.
 SHE: Linguistical.
 HE: Falstaff.
 SHE: Prospero.
 HE: Canary.
 SHE: Diva.
 HE: Pot-pourrist.
 SHE: Alchemist.

Jove turned to me: "All this is your fault."

Stella to Jove: "Of course it isn't Alice's fault. It's your fault."

Jove to me: "Don't listen to her, she'll damage you. Whatever she tells you, it isn't true?"

Thrown together, man and wife resort to the tirade of binary insults which feminists have informed the reading intelligentsia for at least three decades now lies at the heart of phallogentric discourse. Winterson continues to amuse with her authorial humour, telling her jokes through the lips of her characters, while their very textuality becomes the explicit medium for her concerns. Thrown into this argument, this monthly word-game, are all the archetypes of male-female dissent. We find men and women who are broadly classified in the terms listed in the following table.

Archetypes of male and female gender attributes.

Qualities of woman	Qualities of man
Braggart. Liar. Fantasist. Madwoman. Deluded. Faker. Printer's devil. Schizophrenic. Fork-tongued. Gobbledegooker. Legerdemain. *Falstaff. Canary. Pot-pourrist.	Story-teller. Inventor. Fictioneer. Poet. Deluder. Illusionist. Genii. Genius. Mercuric. Runic. Linguistical. Prospero. *Diva. Alchemist.

Yet in this list we see a moment of apparently misplaced gender traits. In Jove's mouth a woman becomes *Falstaff*, the fat, jovial Sir John in Shakespeare's "Henry IV". In Stella's list of abuse, man becomes a *Diva*, a great woman singer, a prima donna. As one's eye travels down the list one also sees how each accuses the other of exactly the same bad stain. The moment the genders become confused strange things begin to happen. As Jove transforms Stella into Falstaff, he is accused of being a Prospero, a magus. As Stella transforms Jove into Diva, she is accused right back of being a pot-pourrist. Yet both of them are alchemists, transforming the lead of their own sex into the gold of otherness/Otherness. Winterson, if taken seriously here, seems to be suggesting something entirely subversive, that in the power games of sexuality and textuality, those who wield power are alchemists, agents of transformation. In another sense Jove (his name of course invokes that of the authoritarian male god), is making accusations about Stella which she is then re-interpreting in a more favourable way. The notion of explicitly unveiled male/female binaries runs alongside that of language and perspective.

What Alice discovers through the course of the narrative is that in time outside of the narrative, in the pre-narrative time of Alice and Stella's childhood, Alice's father had an affair with Stella's mother, Uta. What Winterson demonstrates through her text are the connections which lie outside the expected spaces of the stories we tell and construct of

ourselves. Alice attempts to make sense of a story which lies beyond the story. Yet she is a fictional construct too, she is the story she is narrating to us. We encounter a text, for surely that is what Alice is, considering her/its own textuality. What we discover is a text having an existential moment - considering its own state of being-in-the-world.

I am my father's daughter. I look like him. Stella has her mother's eyes. I do not know what this signifies, if anything at all. Perhaps some things take more than a single lifetime to complete. Perhaps I too have begun to imagine more than can be seen with the instruments we as yet possess. (GS, 217-218)

Winterson is clearly building on the spiritual searches begun in her earlier writing. Her search for spiritual truth seems linked to the truth potential inherent within any perceived love relationship. There in the clumsiness of human sexuality, in the grappling with nakedness and orgasms, is a moment which pushes its participants over the existential edge into spiritual experience. Speaking about her central male character Jove, Winterson uses his forays into research physics to speak her mind on grand narratives in our world.

In the 1970's Jove was working on his GUTs: Grand unified theories that sought to unite the strong, weak and electromagnetic quanta in a sympathetic symmetry that would include gravity and overturn the bolt-it-together-somehow methods of The Standard Model.

GUTs had their heart in the right place; they wanted to recognise the true relationship between the three fundamental forces. Now, more than ever, crossing into the twenty-first century, our place in the universe and the place of the universe in us, is proving to be one of active relationship. This is more than a scientist's credo. The separateness of our lives is a sham. Physics, mathematics, music, painting, my politics, my love for you, my work, the star-dust of my body, the spirit that impels it, clocks diurnal, time perpetual, the roll, rough, tender, swamping, liberating, breathing, moving, thinking nature, human nature and the cosmos are patterned together.

Symmetry. Beauty. Perhaps it seems surprising that physicists seek beauty but in fact they have no choice. As yet there has not been an exception to the rule that the demonstrable solution to any problem will turn out to be an aesthetic solution.

"The tougher the problem the more beautiful the solution," said Jove, smiling at me, frowning at my mathematics.

Later, in bed, inside me, "The short and organised equations of physics are as beautiful and surprising as the natural forces they interpret." (GS, 98)

There is clearly a pun on "aesthetic" in the above text, where the "Beauty" (in simplicity and balance) which a mathematical physicist looks for in experimental research is transferred (translated?) into the "fictional", a "solution in the story". What is Winterson suggesting? It seems that the bigger picture of how the world out there holds together in many ways finds its

corresponding self in the lives of individual people as they negotiate the forces of life.

Winterson is asking: What is the nature of that force which holds people together?

One specific mode of weighing up personal value lies in the postmodern approach, with some of its presuppositions based heavily on a type of existential analysis. Here it is examined by D Martin Fields.

As such reality, as it really is, is unknowable. The "thing in itself," cannot be known. The only thing that can be known is our personal experience and our interpretation of that experience. Since each person's experience is all that can be known, it cannot be concluded that man can know anything in any absolute sense. All one has is his own finite, limited experience. Logic, science, history, and ethics are human disciplines that must, and do, reflect human insufficiency and subjectivity.

Another reason the postmodernists draw these conclusions comes from the fact that the existentialists, with their rejection of rationalism and empiricism, focused philosophy on the human experience, especially as it is communicated through language. Language is the way man expresses these experiences of the world, therefore to understand the world, as best we can, we must look to what is said about reality. But subjectivism is all we can have since the best we can do is experience and interpret what others have experienced and interpreted reality to be, and so the spiral continues downward. Thus, for the postmodernists, any assertion of absolute knowledge is seriously questioned and ultimately rejected. Therefore history is seen as a series of metaphors rather than an account of events as they actually happened. After all, the one recording the events was writing and recording the events as he saw them. Someone else may have seen it differently had they been there. In issues of morality no one particular view is seen as foundational. Rather, each culture's, and ultimately each individual's, view on ethics is just as valid as the next. This view is the basis for the assumptions of "Multiculturalism," and the "Political Correctness" movement in today's society. Rather than affirming any one morality as absolute, every person's moral persuasion is to be respected no matter what it is, and language must be revised so as to not favor any one outlook and thus offend another.

(Martin Fields 1995, 5)

It is through language, then, that Winterson is compelled to present her views and analysis of the gut symmetries between events out there in the world at large and events here, inside the self perceiving its existence in the world. Brian McHale² begins his view of the changing dominant between modernist and postmodernist fiction by a move from epistemological to ontological problematics. In an intertextual fashion Dick Higgins gives an analysis of this change.³

The Cognitive Questions (asked by most artists of the 20th Century, Platonic or

Aristotelian, till around 1958):

“How can I interpret this world of which I am part? And what am I in it?”

The Postcognitive Questions (asked by most artists since then):

“Which world is this? What is to be done in it? Which of my selves is to do it?”

(Higgins 1978, 101 and expanded in McHale⁴ 1992b, 33.)

It is this move from modern epistemological thinking to postmodern ontological thinking which Winterson’s writing revels in. Through language she can interrogate the world to find out its “real” identity; consider an appropriate (re)action; and offer any number of textual selves to carry out the deed.

That postmodernism is a product of our times, a means of reading and textualising the world about us, is apparent. In the following interview with Modern Reformation magazine, Thomas Oden says:

Oden: All that I mean by “postmodernity” is the survival of the devastations of modern consciousness. Many of us are still trying to discover our identity; we’re trying to survive. I do not have in mind, primarily, a literary theory. If you ask people in the university what postmodernism is really about, they would either say it’s a political theory, or a literary theory, or a hermeneutical theory, that is, a theory of interpretation. I’m really concerned about the person who is struggling with the suffering that modernity has caused. I believe that modernity has been the source of enormous human suffering.

MR: What would be the specific sources of modern suffering?

Oden: The premises of self-assertiveness, of absolute relativism, reducing sex to orgasm, and reducing political life to the exertion of power. Naturalistic reductionism is what I call it, but it’s the tendency to try to reduce any description to a scientific empirical description. We’ve had enough of that. We’ve got a belly-full of that. Now we’re looking for ways of connecting with wisdoms that emerge, not simply out of modernity, but out of the past - the premodern situation. (Oden 1995, 9)

In an overt intertextual demonstration of her text’s postmodern character, Winterson inserts quotations by physicists on the problematic nature of scientific inquiry - the difficulty in trying to make research objects out of ourselves, and of trying to comment on the closed system of which we are part.

Defect of vision. Do I mean affect of vision?

“Science cannot solve the ultimate mystery of nature because we ourselves are part of nature and therefore part of the mystery we are trying to solve.”
(Max Planck)

“It appears unavoidable that physical reality must be described in terms of continuous functions in space. The material point can hardly be conceived anymore.” (Albert Einstein)

“If we ask whether the position of the electron remains the same we must say no. If we ask whether the electron’s position changes with time, we must say no. If we ask whether the electron is at rest we must say no. If we ask whether it is in motion we must say no.” (Robert Oppenheimer)

Is truth what we do not know? (GS, 82)

This philosophical musing by Winterson occurs in a passage dealing with Stella’s thoughts on her origins, her family’s flight from Vienna just before World War II, and their escape to New York. Stella’s mother is German but her father, a bookseller, is Jewish. Stella is remembering her youth, before she fell in love with Jove, and contemplates the meanings attached to the word “know”. We know that Stella is being cuckolded by Alice, a woman is being betrayed by a woman - but we also know that Stella is in love with Alice who has sexual knowledge of both Jove and Stella. Picking up the text immediately after Winterson’s question above we discover Stella’s ontological search.

Is truth what we do not know?

What we know does not satisfy us. What we know constantly reveals itself as partial. What we know, generation by generation, is discarded into new knowings, which in their turn slowly cease to interest us.

In the Torah, the Hebrew “to know”, often used in a sexual context, is not about facts but about connections. Knowledge, not as accumulation but as charge and discharge. A release of energy from one site to another. Instead of a hoard of certainties, bug-collected, to make me feel secure, I can give up taxonomy and invite myself to the dance: the patterns, rhythms, multiplicities, paradoxes, shifts, currents, cross-currents, irregularities, irrationalities, geniuses, joints, pivots, worked over time, and through time, to find the lines of thought that still transmit.

The facts cut me off. The clean boxes of history, geography, science, art. What is the separateness of things when the current that flows to each is live? It is the livingness I want. Not mummification. Livingness. I suppose that is why I fell in love with Jove. Or to be accurate, why I knew I would fall in love with Jove when I first saw him, on the day that I was born.

Energy precedes matter. (GS, 82-83)

Stella’s heart is crying out, while her voice articulates the search for any deep feeling, for

connection, for intimate knowledge of an other/Other whose existence in relationship with herself brings meaning to her perceiving self's knowledge of the world.

In her articulation of science's acts of exploration Winterson announces:

It is the poet who goes further than any human scientist. The poet who with her dredging net must haul up difficult things and return them to the present. As she does this, the reader will begin to recognise parts of herself so neatly buried that they seem to have been buried from birth. She will be able to hear clearly the voices that have whispered at her for so many years. Some of these voices will prove false, she will perhaps learn to fear her own fears. The attendant personalities that are clinically labelled as schizophrenia, can be brought into a harmonious balance. It is not necessary to be shut up in oneself, to grind through life like an ox at a mill, always treading the same ground. Human beings are capable of powered flight; we can travel across ourselves and find that self multiple and vast. The artist knows this; at the same time that art is prising away old dead structures that have rusted almost unnoticed into our flesh, art is pushing at the boundaries we thought were fixed. The convenient lies fall; the only boundaries are the boundaries of our imagination. (AO, 115-116)

As Winterson writes she seems to interrogate the nature of otherness, intently asking of the texts and the characters within her texts, Who are you? What is your name? How can we connect? How can I understand you more completely? How can I ever know you as you really are? In commenting on the language employed by writers, within texts, Winterson suggests that it is in the interrogation of the Other that we discover the nature of artistic strategy, over and above the strategies of the inductive goal-orientated thinking of rational science.

We are a speculative, subjective, changing people and each new generation considers itself more enlightened than its predecessor; a view that science both encourages and depends on. Literature (all art) takes a different view; human nature, emotional reality is not seen as a progress from darkness to light but as a communication, with ourselves and across time, so that work entirely out of date by scientific standards is as fresh and meaningful to us as it ever was. Whereas science outdates the past art keeps it present. Whereas the language of science tries to eliminate error, chiefly by the use of agreed symbols carrying an agreed value, the language of literature seems to be able to contain error by being greater than it . . .

The choosing of the word is something like the arming of a knight and if it seems ritualistic, obsessive, absurd, then remember that its perils and its obligations are sacred; that is, consecrated, devoted and set-apart. The language of literature is not the language of the everyday. Human beings have made it Other. One of the jobs of the writer now is to go on respecting it as Other. (AO, 166-167)

Pushing this idea of maintaining an awareness of otherness/Otherness as a sacred textual

space, Winterson speaks directly to the creative voices of this reading/writing generation.

If I say that now, writing now, are too many people who have no concept of art as energy, of art as space, I think you will follow me. I think you will realise that if fiction is to have any future in the technological dream/nightmare of the twenty-first century, it needs, more than ever, to remember itself as imaginative, innovative, Other. To do this the writer must reclaim lineage and language. (AO, 178)

What is Winterson's concern with the two textual elements of lineage and language? In terms of lineage, Winterson seems deeply concerned that writers hold on to their sense of past genealogy but press forward too with an inherent sense of destiny, of offering something new, now, as the work is produced and consumed.

What literature can offer, it should be unembarrassed about offering, there is no need for art to strive to be like anything else. In so much as television and film have largely occupied the narrative function of epic poetry, fiction will have to move on, and find new territory of its own . . .

To say that the experimental novel is dead is to say that literature is dead. Literature is experimental. Once the novel was *novel*; if we cannot continue to alter it, to expand its boundaries without dropping it into even greater formlessness than the shape tempts, then we can only museum it. Literature is not a museum it is a living thing.

Modernism has happened and it was the mainstream. It is no use looking for the new George Eliot, and she were to appear, what a ghastly creature she would be. We cannot look for the new Virginia Woolf either. We can only look for writers who know what tradition is, who understand Modernism within that tradition, and who are committed to a fresh development of language and to new forms of writing. (AO, 176-177)

In making sense of the importance of language, Winterson says “[w]hat should distinguish a writer who chooses the printed page rather than the moving screen, is language. What distinguishes one printed page from another, is language. I do not mean meaning.” (AO, 177)

Speaking about the tool-kit required by a writer if she is going to develop her word craft, Winterson appeals to the need for integrity and discipline. As a writer gains a sense of her vocation, her calling to the nurturing of the craft of working with words, she needs to pay heed to the careful maintenance of a unique style.

If a writer needs integrity, she also needs discipline. The gift of a vision and a voice is a more difficult gift than magic beans that grow into magic beanstalks. If a writer is to succeed on her own terms she will have to take the daytime and the night-time to make a chisel of her style.

The chisel must be capable of shaping any material however unlikely. It has to leave runnels of great strength and infinite delicacy. In her own hands, the chisel will come to feel light and assured, as she fines it to take her grip and no other. If someone

borrowing it, it will handle like a clumsy tool or perform like a trick. And yet to her, as she works with it and works upon it, it will become the most precise instrument she knows. There are plenty of tools a writer can beg or borrow, but her chisel she must make for herself, just as Michelangelo did. (AO, 180)

From the beginning of Winterson's Gut Symmetries the text reveals her attempts to make sense of the universe we and her text inhabit. In her prologue to the novel a theory of origins is pursued and Winterson sets up the boundaries of her dialogue. The presuppositions of her thinking are established and working definitions of conceptual ideas we will of necessity encounter in her text are qualified. This is what she elaborates.

This is the theory.

In the beginning was a perfect ten-dimensional universe that cleaved into two. While ours, of three spatial dimensions and the oddity of time, expanded to fit our grossness, hers, of six dimensions wrapped itself away in tiny solitude.

This sister universe, contemplative, concealed, waits in our future as it has refused our past. It may be the symbol behind all our symbols. It may be the mandala of the East and the Grail of the West. The clouded mirror of lost beauty that human beings have stared into since we learned to become conscious of our own face.

Can anyone deny that we are haunted? What is it that crouches under the myths we have made? Always the physical presence of something split off.
(GS, 4)

Winterson presents a dictionary of words which we would otherwise read out of context. She foregrounds the elements of these terms in ways which alert us to her search for meaning, for her seeking the physicality of something split off from our understanding of the world, an entity on a par with a postmodern Platonic form (one needs to believe in paradox to comprehend that) which crouches under the myths we have manufactured or perpetuated over the course of humanity's historiographic narrative. Thus her dictionary begins.

Always the physical presence of something split off.

Paradise: The Eden from which we have been forcibly removed.

The Twins: Missing self, other half, completeness again.

Male and Female: The uniting mystery of one flesh.

The Christ Motif: The Divine infills the human form and makes it whole . . .

We are the beginning. We are before time.

It may be that here in our provisional world of dualities and oppositional pairs: black/white, good/evil, male/female, conscious/unconscious, Heaven/Hell, predatory/prey, we compulsively act out the drama of our beginning, when what was whole, halved, and seeks again its wholeness.

Have pity on this small blue planet searching through time and space. (GS, 4-5)

One begins to get a sense of the searching inherent within Winterson's text, as one grasps the importance of otherness/Otherness in her work. She is saying that when one loves deeply, passionately, the love one offers and longs to receive has no definition without an other/Other returning and receiving that love. We come to understand the quality of the perceiving, experiencing self when we realise that there must be another (an other/Other) self which is being perceived and at times is also being experienced. On a micro level this relationship between self/Self and other/Other offers the mirror image of that macro, universal parallel universe Winterson is exploring, the small blue planet searching through time and space for An other/Other planet, An other/Other universe to make sense of itself.

Both of these entities, the self/Self and the other/Other, move from being apart in the world to finding and/or realising (making real) their individual place in the same world. Hence we see the move from a narrating self/Self and a narrated other/Other, to a point where both are "being-in-the-world." Winterson's dictionary continues as she introduces the text and wraps up her prologue by detailing the anatomy of each term she employs in her narration.

Here follows a story of time, universe, love-affair and New York. The Ship of Fools, a Jew, a diamond, a dream. A working-class boy, a baby, a river, the sub-atomic joke of unstable matter.

TIME: A concept arising from change experienced or observed. A quantity measured by the angle through which the sun turns on its axis. A moment in which things happen.

UNIVERSE: All that is. The Cosmos.

LOVE AFFAIR: *Amour* honourable or dishonourable.

NEW YORK: Manhattan Island. Latitude 40:46N Longitude 73:59W.

SHIP OF FOOLS: A mediaeval conceit. Lunatics/saints sailing after that which cannot be found.

JEW: A person of Hebrew descent or religion. A chosen one. *See* Old Testament.

DIAMOND: Crystallised carbon. The hardest of all minerals. A magic stone.

DREAM: An image of truth.

WORKING-CLASS BOY: Drive disc of Capitalism. Girl or boy. An unexploded dream.

BABY: A beginning. An epiphany. A culet.

RIVER: *See* Einstein, Heraclitus, the Mersey, the Hudson, Time.

MATTER: A witticism. At sub-atomic level, that which has a tendency to exist.

(GS, 6-7)

In examining Winterson's text and asking if it is indeed postmodern, and if its postmodern concerns reveal a spiritual content, it seems her writing is pushing towards the boundaries of what we can know. Perhaps the three characters in this text offer a skeletal structure, the bare essential boundary markers. As Winterson explores and makes meaning out of these textual people, the boundaries are pushed, the bones are fleshed out.

Searching for the gut symmetries of the world as she narrates it, Winterson finds a spiritual connection in an account of Alice's thoughts after her father has died:

Infinite grace. Infinite possibility. The mercy of the universe extended in its own laws. According to quantum theory there are not only second chances, but multiple chances. Space is not simply connected. History is not unalterable. The universe itself is forked. If we knew how to manipulate space-time as space-time manipulates itself the illusion of our single linear lives would collapse. And if our lives here are not the total our death here will not be final. (GS, 160)

Alice explains (GS, 160) that she is playing with these things to free herself from common sense which tells her, not least, that she experiences "the world as flat and [her] father as dead. He may be less dead now than he has been for thirty years." Alice describes herself as an "armchair atheist" (160) who stumbles into God as soon as she gets up and walks. In the aftermath of her father's death, Alice's mind is beginning to take stock of what can be known about the spiritual world. She says (160) that although she does not "know what God is", she still uses the word/term/sign "God" as "a notation of value":

God = highest value. Force and freedom of the thinking universe. The model of the universe as mechanical has no basis in fact. In a quantum universe, heaven and hell are simply parallel possibilities. In our Judeo-Christian myth-world, Eve ate the apple. In a symmetrical myth-world next door, Eve did not. Paradise lost. Paradise unlost. Objections to this are logical but quantum mechanics is not interested in our logic. Every quantum experiment conducted has shown, again and again, with dismaying mischief, that particles can hold positions contradictory and simultaneous. (GS, 160)

In the terminology of quantum physics, Winterson finds a model for re-presenting ways of knowing by investigating the margins of experience. As she notes (161), “Quantum theory states that for every object there is a wave function that measures the probability of finding that object at a certain point in space and time. Until the measurement is made, the object (particle) exists as a sum of all possible states”. Alice continues to explain (161) that “The difficulty here, between the logical common sense world and the complex, maverick universe, is that at a sub-atomic level, matter does not exist, with certainty, in definite places, rather it has a *tendency to exist*”. In a summary of postmodernism’s rejection of former knowledge paradigms, Alice observes that “The hard-hat bull-nose building blocks of matter, manipulated by classical physics, now have to be returned as an infinite web of relationships. What is chosen and why is still unknown” (161).

From the explanations of quantum logic applied to the death of Alice’s father, Winterson flips us back into the emotional vortex of the novel’s triangular love affair. Stella at a further point of the narrative is stranded at sea, in a capsized yacht with her husband Jove. As Stella’s life flashes before her she remembers her father’s death by suicide, after he has learnt that his wife is having an affair. Stella remembers the story as she told it to Alice.

In the morning, when Mama went to the bookstore, she found Papa, neatly bled to death in a galvanised bathtub he kept in his room. He was pale as a plaster icon, his pounded body white with stillness. He had been reading, as his life as we knew it drained away. Mama picked up the book. It was a new collection from a poet he admired: Muriel Rukeyser, *Body of Waking* (1958). She looked at the page. (GS, 169)

As Stella’s mother looks at the page of the book her husband read as he lay dying, and as Stella tells Alice about this book, we see through Stella’s mother’s eyes as she looks at that page and reads the poem. The reading process becomes an active exploration, we become the other/Other.

KING'S MOUNTAIN

In all the cities of this year
I have longed for the other city.

In all the rooms of this year
I have entered one red room.

In all the futures I have walked toward
I have seen a future I can hardly name.

But here the road we drive
Turns upon another country.

I have seen white beginnings,
A slow sea without glaze or speed,
Movement of land, a long lying-down dance.

This is fog-country. Milk. Country of time.

I see your tormented colour, the steep front of your storm
Break dissipated among limitless profiles.

I see the shape of waves in the cross-sea
Advance, a fog-surface over the fog-floor.
Seamounts, slow-flowing. Colour. Plunge-point of air.

In all the meanings of this year
There will be the ferny meaning.
It rises leaning and green, streams through star-lattices;
After the last cliff, wave-eroded silver,
Forgets the limitations of our love,
These drifts and caves dissolve and pillars of these countries
Long-crested dissolve to the future, a new form. (GS, 170)

The poem rests within the vessel of Winterson's text, a text-book example of intertextuality, a look beyond the world of Winterson's writing into the created world of another textual creator, Muriel Rukeyser. We have no idea what intention Rukeyser had in this poem "King's Mountain" but when it is strapped onto, or grafted into Winterson's Gut Symmetries it assumes a new accent, a new set of meaning-making possibilities. The poem becomes Stella's lament for the decay of her parents' love, and a moment of hope and restoration. "King's Mountain" speaks of a deep longing for another existence beyond the confines of the present one. The speaker longs for "the other city", one which is special, set apart from "all

the cities of this year". The speaker looks forward to an experience which is sacred in its uniqueness, one red room set apart from "all the rooms of this year", one future which can hardly be named seen distinct from "all the futures I have walked towards". The speaker moves solemnly, thoughtfully towards one ferny meaning, drawn out of the reservoir of "all the meanings of this year" and that one special meaning is the one which breaks free from the chains of a present sadness and "forgets the limitations of our love". Like a wave and the cliff it breaks against, the speaker's despair can "Long-crested dissolve to the future," become a "new form", a "King's mountain" carved out of the old land.

Set into her text, her narrative time, Winterson creates from Rukeyser's poem another "King's mountain". The textual sea of Winterson's writing creates from the sadness of Stella's story a new form, the lament for the death of love, and a fragment of hope. Stella describes her mother's reaction to finding the poem and her husband's body.

And Mama cried then, hard and sad, her back up against the blood-heavy bath, Papa's hand in hers. This was he, her dark, fire-burned man, and she had loved him, she remembered she had, and the love strong as its memory was in her veins and in his. A part of them that life had separated returned in death. The tormented colour had cleared and the limitations of their love. She remembered she had loved him and that part of herself was redeemed. (GS, 171)

When we probe the inner-space of Winterson's text it is love, and the questions that being in love and being loved ask and leave unanswered, which we discover. Right near the beginning of this textual journey we find a question and its brutally quick retort: "What kills love? Only this: neglect" (GS, 45). The novel attempts in many ways to offer this question again and again through the textual lives of three characters, the triangle of forces within this work: Alice, Jove and Stella. The voice of Alice musing ends the chapter "The Fool" with the sad observation, "Love affair: *amour* honourable or dishonourable. Jove had a wife" (GS, 28). Stella's narrative voice picks up immediately afterwards with her opening words of "The Tower": "My husband has started an affair. *Cherchez la femme*. Where is she? Ransack the bedroom . . . My radioactive hands will sense her" (GS, 29).

Sandwiched between these two women, a wife and an elastic lover, is Jove who calmly admires his own erection and says, "This is the physics of God" (GS, 27). We are warned on the same page however by Alice to read Jove's theologically weighted statements carefully,

“because Jove did not believe in God”. Stella’s first reaction to her husband’s infidelity is acute pain, madness even. She acutely resents being forced to occupy a space with the unknown *other* who now knows her husband. The immediate reaction to the confession letter which Stella believes is from Alice (but is actually written by Jove) is agonising. Stella speaks:

I have become my own pornographer. His body. Her body. My body. Unseparated, twisting, dark. The grinning collusion of skulls boned in lust. The silent gravity-gone somersault of she on he on she. There we are, the infernal triangle, turning in the lubricious air, breasts, cock, cunt, oversized inflated parachutes of skin. I know we are falling, all three, but the ground is still a long way off . . . To vow yourself to someone else is to open a wound. From it blood flows freely, life of you to them. We call it blood brothers. We call it the dying Christ. The Fisher King’s wound becomes him and will not heal. The vow of me to you and you to me is a red vulnerability on a grey shuttered world . . .

Don’t say it was not so. We transfused each other. Now you want me to bleed to death so that no one can tell what wound it was we shared. It is not so simple. Vows can be broken; usually they are, but the wound tunnels deeper into the body one day to recur. (GS, 36-37)

Stella speaks of a deep anguish, the same anguish we revisit when she recalls her mother’s agony at finding her husband’s body and the poem “King’s mountain”. For Stella the wound of betrayal, the tunnel dug into the heart by a broken vow, is one which will recur, a slow bleeding which continues throughout the text. Immediately after her thoughts on betrayal, Stella offers a reading of one of the cards in a Tarot pack. For her the security of a safe tower, the Tower Dauntless of her sexuality invested in Jove, has become the falling tower of Babel, from which she flees in terror, robbed of the language she used to communicate her love.

The Tower. Card XV of the Tarot deck. Two figures in identical dress explode from a shattered fortress.

Brick 1	Happiness. I love him he loves me.
Brick 2	Approval. I love him he loves me.
Brick 3	Security. I love him he loves me.
Brick 4	Time. I love him he loves me.
Brick 5	Complacency. I love him he loves me.
Brick 6	Indifference. I love him he loves me.
Brick 7	Apartness. I love him he loves me.
Brick 8	Refusal. I love him.
Brick 9	Lies. He loves me.
Brick 10	Danger. Love? Love?

Brick 11 One straw. One camel. Two backs. (GS, 37-38)

At times Winterson is brutal in her analysis of love and love betrayed. In her mind it seems that lovers build castles for themselves, strongholds which each lover claims to believe in whether their love is true or not. This progression from Happiness to the One straw which breaks the camel's back (and its wincing allusion to "the beast with two backs"⁵, Iago's icon of two lovers entwined in sex) is the explosion of the Lovers' tower, the fragile security of their so-called love. Winterson's analogy of the tower continues.

The Tower. The safe walls are falling child.

I think back to Nimrod, the mighty hunter of Genesis, who built the Tower of Babel that God destroyed. Babel. Even when ruined, a man could walk for three days and still be in its shadow. What did I build that has called down such wrath?

I prefer to think of wrath on the outside and me on the inside....I built a tower. I lived in it. Now it has been struck down. Did the lightning come like an indifferent god or did I draw it? (GS, 38)

The anguish of this text, of the textual pictures Winterson paints, is the agony of love betrayed. No matter how grand or magnificent the artifice, Winterson suggests that love can never be a secure refuge, that a lover will always be wandering the face of the earth in search of the next love, or fleeing from the ruins of the last relationship. Stella speaks of the love she has built with Jove.

Other people envied Jove and me. We were clean, wholesome, sexy, together. We displayed our marriage like a trophy and we did think that we had won it well. We polished the trophy but forgot to polish ourselves . . .

Our marriage became a thing apart; that is, a thing apart from the two of us. Both of us had a touching faith in its talismanic powers of protection, and it is true that for a time a symbol can outlive the plain fact that the symbol makers have turned elsewhere.

We had built our safe tower, put the trophy on the roof and dared lightning to strike. (GS, 40)

Winterson's characters are very in touch with their emotions. They know exactly how they feel, but what they fail to understand is how to hold on to certain feelings. When Stella speaks to us, we *are* able to know exactly where her emotions are bleeding. Any person who has loved and lost, or has been loved and been lost, understands her agony.

I understand that pain leapfrogs over language and lands in dumb growls beyond time. A place where there is no speech and no clock, no means of separating either the moment or its misery. Nobody comes and nobody goes. It is a place unvisited by civilisation. Civilisation has not happened. (GS, 41)

In order to understand the anguish caused by a person searching for meaning within the confines of love, Winterson at times suggests that as innocents, as children we possess a far greater wisdom in our naive state. In fact, it can be argued that naivety is in this sense a fortunate virtue, protecting one against "The reek of Judas . . . Kiss of life, kiss of death" (GS, 41). Stella speaks of her childhood mind.

When I was a child I imagined love as a glass well. I could lean over and dabble my hands in it and come up shining. It was not a current or a torrent, but it was deep and at its bottom, flowing. I knew it was flowing by the noise of the water over the subterranean pebbles. Were there ships in there and ports that depended on it, and harbours where people naturally built their settlements? I saw the world beneath the water only by reflection. To enter it would have meant climbing into the well and letting myself drop away. My mother cautioned me against swimming.

Day by day I returned to the edge, watching what I could, dabbling my hands. Later, when I was grown up, I met a man carrying two buckets, who plunged them into the pellucid waters, took one for himself and gave one to me. I had never held so much water. Never found any container that could. I lost interest in the well, I had my bucket. (GS, 39-40)

This is probably Winterson's most accurate benchmark in her analysis of the search for meaning through connection with an other/Other. As children we look into the well of love, knowing it is intimately close and at any stage we can dip a tiny hand into it and lift it up to our mouths, drinking deeply until we are full. As we grow, our intrigue with the water continues and we long for more than a handful. One day a stranger appears and scoops out some water into the container he or she carries. This stranger, this other/Other, only removes

one container full of water yet this is the first time we have seen water removed from the well. We too want to carry our own supply of water, thinking perhaps that we can travel away from the well. Yet we fail to ask why we need to leave the well at all. We end up exchanging a bottomless supply of the freshest drinking water for the meagre bucketful a stranger offers, which will taste stale soon anyway and cannot last forever. Winterson's allegory is bleak indeed. Grafted into her investigation of otherness/Otherness is an acknowledgement of another layer to reality, the spiritual. This talk of rivers, and thirst quenching draughts of fresh water flows eloquently towards our search for more than what is simply seen. In her writing Winterson points us to another realm of sensory experience.

We have to admit that the arts stimulate and satisfy a part of our nature that would otherwise be left untouched and that the emotions art arouses in us are of a different order to those aroused by experience of any other kind.

We think we live in a world of sense-experience and what we can touch and feel, see and hear, is the sum of our reality. Although neither physics nor philosophy accepts this, neither physics nor philosophy has been as successful as religion used to be at persuading us of the doubtfulness of seeming-solid world. This is a pity if only because while religion was a matter of course, the awareness of other realities was also a matter of course. To accept God was to accept Otherness, and while this did not make the life of the artist any easier (the life of the artist is never easy), a general agreement that there is more around us than the mundane allows the artist a greater license and a greater authority than he or she can expect in a society that recognises nothing but itself . . .

Art is visionary; it sees beyond the view from the window, even though the window is its frame. This is why the arts fare much better alongside religion than alongside either capitalism or communism. The god-instinct and the art-instinct both apprehend more than the physical biological material world. The artist need not believe in God, but the artist does consider reality as multiple and complex. If the audience accepts this premise it is then possible to think about the work itself . . . Art is not documentary. It may incidentally serve that function in its own way but its true effort is to open us to the dimensions of the spirit and of the self that normally lie smothered under the weight of living. (AO, 135-137)

At the end of the novel, what has Winterson attempted to convey? We have met and followed the triangular love affair of three people, and have been asked to consider several weighty philosophical questions. In her review of Gut Symmetries, Katy Emck offers the following comment.

The basic plot - two women, one man, a triangle of desire - is familiar from The Passion and Written on the Body. But now the idea of sexual uncertainty - and possibility - is

elevated to a higher plane. The new physics is as confusing as the new sexuality. Neither Jove, Alice or Stella can really choose, but that's alright because "every quantum experiment has shown, again and again, with dismaying mischief, that particles can hold positions contradictory and simultaneous"

This is a beautiful, stirring and brilliant story, but it does not really make sense. It is the song of a romantic outsider; a grand, author-as-god attempt to unify a bunch of loosely compatible ideas about the universe. It is a bit runic and ornate for people who live in ordinary houses . . .

Although the novel takes the love triangle as its theme, it is hard to care what happens to Alice, Stella and Jove. Jeanette Winterson is more interested in being a prophetess than in talking about or indeed entertaining human beings. But for all its presumptuousness, *Gut Symmetries* has a crazy surreal force and its superstitions are, if nothing else, picturesque. (Emck 1997, 21)

Emck does not seem to have much time for Winterson's postmodern jokes and textual acrobatics. However, in the last moments of the novel the textual voice urges us to join Alice as she walks and considers the meaning of existence.

Walk with me . . .

The difficulty. The dream. To pan the living river that you are and find gold in it. But the river moves on, never step in the same river twice, time surging forward and sometimes leaving a caracol, its half-turn backwards that mocks the clock.

My time, my father's time, my grandmother's time. Now separate, now flowing together, and joined with the floods and cries of men and women I have never met, places and years that snag their movement in mine and choose me, for a moment, as a depot of history.

What is it that you contain? The dead, time, light patterns of millennia opening in your gut. What is salted up in the memory of you? Memory past and memory future. If the universe is movement it will not be in one direction only. We think of our lives as linear but it is the spin of the earth that allows us to observe time.

Walk with me. (GS, 218)

As we walk with Alice through a textual re-presentation of New York, and suspecting that Winterson is just behind her, buried in the thoughts and words, we traverse the closed system of a text which is interconnected with countless other texts, a multiple three dimensional matrix, layers of overlapping universes spinning in infinity. Yet for a moment, in the space of this temporarily closed textual system, we meet a character who urges us to carefully weigh up the cumulative experience of our lives, and to walk through the meaning-making possibilities of it all with new eyes.

The universe hangs here, in this narrow strait, infinity and compression caught in the hour. Space and time cannot be separated. History and futurity are here. What you remember. What you invent. The universe curving in your gut. Put out your hand. Kiss me. The city is a scintilla, light to light, quartz and neon of the Brooklyn Bridge and the incandescence of the stars.

They were letting off fireworks down at the waterfront, the sky exploding in grenades of colour. Whatever it is that pulls the pin, that hurls you past the boundaries of your own life into a brief total beauty, even for a moment, it is enough. (GS, 219)

Winterson leaves us with an image which tries to escape the constraints of language - the fireworks and grenades of colour are visual icons described in words. Gut Symmetries alludes to relationships whose interconnections are delicate, fragile, but there if we take the time to discover their points of contact. Winterson appeals to whatever experience succeeds in hurling us past the boundaries of our own lives - to whatever awakens the individual self to a brief transcendent moment of total beauty. In a world of constant change and challenges to the security of a stabilised self, a moment of stillness is enough to awaken a sense of the infinite at work in a finite life. Against the picture of this paradox is a space of symmetry, a unifying theory, which brings the impossible strands together and weaves them into a cord of meaningful possibility. Life, in the Winterson universe, is chaos - but its chaos finds redemption and transcendence through the moments of grace which inexplicably punctuate its course.

Looking back to Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit, in that text lesbianism itself becomes the disturbing trace of the other/Other. In Gut Symmetries, it is the character Alice who sleeps with both sexes who becomes the disturbing, intrusive, catalytic presence which prevents this world meeting a satisfying binary stasis. This said, eventually all the characters take the place of ME and other/Other by turns. The novel ends in a *walk* with Alice, not a stasis. In this way Gut Symmetries envisages nostalgia for an other/Other prior world necessary to human beings' own interpretations of themselves. It does not implicitly assert the definite existence of that other/Other world which continues to teasingly elude capture, in and outside of language.

/gut.ends

Endnotes to Chapter Three.

1. I use the term “research physics” to contextualise Winterson’s perspective on physics. She interrogates the newest aspects of physics through her character Jove who is described as belonging to the prestigious “Institute for Advanced Studies, Princeton, New Jersey” (GS, 15). Jove is “working on a new model of the cosmos, dimensionality of hyperspace, ghost universes, symmetrical with ours” (GS, 15).

2. Note on an unnumbered page preceding Chapter One in McHale’s Postmodernist Fiction (1992a).

3. Quoted in McHale on the unnumbered opening page to “Part One: Preliminaries” of Postmodernist Fiction (1992a).

4. Dick Higgins, poet, composer, performance artist, and sometime small-press publisher writes:

Long ago, back when the world was young - that is, sometime around the year 1958 - a lot of artists and composers and other people who wanted to do beautiful things began to look at the world around them in a new way (for them).

This is Higgins’s version of the myth of the postmodernist breakthrough although in fact he avoids the term “postmodernist” or “postmodernism” (McHale 1992b, 33).

5. From William Shakespeare’s Othello. “Iago: I am one, sir, that comes to tell you your daughter and the Moor are now making the beast with two backs” (Othello, I.i.162-163).

/ends

Chapter Four: The quest for identity in John Irving's A Son of the Circus and "The King of the Novel".

In a review in the Times of London, Colin Greenland observes the following about Irving's A Son of the Circus (hereafter AS):

Kurt Vonnegut "admires the hell out of" Irving. It is easy to see why. Like Vonnegut, Irving obviously feels keenly the responsibility to steer readers with short attention spans through big, melancholy books crowded with bizarre incidents and singular characters. But by continually reminding us who each character is and what might perhaps have happened to them, he clogs and suffocates the drama and the dialogue. The constituent oddities: identical twins at large separately, a dildo stuffed with smuggled Deutschmarks, a comic "miraculous" religious conversion, elephants and acrobats, a transsexual gold-digger and a battle dwarf might have gone to make a spicy masala of a Hollywood movie. Reading this book is more like trying to eat a whole suet pudding. (Greenland 1994, newspaper article)

Contrasting with Greenland's disappointment is Erica Wagner who observes:

This is a complex novel, far more than the fairly simple mystery its dust jacket claims it is. In the first place there is never really a mystery, at least as far as the identity of the killer is concerned. The mystery in this novel is the mystery of identity. (Wagner 1994, newspaper article)

From the start this text by Irving is problematic. For readers more used to Irving's stories about "screwed-up" artists in "dysfunctional" families in New Hampshire or Vienna, this tale about a dispossessed Indian doctor in Bombay might start off feeling like a flop. Yet, the old Irving in a new writerly bear-suit performs the same strange fictional antics as in the story of Owen Meany. At the heart of this novel is one man's quest to find himself. Perhaps the first key to use in an attempt to unlock Irving's text is a short piece Irving wrote on the work of Charles Dickens in the collection of short pieces Trying to save Piggy Sneed.

In this reflective essay "The king of the novel" Irving, in praising the writing skill of Charles Dickens, reveals more than a few insights into the driving passion which moves through his own texts. In the first section of this essay, "Why I Like Charles Dickens; Why Some People Don't," Irving notes:

Here is the thing highest on the list that they don't like: the intention of a novel by Charles Dickens is to move you emotionally, not intellectually; and it is by emotional means that Dickens intends to influence you socially. (PS, 191)

From analysing the strategy of emotional plot-making in a Dickens work, Irving moves on to mirror the textual weight of what he regards as *the* nineteenth century writer. Some readers might be put off the sheer bulk of Irving's stories - the paperback copy of *A Son of the Circus* is 830 pages long - and discount his work as quasi-intellectual pulp fiction. But to do so is to miss the story at the heart of Irving, which like Dickens, takes time to create. Listen to Irving as he explains Dickens, obviously pointing straight back to his own keyboard:

Dickens knew how to keep a reader reading; he trusted his descriptive powers - as much as he trusted his ability to make his readers feel emotionally connected to his characters. Very simply, narrative momentum and emotional interest in the characters are what make a novel more compellingly readable on page 300 than it is on page 30. "The bursts of vivid imagery are spaced" is how Nabokov puts it. (PS, 199)

It is this wide range, according to Irving, this move from slow meandering prose to short, fast, intense description which makes a text by Dickens so variable in the experience it evokes in the reader.

Yet Dickens's greatest risk-taking, as a writer, has little to do with his social morality. . . he is not self-protective; he is never careful. In the present, post-modernist praise of the *craft* of writing - of the subtle, of the exquisite - we may have refined the very heart out of the novel. Dickens would have had more fun with today's literary elitists and minimalists than he had with Mr Pumblechook and Mrs Jellyby. (PS, 196)

What Irving shares with Dickens, and with a 20th century writer like Flannery O'Connor, is a fondness for the grotesque, the sickening laugh which wells up inside and embarrasses us even as we snigger. It is this black humour, this ability to put in the knife of real intention between the ribs of an amused reader, which Irving relishes in Dickens and which informs his own writing. Irving in effect is commenting on the playful concerns of postmodernism:

Dickens wrote great comedy - high and low - and he wrote great melodrama. At the conclusion of the first stage of Pip's expectations, Dickens writes: "Heaven knows we need never be ashamed of our tears, for they are rain upon the blinding dust of earth, overlying our hard hearts." But we *are* ashamed of our tears. We live at a time when critical taste tells us that to be softhearted is akin to doltishness; we're so influenced by the junk on television that even in reacting against it, we overreact - we conclude that *any* attempt to move an audience to laughter or tears is shameless, is either sitcom or soap opera or both. (PS, 197)

The ludic qualities of any Irving text are quite in character with a novelist practising his art at this end of the twentieth century. In a display of creative paradox, it is also his fascination with names and naming which links Irving to Dickens and those nineteenth century pot-

boilers. Irving is unashamed of this debt and in a 1996 interview acknowledges his admiration for Dickens:

A fan of the great 19th-century story-tellers like Trollope, Hardy and particularly Dickens, Irving is unabashedly middlebrow. He cares little for innovative language or experimental form, and hates Proust. Instead, he cleaves to the good old-fashioned values of a strong plot. He takes notes for up to 18 months before even starting a new novel and never sits down to write unless he knows how it's going to end. A writer's aim, he argues, should be to keep the reader hooked . . .

"I don't think my strengths as a writer are ever experimental," he says. "In fact, the more original of my novels, The Water-Method Man and The 158-Pound Marriage, I don't think are as good as those that are in the conventional stream of 19th-century narration - the passage of time, the development of character, the coincidence of crossed paths. I feel that the novel was at its greatest in the 19th century, and the living novelists I most admire today are all writing from a very 19th-century mode of narrative. What they also have in common is plot, and, by no coincidence, these people I'm talking about are comic. They write 19th-century comic novels." (Bone 1996, newspaper article)

Irving's writing involves a passionately important quest, the search for self-identity, wrapped up in much which is both funny and wincingly poignant. At the heart of this novel is Dr Farrokh Daruwalla, a 59-year-old orthopaedic surgeon, displaced, questioning, doubting, intent on getting to the bottom of himself. The novel begins with a section entitled "THE CROW ON THE CEILING FAN" and a chapter labelled "Blood from Dwarfs":

Usually, the dwarfs kept bringing him back - back to the circus *and* back to India. The doctor was familiar with the feeling of leaving Bombay "for the last time"; almost every time he left India, he vowed that he'd never come back. Then the years would pass - as a rule, not more than four or five - and once again he'd be taking the long flight from Toronto. That he was born in Bombay was *not* the reason; at least this was what the doctor claimed. Both his mother and father were dead; his sister lived in London, his brother in Zürich. The doctor's wife was Austrian, and their children and grandchildren lived in England and in Canada; none of them wanted to live in India - they rarely visited the country - nor had a single one of them been born there. But the doctor was fated to go back to Bombay; he would keep returning again and again - if not forever, at least for as long as there were dwarfs in the circus. (AS, 19)

Ostensibly the surgeon's interest in identifying the genetic marker responsible for achondroplasia (a type of short-limbed dwarfism) is what keeps drawing him back to the performing midgets of the Bombay circus, but we would be fools to believe Irving would give the textual game away on the first page. Irving demonstrates his passion for grotesque humour by kicking off with a doctor obsessed with performing dwarfs. With the

understanding that dwarfs are a showcase exhibit in many freak-shows, it should come as no surprise that Irving begins his novel with midgets. We are told very matter-of-factly about this doctor's formidable reputation.

[No]-one in India had bled as many dwarfs as Dr Daruwalla had bled. In those Indian circuses that passed through Bombay, or in such circuses that frequented the smaller towns in Gujarat and Maharashtra, it was with affection that Farrokh was called "the vampire." (AS, 20)

Farrokh opens this text. His is the mind into which we enter, and the first sense we have of existential unease is the uneasiness of an Indian at being un-Indian. From the first signs of things not being in place, of Farrokh being out-of-place, we begin to meet the characters whose stories will weave together as the novel unfolds. "THE CROW ON THE CEILING FAN," Part One of the novel, begins with Farrokh's introduction, as a man in search of himself and the real India, and ends with the murder of Mr Lal on the Duckworth Club golf course. This introduces the doctor to a real live murder plot - an immediate change from his closet career as the screenwriter of Bombay's "Inspector Dhar" detective movies.

The modes of intertextuality begin here as Farrokh's story is woven into the dwarfs' story, and as he dwells on the stories of a past India (the well endowed Lady Duckworth who used to flash her breasts at Club members), and as the story of a transsexual killer from the past begins to merge with the present. The "seemingly unimportant" crow which flies squawking into the clubhouse with a clue to the killer's identity is a double-play on grotesque comedy.

And then, suddenly, a small and seemingly unimportant incident distracted Dr Daruwalla from his entrancement with Lady Duckworth's bosom. The doctor would need to be in touch with his subconscious to remember this, for it was only a slight disturbance from the dining room that drew his attention. A crow, with something shiny seized in its beak, had swept in from the open verandah and had landed rakishly on the broad, oar-shaped blade of one of the ceiling fans. The bird precariously tilted the fan, but it continued to ride the blade around and around, shitting in a consistently circular form - on the floor, on a portion of one tablecloth and on a salad plate, just missing a fork. (AS, 40)

What the crow carries in from the golf course is the top half of a pen which Rahul, the transsexual killer, uses as a money clip and has dropped. It is a vital clue hidden from Daruwalla in the text, and also hidden from the police at the murder scene as the crow flies off with it towards the Duckworth Club dining room.

Rahul's money clip had no longer been in the bougainvillea when the deputy commissioner had examined Mr Lal's body. The silver was so shiny in the morning sun, it had caught a crow's sharp eyes. It was the half-pen that led the crow to discover the corpse. The crow had begun by pecking out one of Mr Lal's eyes; the bird was busy at the open wound behind Mr Lal's ear and at the wound at Mr Lal's temple when the first of the vultures settled on the ninth green. The crow had stood its ground until more vultures came; after all, it had found the body first. And before taking flight, the crow had stolen the silver half-pen. . . [and] promptly lost its prize in the ceiling fan in the Duckworth Club dining room . . .

That shiny something, which first Nancy and then Rahul and then the crow had lost, might now be lost forever, for its discovery lay within the limited abilities of Dr Daruwalla. Frankly, both the memory and the powers of observation of a closet screenwriter are not the best. One might more sensibly rely on the mechanism of the ceiling fan to spit out the half-pen and present it, as a miracle, to Detective Patel (or to Nancy). (AS, 555-556)

Eventually the pen-top is discovered and is used to lay a trap for Rahul, who has since become the second Mrs Dogar. The use of a comical event - the crow shitting in a circle and losing the half-pen - and its later connection with a clue to the murderer's identity is a precise instance of the paradox exploited by the postmodern project. Irving plays with narrative options made explicit, drawing the reader into a world of shifting plot dynamics through intra-textual (links in the same text) commentary.

We laugh at something amusing, only to realise later the profound implications of the joke. The complete silver pen was originally bought by Nancy, a woman who twenty years earlier was a dirty hippy in Goa, running from an "Iowa pig-farming family of German descent" (AS, 271). At that time she was travelling with a small-time drug dealer called Dieter and a girl called Beth who both get killed by Rahul. The terrifying Rahul spares her life, apparently on a whim, and steals the silver pen-top because it makes an unusual money-clip. Nancy hides the bodies, and tells her story to an Indian policeman, Inspector Patel. Nancy falls in love with Patel and gives him the drug-buying money which Dieter had hidden in a hollow dildo (used to smuggle drugs and money past airport customs officials). Patel marries Nancy and uses the money to bribe his way to promotion in the Indian police force. Years later Patel is now the investigating officer of Mr Lal's murder and Nancy is as terrified of Rahul as she ever was. Irving uses this sub-plot to exploit Nancy's search for peace from her own guilty past.

Her story is archetypal - a smalltime good girl's fall from grace. She originally flunked out of the University of Iowa, pregnant, and had to give away her baby. Then she found a wretched job and stole money from the small-town hardware store so she could run away. She ends up alone and frightened in India, after being picked up in Europe and seduced by Dieter to be used as one of his drug-couriers. Inspector Patel becomes her saviour and she is able to use some of the dildo-money to pay off the debt on her conscience - the money she stole in Iowa. Irving creates seemingly random events - a smalltown girl running away from home, a transsexual killer, a dildo which lays golden eggs in the form of deutschmarks, a good Indian inspector who compromises his integrity once to pay a necessary bribe, a silver pen-top - and weaves them all together into the story of Farrokh's consuming need to know who he is, and where he belongs.

Drawing on a Dickensian trait for name-games, Irving tells us that Farrokh has a number of names ranging affectionately from "the vampire" (AS, 20) to "Dead Bone" Daruwalla and "Dwarf Blood" Daruwalla (AS, 30) on account of his orthopaedic work and research into the genetic roots of dwarfism. Later, Irving introduces Farrokh's moonlighting work as the script-writer for the B-grade Inspector Dhar movies. We are also allowed into the doctor's frustrated efforts to name his final movie, which will be set in a circus.

This time, Julia found him in the morning with his face pressing a pencil against the glass-topped table in the dining room. An ongoing title search was evident from Farrokh's last jottings. There was *Lion Piss* (crossed out, blessedly) and *Raging Hormones* (also crossed out, she was happy to see), but the one that appeared to have pleased the screen-writer before he fell asleep was circled. As a movie title, Julia had her doubts about it. It was *Limo Roulette*, which reminded Julia of one of those French films that defy common sense - even when one manages to read every word of the subtitles. (AS, 602)

Before the end of the novel, Farrokh, with Irving obviously chuckling on the other side of this character, will have toyed with the possibility of *Elephant Shit* (AS, 570) and *Escaping Maharashtra* (AS, 778) which he will dismiss as overoptimistic and wholly improbable given the conditions of the real Maharashtra circus. Irving's name-game undergoes a postmodern metamorphosis in the course of the text as Farrokh tries to identify a killer he first encountered 20 years before, and as he seeks to uncover the "real" (and infinitely problematic) Farrokh inside himself. He has a strong connection with the circus, as we

discover in his lunatic attempts to draw blood from reluctant dwarf donors on the pretext of trying to save another dying dwarf. It seems to be in the circus where Farrokh most wants to find a home.

[T]he source of the human-hair-and-red-chili recipe, as well as of the tiger-urine cure (not to mention the tiger-whiskers warning), was the great Pratap Singh. In Dr Daruwalla's view, the ringmaster and wild-animal trainer was undeniably a man who knew his business.

This kind of lore, and blood from dwarfs, enhanced Farrokh's abiding feeling that, as a result of flopping around in a safety net and falling on a poor dwarf's wife, he had become an adopted son of the circus. For Farrokh, the honor of clumsily coming to Deepa's rescue was lasting. Whenever *any* circus was performing in Bombay, Dr Daruwalla could be found in a front-row seat; he could also be detected mingling with the acrobats and the animal trainers . . . These intimate views . . . these close-ups . . . were the privileges that made Farrokh feel he'd been adopted. At times, he wished he were a *real* son of the circus; instead Farrokh supposed, he was merely a guest of honor. (AS, 50)

At the heart of the novel is a man in search of something true, which lies at the core of himself. When turmoil comes in like a flood, the doctor returns to what is known, to the circus which offers a temporary respite from the storms of trying to keep his balance in India, but also serves as a postmodern icon of "Life".

It soothed him to think of the circus. Like a child who's proud to recite the names of Santa's reindeer or the Seven Dwarfs, [Irving's name-games again] Farrokh tested himself by remembering the names of the Great Royal's lions: Ram, Raja, Wazir, Mother, Diamond, Shanker, Crown, Max, Hondo, Highness, Lillie Mol, Leo and Tex. And then there were the cubs: Sita, Gita, Julie, Devi, Bheem, and Lucy . . . With lions, you could count on certain things. They were always themselves. Lions didn't try to be what they couldn't be, the way Dr Daruwalla kept trying to be a writer - the way I keep trying to be an Indian! he thought. (AS, 71-72)

Farrokh is a problematic textual character. He is both a product of text (living in Irving's invented world) and a producer of texts (the infamous Inspector Dhar movies). He is also a consumer of texts, devouring his surroundings: the circus, the Bombay cage-girls, the drawings a serial killer makes on the bellies of his victims, in order to read the text which is India, and to produce his own texts, the much-loved-and-much-hated detective film-scripts.

Above all, Irving creates a textual experience which continually "makes strange", which strikes both Farrokh and us (as readers) through the intensity of its contemplation of alienation. Irving points explicitly to this in the "AUTHOR'S NOTES" to the novel.

When I was there, [in India] I was struck by the country's foreignness; it remains obdurately foreign to me . . . I began to imagine a man who has been born there and has moved away; I imagined a character who keeps coming back again and again. He's compelled to keep returning; yet with each return trip, his sense of India's foreignness only deepens. India remains unyieldingly foreign, even to him . . .

I repeat: I don't "know" India, and A Son of the Circus isn't "about" India. It is, however, a novel set in India - a story about an Indian (but *not* an Indian), for whom India will always remain an unknown and unknowable country. (AS, 7, 9)

If we take Farrokh as Irving's self-confessed starting point, then the doctor becomes the locus for every concern the novel raises. Returning to the reflections on Dickens's work we see how important it is for Irving to use a central character.

But what about the *plot*? his [Dickens's] critics keep asking. How can you believe it?

Very simply: just accept as a fact that everyone of any emotional importance to you is related to everyone else of any emotional importance to you; these relationships need not extend to blood, of course, but the people who change your life emotionally - all those people, from different places, from different times, spanning many wholly unrelated coincidences - are nonetheless "related". We associate people with each other for emotional not for factual reasons - people who've never met each other, who don't know each other exist; people even who have forgotten us. In a novel by Charles Dickens, such people really *are* related - sometimes, even, by blood; almost always by circumstances, by coincidences; and most of all by plot. (PS, 214)

One of the connections between postmodernism and Christianity is each of their attempts to make sense of identity and the truth inherent (or absent) in a search for selfhood. Modes of revelation start becoming more and more a dual aspect of their projects. A Son of the Circus is a story of revelation, of truths gradually getting revealed. This said however, there is a randomness and a serendipity to the idea of a specifically *postmodern* search which does not (without explanation) seem to adhere in a Christian pilgrimage, where the ultimate goal is at least pre-ordained. With postmodernism the idea of an ultimate goal is redundant in an ideology which specifically rejects totalising grand narratives, or claims to definitive truth. Even if one accepts the arguable notion that postmodernism prizes "fragments of truth" at all, the inevitable break of *chiasmus* comes in the admission that "existential postmodern Christianity" is not in all respects identifiable with the traditional brand.

Both postmodernism and a relationship with God are nonetheless concerned with unpeeling the layers of experience to get to the heart of the matter in question. Postmodernism reveals

how most claims to absolute truth, the grand narratives, can be revealed as thoroughly inadequate. In its pursuit of deconstructed experiences (be they textual or “real” as in Baudrillard’s analysis of the Gulf War¹) postmodernism seeks to reveal what fragments of narrated truth can be accepted as such. Christianity also claims that the truth about a given situation (for example, the nature of human suffering) is revealed as one lives in relationship with God, and as the work of the Holy Spirit (in the individual, the community and the world at large) peels away the layers of human experience which keep truth veiled.

In terms of revealing previously hidden truth, Irving’s analysis of plot in a Dickens text reveals his own technique: each narrative event which occurs, and each textual relationship initiated *is* vitally important. In Irving’s text one of those relationship patterns lay in the comedy of the shitting crow whose antics deposited a vital clue to Rahul’s identity as the murderer, both in the past (the double murder in Goa twenty years before) and in Farrokh’s narrating present. In terms of narrative time, Irving uses modes of revealed truth to drop clues, benchmarks, along the textual disciple’s pilgrimage towards truth - offering answers to specific character’s questions.

These clues are textual and narrative. They exist at physical places in the text (accounts of the shitting crow are found at pages 40 and 555) and also in the process of Irving’s telling of the story. Dr Daruwalla observes the crow originally as just an amusing, but meaningless event. Farrokh just sees the crow out of the corner of his eye, an amusing distraction. Weeks later, in narrated time, he will have to remember seeing that crow in order to get Nancy to dig around in the ceiling fan mechanism to retrieve her lost silver pen-top. Irving’s method in A Son of the Circus is to reveal clues by degrees, merging the search for a killer’s identity and Farrokh’s search for himself. As we journey through the novel, Irving presents pieces of information which bring us closer to Rahul’s capture, and which also bring us closer (through Farrokh’s internalised narrative) to understanding what lies beneath the surface of each key character’s story.

In trying to diagnose Farrokh’s struggle for selfhood one has to bear in mind that it is occurring on several levels. These seem to be his on-going struggle for a coherent grasp of;

1) national identity (including Farrokh's feelings of racial angst); 2) sexual identity (at the level of the unease Farrokh feels towards sexual revelations); and 3) spiritual identity.

These struggles for selfhood, for making a positive identification of the self, seem to echo throughout the novel, as each new revelation in each character's narrated life suggests. The struggle finds its genesis in Farrokh's grappling mind and spills over into the wider world of the novel at large.

(1) National identity

Thrown together with his mixed-masala feelings for sexuality and "God" are Farrokh's embarrassed and awkward feelings for India, especially in colonial institutions like the archetypal Duckworth Club which one might find in an E M Forster novel. Farrokh is acutely aware of not quite belonging anywhere.

When he was visiting Bombay, Dr Daruwalla was sensitive to anyone or anything that reminded him of how little he knew or understood the country of his birthplace. The more time he spent in the haven of the Duckworth Club, the more the doctor could sustain the illusion that he was comfortable in being in India.

At home, in Toronto, where he'd spent most of his adult life, the doctor enjoyed the reputation - especially among Indians who'd never been to India, or who'd never gone back - of being a genuine "old India hand"; he was even considered quite brave. . . But in the Duckworth's dance hall, in the sacred presence of those portraits of Members Past, Dr Daruwalla could momentarily imagine that he truly came from somewhere, and that he belonged somewhere. Increasingly, as he approached 60, the doctor acknowledged (only to himself) that in Toronto he often *acted* far more Indian than he was; he could instantly acquire a Hindi accent, or drop it, depending on the company he kept . . . During Farrokh's visits to India, he was similarly ashamed of himself for how completely European or North American he pretended to be. In Bombay, his Hindi accent disappeared . . . In truth, it was only when he was surrounded by the old photographs in the dance hall of the Duckworth Club that Dr Daruwalla felt at home. (AS, 36-37)

Farrokh is asking difficult and unsettling questions, which are both ontological (Who am I?) and epistemological (How can I know?). He asks these questions about himself first, and then as he is increasingly involved in the solution of a serial murder case, he will continue to ask these questions of others. Irving's writerly concerns extend far beyond the mere geography of this work. He brings an out-of-place doctor all the way from Toronto to Bombay (a place he confesses he knows next to nothing about) to tell us a story about the sphere of human

experience he has intimate insider knowledge of, the search for self-identity and authenticity. Some of Irving's critics have been particularly unforgiving at the audacity of an American writer tackling a post-colonial enterprise like the nature of Farrokh's India. In the textual world of Irving's created India, issues of racism, displacement, sexuality, self knowledge, and the lifelong struggle to be true to oneself are all examined against the context of an entirely "constructed" India. McWilliam believes that Irving reaches beyond his depth in this novel, moving too far from the familiar territory of American angst:

A Son of the Circus is even more ambitious than its predecessor [A Prayer for Owen Meany]. [Irving] has selected (or been seduced by) a most elusive subject, India, at once more abstractly concrete and more concretely abstract than may be conveyed without the subtlest of stylistic tuning. Irving's writing falls wide of his shifting quarry . . . his words, so accurate and so moving in evoking the impossible metaphysics and imponderable actualities of America and her moral life, seems to fail to reach India. He has added to his difficulties by refracting India through two embodiments of manufactured illusion - cinema and the circus. A writer in the most evident good faith, John Irving has not the slyness for these subjects. Irving has found no slant of ingress that permits the reader to believe and feel the novel. Behind the words, the working author is audible. The bitter truth is that juggling must look easy or it's dull; deception has to move like light or it's embarrassing. In an over-familiar introductory note to the novel, Irving confides, "This novel isn't about India. I don't know India. I was there only once, for less than a month."

The book is about deracination, but the country from which its central character, Dr Farrokh Daruwalla, has been uprooted is India, and much of the action takes place there . . .

Dr Daruwalla . . . is deracinated fictionally as well as geographically, historically and religiously; he seems to belong in the world of a more curtailed writer such as Anita Desai or Naipaul. In Irving's great windy daylight, Dr Daruwalla has filled with air, lost his shadows, become too gross for the interesting human folds that lie in what his character and circumstances might have suggested. (McWilliam 1994, 40)

Despite McWilliam's feelings to the contrary, it is possible for Irving to create "Farrokh in India", for the same reasons writers tackle the hyper-real worlds of science fiction and fantasy. By removing us from the comfortable knowledge of what is known (Earth/America) to the uncomfortable unknown (Off-planet/India) Irving forces the reader to confront questions which make us examine what is known more closely. Over and above that, Irving is getting on with what he has always undertaken in his works, presenting an ordinary character beset by the sometimes overpowering presence of life. Such a character is thrown into a situation which is shifted maybe one degree from the normal, and in that move the grotesque

emerges, creeps out from the textual shadows.

Farrokh is an Indian-born, Austrian-educated, now Canadian-naturalised orthopaedic surgeon. What could be more acceptable in today's western standards of self-expression and success through hard work? Yet the paradigm shift occurs when an external variable is fiddled with and Farrokh is forced to confront himself and his past in an unsettling environment. The eco-system which sustains Farrokh in Canada has been replaced by Bombay's all-pervading scent, which like that of the trapeze artist Deepa, clings to our readerly nostrils as sex, death, and flowers.

National identity is problematised by Farrokh's discomfort at feeling out of place in Canada and India alike. His fractured self tries to find connection in the past, in the middle-ground of Vienna, where he studied and met his wife. In a section titled "Austrian Interlude" this part of his story emerges.

Farrokh had arrived in Austria in July of 1947 to prepare for his undergraduate studies at the University of Vienna; hence he missed Independence. (Later he thought he'd simply not been at home when it counted; thereafter he supposed, he was never "at home.") What a time to be an Indian in India! Instead young Farrokh Daruwalla was acquainting himself with his favourite dessert, *Sachertorte mit Schlag*. (AS, 111-112)

In Austria Farrokh encounters racism when he is mistaken for a dark-skinned Hungarian Gypsy and is then jeered at by drunk patrons in a *Gasthof* who think he is a Jew. The Daruwalla brothers (both are studying in Vienna) are employed as translators.

Their youthful vigor for foreign languages made them useful transcribers of the minutes for the Allied Council meetings, at which they scribbled profusely but were told to remain as silent as cobblestones. . . (It was racially reassuring that at least the British knew they were Indians). (AS, 113)

Farrokh endures racism while transcribing the notes for the murder of Anna Hellein, a 29-year-old social worker who was dragged off her train by a Russian guard at the Steyregg Bridge checkpoint on the American-Soviet demarcation line. She was raped, murdered, and left on the rails. Later her corpse was decapitated by a train. In the notes, a Viennese witness is quoted as saying that she didn't report the incident because she thought *Fräulein* Hellein was a giraffe. The young Farrokh explains to an indignant British interpreter that the phrase

“*Nur Umgangssprache*” is Berliner slang for a *prostitute*, the dead woman was mistaken for a whore. The British interpreter says that he doesn’t “care to have [his] English corrected by a bloody wog” (AS, 114). Farrokh is correct in his observation, but the racial snub persists:

Farrokh was almost relieved that his assailant was British and that the term “wog” - at least the correct racial slur - was used. Doubtless it would have unnerved him to have been mistaken for a Hungarian Gypsy *twice*. And by his bold interference, young Daruwalla had saved the Allied Council from committing an embarrassing error; it was, therefore, never entered into the official minutes that a witness to *Fräulein Hellein’s* rape and murder and decapitation had mistaken the victim for a giraffe. On top of everything else that the deceased had suffered, she was spared this further outrage. (AS, 115)

These racial injuries are sustained throughout Farrokh’s life, as he relates incidents at various times in the novel which increase his sense of being a stranger in a strange land, no matter what land he finds himself in. He also bears witness to racial injury against his own father which really seems to hurt the young man. In London, at the Royal College of Surgeons, old Lowji is giving a lecture on infantile paralysis in India. Old Lowji is extremely proud of his “F”, his honourable fellowship of the Royal College, and as he is delivering his lecture Farrokh (who is visiting London at the time) overhears two English medical men.

“What monkeys they are,” said a florid orthopedist to a fellow Brit. “They are the most presumptuous imitators. They observe us for all of five minutes, then they think they can do it, too.”

Young Farrokh sat paralysed in a room of men fascinated by the diseases of bones and joints; he couldn’t move, he couldn’t speak. This wasn’t a simple matter of mistaking a prostitute for a giraffe. . . “It” was Englishness, “it” was merely *being them*. Even in a gathering of what his father boastfully called “fellow professionals,” the “it” was all they noticed - simply what of their Englishness had been successfully or unsuccessfully copied. And for the remainder of old Lowji’s exploration of infantile paralysis, young Farrokh was ashamed that he saw his ambitious father as the British saw him: a smug ape who’d succeeded in imitating *them*. It was the first time Farrokh realised how it was possible to love Englishness and yet loathe the British.

And so, before he ruled out India as a country where he could live, he’d already ruled out England. (AS, 116)

How does A Son of the Circus become, in a sense, the story of “us” and “them”? One way of constructing it is that we, as readers, constitute the “us” and “they” are the textual elements of the novel, with Irving as the imperial coloniser. The story becomes our attempt to make sense of Farrokh and every “other” he encounters in his quest, even as Farrokh tries to understand the India of his contemplation and indeed, of Irving’s own making. To use Milan Kundera’s

words,² “making a character ‘alive’ means: getting to the bottom of his existential problem. Which in turn means: getting to the bottom of some situations, some motifs, even some words that shape him” (1988, 35).

From the moment of his first attempts to be an independent adult self, Farrokh feels estranged and uncomfortably unable to fit in. This neurosis, from a Freudian point of view, or this *angst* - to take an existential line - will persist in Farrokh’s mind, leading him all the way to Toronto, and back to Bombay in his attempts to shake the doubts which plague him. His quest in India for an integrated self is mirrored by characters like the mysterious Inspector Dhar whose real identity is an enigma scrupulously guarded by Farrokh.

(2) Sexual identity

Dr Daruwalla’s moments of sexual discovery frequently become encounters which, for a spectator, are painfully funny moments. Watching a circus performance, Farrokh rushes to the aid of a not-so-very-gifted trapeze artiste called Deepa. She is feeling dizzy because of the Kingfisher beers the doctor brought along to bribe the dwarfs into donating samples of test blood. Deepa has fallen and twisted herself in the safety net which Farrokh must clamber into to help her. Vinod, Deepa’s dwarf husband, has been instructed to clamp her head between his knees so that Farrokh will not cause her further damage as he crawls to reach her.

Then, suddenly, the net sagged so steeply that Dr Daruwalla was thrown off balance; clumsily he fell forward . . . Dr Daruwalla pitched headfirst into the sequined belly of Deepa’s tight singlet . . .

Her hip was dislocated; it hurt her when Farrokh fell upon her abdomen. The doctor’s forehead was scratched by the pink and fire-engine-red sequins that formed a star over Deepa’s pelvis, and the bridge of Dr Daruwalla’s nose ground to a sharp halt against her pubis.

Under vastly different circumstances, their collision might have been sexually thrilling, but not to a woman with a dislocated hip (and with her head clamped tightly between a dwarf’s knees). For Dr Daruwalla - the fallen flyer’s pain and her screams notwithstanding - this encounter with Deepa’s pubic bone would be recorded as his single extramarital experience. Farrokh would never forget it. (AS, 27)

This mix of the sexual with pain and acute embarrassment, is vintage Irving, cognate with Garp’s wife biting off her lover’s penis (*The World According to Garp*), and Owen Meany’s “immaculate” conception. The doctor is awkward in India, unsure of himself, in search of a centre, and his sexual sensibilities are constantly teased by the situations he stumbles into.

[I]n full view of the unimpressed crowd, the doctor had ended up with his face jammed into the injured woman's crotch . . . Where his cheek had come to rest against her inner thigh, Farrokh could still feel how her tights were soaked with sweat. . . And when Dr Daruwalla breathed in her dangerous aroma, he thought he'd at last identified the smell of sex, which struck him as an earthy commingling of death and flowers.

It was there in the swaying safety net, that Vinod first accused him. "All this is happening because you are wanting blood from dwarfs," the dwarf said. (AS, 27)

This close encounter with another's sexuality is symbolic of the identity quest in Irving's writing. Bound into the narrative is the search for self-identity, for understanding the depths and limits of oneself. The central characters in an Irving novel stumble towards their quest object (self-knowledge) on a path which will often carry them across the paths of quest helpers and others who embody heroic tests. In this narrative, Dr Farrokh Daruwalla must face himself, his past, and his fears for identity within the present.

The anxiety of trying to understand sexual identity begins with Farrokh's encounter with Deepa's sweat stained crotch when she falls from the circus trapeze, but quickly spirals out to include Lady Duckworth's breasts which we are reminded of even as Farrokh stares at her photograph in the Club dance hall.

Lord D committed suicide on New Year's Eve, precisely at the turn of the century. For many more years Lady Duckworth would reveal her breasts, but it was agreed that, as a widow, although she exposed herself more often, she did so halfheartedly. Cynics said that had she lived, and continued to show India her gifts, Lady D might have thwarted Independence. (AS, 39)

Farrokh is a faithful husband, and his fidelity to his Viennese wife is beyond reproach. Yet the account of his search makes some explicitly sexual inter-connections with the lives of others we meet through Irving's story-telling. Inspector Dhar's dubious conception is just one of the mysteries which Farrokh's quest for truth uncovers and problematises. The lines between narrated truth and narrated myth are blurred in the revelation of the story behind the screenplay version of John D (Inspector Dhar).

That Inspector Dhar had invented himself, and that he appeared to have got away with his preposterous and unexaminable fiction, was surely a contributing reason for the virulence with which he was despised. . .

As for twins separated at birth, the irony was that this is an extremely popular theme with Hindi screen-writers. Such a separation frequently happens at the hospital - or

during a storm, or in a railway accident. Typically one twin takes a virtuous path while the other wallows in evil. Usually there is some key that links them - maybe a torn two-rupee note (each twin keeps a half). And often, at the moment they are about to kill each other, the telltale half of the two-rupee note flutters out from one twin's pocket. Thus reunited, the twins vent their always-justifiable anger on a *real* villain, an inconceivable scoundrel (conveniently introduced to the audience at an earlier stage in the preposterous story).

How Bombay hated Inspector Dhar! But Dhar was a *real* twin, *truly* separated at birth, and Dhar's actual story was more unbelievable than any story concocted in the imagination of a Hindi screenwriter. Moreover, almost no one in Bombay, or in all of Maharashtra, knew Dhar's true story. (AS, 57-58)

What Irving does by invoking the humour of Bombay Hollywood, is actually to set the scene for the story of John D and his unsuspecting twin, Martin Mills, who is a Jesuit missionary. There is also a *real* villain in this story, Rahul the transsexual scoundrel who makes a hobby of killing women and drawing cartoon elephants on their bellies. Rahul has featured in both Farrokh and John D's past and intrudes uncomfortably into their present. Martin Mills as the twin brother, is portrayed as idiotic in both his naivety and in his fumbling attempts to be a spiritual agent of transformation in India.

Dhar's twin was the first American missionary in the highly esteemed 125-year history of St Ignatius; neither the church nor the school had been blessed with an American missionary before. Dhar's twin was what the Jesuits call a scholastic, which Dr Daruwalla already understood to mean that he'd endured much religious and philosophic study and that he'd taken his simple vows. However, the doctor knew, Dhar's twin was still a few years away from being ordained as a priest. This was a period of soul-searching, Dr Daruwalla supposed - the final test of those simple vows.

The vows themselves gave Farrokh the shivers. Poverty, chastity, obedience - they weren't so "simple." (AS, 212-213)

Farrokh, in taking on responsibility for trying to bring Martin and John together, as two 40-year-old twins who have never met, battles to understand and accept their sexual identity. Irving devotes some of his text to gay rights, and the problematic nature of being and living as a homosexual. The sub-text, read in one light, argues that being gay in a straight society is as problematic as trying to be authentically spiritual in an anti-theist, or post-Christian world. Dr Daruwalla's continuing search for the dwarf chromosome brings his path across that of another medical researcher intent on isolating a gay genetic marker.

Dr Daruwalla doubted that he knew enough about genetics to argue with a geneticist; the doctor simply continued to draw samples of the dwarfs' blood and he kept bringing the photographs of the chromosomes back to Toronto. The U. of T.

[University of Toronto] geneticist was discouraging but fairly friendly, if not sympathetic. He was also the boyfriend of Farrokh's friend and colleague at the Hospital for Sick Children - Sick Kids, they called the hospital in Toronto. Farrokh's friend and the geneticist were gay. . .

Dr Duncan Frasier, the gay geneticist, was renowned for his research on the so-called (and elusive) gay chromosomes; Frasier was used to being teased about it. Biological studies of homosexuality generally irritate everyone. The debate as to whether homosexuality is present at birth or is a learned behaviour is always inflamed with politics. Conservatives reject scientific suggestions that sexual orientation is biological; liberals anguish over the possible medical misuse of an identifiable genetic marker for homosexuality - should one be found. But Dr Frasier's research had led him to a fairly cautious and reasonable conclusion. There were only two "natural" sexual orientations among humans - one in the majority, one in the minority. Nothing he'd studied about homosexuality, nor anything he'd ever personally experienced or had ever felt, could persuade Dr Frasier that either homosexuality or heterosexuality was a matter of choice. Sexual orientation wasn't a "life-style."

"We are born with what we desire - whatever it is," Frasier liked to say.
(AS, 520-521)

Irving uses the story of Farrokh's professional quest for the key to dwarfism, and overlaps it with another professional quest for "the truth" about sexual orientation. Removed from the neat, clinical world of Toronto research laboratories, Farrokh's quest merges with the sexual identities of the people he meets in India.

Nancy, the "dirty hippy" reformed by her escape from Rahul and her marriage into the safety of Inspector Patel's arms, is also seeking the truth about her sexual identity. After running from Rahul, Nancy makes for Bombay where she knows she can find Inspector Patel.

She'd embraced evil; she'd found it lacking. She was the sinner in search of the impossible salvation; she thought that only the uncorrupted and incorruptible policeman could restore her essential goodness. She had spotted something conflicted about Inspector Patel. She believed that he was virtuous and honourable, but also that she could seduce him; her logic was such that she thought of his virtue and his honor as transferable to her. Nancy's illusion was not uncommon - nor is it an illusion limited to women. It is an old belief: that several sexually wrong decisions can be remedied - can be utterly erased - by one decision that is sexually right. No one should blame Nancy for trying. (AS, 339-340)

Irving does not "blame Nancy for trying". Instead he includes her "quest" in the narrative and links it to the novel's dominant theme of a search for authenticity. This connection is reinforced by the continuing story of John D and Martin Mills. The sexual identities of the

twins lie in the mystery of their conception, in the twist to their genes which marks both of them with a gay orientation. The public story behind Inspector Dhar's conception frames Farrokh as a possible father, amongst a number of other possibilities worthy of Bombay cinema.

Inspector Dhar's fictional autobiography manifested a fondness for shock value and sentiment that was remindful of his films. He claimed to have been born out of wedlock; he said he mother was an American - currently a has-been Hollywood movie star - and his father was an actual Bombay police inspector, long since retired. . . .

Everyone said that possibly the mother was a blue-eyed blonde, and all that the police inspector could contribute to the child was a racially neutralizing effect and a fervor for homicide cases. . . There was no credible explanation for his all-white appearance, which fueled the rumour that Dhar was the child of Farrokh's brother, who'd married an Austrian; and since it was well known that Farrokh was married to this European's sister, it was also rumoured that Dhar was the doctor's child. (AS, 60-61, 62)

As we discover, John D and Martin Mills's real mother was an actress with the screen name Veronica Rose. She was born Hermione Rosen (AS, 144) but understandably changed it to Vera. She seduces Danny Mills, who is the screenwriter of a film being shot on location in Bombay, to get the leading female role. Then she has an affair with Neville Eden, her leading man, who is bisexual (although she does not know this). She discovers she is pregnant with twins and does not know who the father is. In a number of interesting intra-textual connections, Irving merges Vera's story with Farrokh's. Vera is an exhibitionist who, like the legendary Lady Duckworth, also enjoys exposing her breasts to admiring spectators. She is asked what she thinks of the late Lady Duckworth and responds in kind.

Vera unbuttoned the front of her white muslin dress, showing her breasts to them all - Dr Lowji Daruwalla and Mrs Daruwalla, too. . .

"Well, whatta ya think?" Vera asked her audience. "I don't know if she was an exhibitionist - I think she was just too fuckin' *hot*!" She added that she wanted to return to the Taj, where at least there was a sea breeze. In truth, she looked forward to feeding the rats that gathered at the water's edge beneath the Gateway of India; the rats were unafraid of people, and Vera enjoyed teasing them with expensive table scraps - the way some people enjoy feeding ducks or pigeons. Thereafter she would go to Neville's room and straddle him until his cock was sore. (AS, 148)

Vera's connection with Neville Eden also links her to the killer Rahul. Neville Eden has a fling with Subodh Rai, Rahul's older brother who "was better known for his flamboyant homosexuality than for his theatrical talents" (AS, 119) and both lovers die in a car accident

in Italy.

Rahul remains behind, the younger and more disturbed Rai brother with an embittered aunt Promila Rai, who has “suffered the tragic history of having been jilted by the same man on two different wedding days, a condition that prompted Dr Lowji Daruwalla to privately refer to her as ‘the Miss Havisham of Bombay - times two’” (AS, 118). After a sex-change Rahul becomes a gorgeously seductive “woman” and an enraged transsexual serial killer, who adorns the bellies of his (mostly prostitute) victims with a cartoon elephant:

. . . an inappropriately mirthful elephant with one tusk raised, one eye winking, and water spraying from the end of its downward-pointing trunk. The size and shape of the victims’ navels afforded the artist a considerable variety of winking eyes; the amount and colour of the victims’ pubic hair also varied. The water from the elephant’s trunk was constant; the elephant sprayed, with seeming indifference, over all. Many of the murdered prostitutes had shaved their pubic hair; the elephant appeared not to notice, or not to care. (AS, 353-354)

The notion of identity becomes crucial through Irving’s presentation of the sexual struggle within Rahul, “a veritable war was being waged over the true identity of his sexual self, which, to his astonishment, was not appreciably clarified by the successful completion of his long-awaited sex change. . . it was Rahul’s illusion that a new sexual identity could provide a lasting peace of mind” (AS, 354). Returning to Vera’s affair with Neville Eden momentarily, and Eden’s erotic switch to the older Rai brother, the text reveals how much “Rahul had hated how girlishly Subodh had allowed himself to be dominated by Neville Eden” (AS, 355). The complexity of Rahul’s condition slowly unwinds with the narrated stream of his thoughts.

Rahul had imagined that it was only as a woman that *she* could dominate both women and men. He’d also imagined that being a woman would make him envy other women less, or not at all; he’d even thought that his desire to hurt and humiliate women would somehow *evanesce*. He was unprepared for how he would continue to hate them and desire to do them harm; prostitutes - and other women of what he presumed to be loose behaviour - especially offended him, in part because of how lightly they regarded their sexual favours, and how they took for granted their sexual parts, which Rahul had been forced to acquire through such perseverance and pain. (AS, 355)

Through his in depth analysis of one character’s most intimate longings and fears Irving demonstrates how the postmodern genre moves the 19th century style novel forward. In a Dickens novel, for instance Great Expectations or Oliver Twist, although we are allowed into the process of story in a specific character’s life, we arguably never enter that character’s

stream of consciousness. The move from an objective “readerly” perspective on story (premodern and modern), to the overtly subjective experience of reading-as-writing (postmodern) allows us to enter the maze of Rahul’s sexual thoughts. Docherty (1983, xiv-xv) argues that in postmodern fiction the concept of a definitive character is replaced through a process of characterisation:³

[I]n many recent novels we witness either a loss of individuation in characters, or their anonymity. Rather than being clearly delineated centres around which we can orient ourselves and our attitudes, they become fragmentary or evanescent. The stability of “character” is replaced with the more mobile “subject” (and often the novels are narrated by an anonymous first-personal subject); in some cases, instead of characters we seem to have fragmentary “instances of subjectivity” none of which seem ever to develop into a more stable Self. The reader is involved in this fragmentation, for he or she has to make piecemeal sense of these “subjects” in a disjointed and sometimes self-contradictory way . . . It is no longer the author who is unproblematically the source or origin of meaning for the text, but rather there is some degree of shared responsibility between writer and reader for the meaning of the work.

Through these new fragmentary “instances of subjectivity”, we enter into a collaborative dialogue with the text. We become co-authors in a communal creative act. The naming of characters changes in fiction, Docherty argues, from *essentialist* nomination where a character’s “proper name is seen in some way to ‘sum up’ or contain the entire significance and existence of the character, and its use is consonant with the unification of the person into one self-integrated whole” (1983, 49) to *existentialist* or historical nomination.

Through essentialist nomination, characters in older novelistic forms (Dickens’s work for example) have names which exist purely as a function of the plot:

The author, in so naming a character, confers an entire “life” upon the character in its plot-function; the character loses the illusion of subjective being, and is an object to be manipulated under the shaping hand of its creator, the author of the plot. An essentialist use of the proper name, then, is clearly consonant with a plot-oriented fiction, a fiction in which the mechanics of the intrigue subsume the characters into the effecting of a design (often called the “world” of the novelist, and always the “plot”) whose hermetic nature precludes the illusion of a character having any existence outside of its boundaries. In this, author and reader share a godlike view upon the essentially named puppets. (1983, 49)

In contrast is Docherty’s exposure of the newer *existentialist* nomination, where the name of a character becomes “a sort of password or passport to existence” (49). In postmodern terms

this type of character can no longer be encapsulated by the label of the proper name, coming in a time of literary history after the “death” of the godlike author of what Docherty calls the realist novel. So, in a new postmodern setting, the character is freed into a degree of autonomy. He himself becomes the authority behind his own existence and gains the virtual “reality” of subjectivity. Such a character gains a name which becomes something he achieves, which he inhabits and realises subjectively. Postmodern characters are no longer simply named by the author. The self-defining, self-generating “subject” now names himself or sometimes even fails to attain the status of a name.

It is this overtly subjective experience of reading-as-writing which allows us to join Farrokh as he remembers the sexually ambiguous Rahul. We share his narrated memory, and we add that narrative discourse to the narrated bitterness we experience inside Rahul. The narrative is problematised, flavoured and enhanced, by the other story of Farrokh’s research into dwarf genes, and his Canadian friend’s work on the elusive gay gene marker. The notion of what makes us what we are is at the heart of Irving’s project - whether you become a Canadian heterosexual surgeon cum closet screen-writer, and he becomes a viciously frustrated transsexual killer, and I remain a subjective writerly-reader. What is the mysterious quality, that elusive *thing* (for it has no other distinct label) which makes us what we are, what we continue to be?

A sub-text in the novel is “the truth” behind John D and Martin Mills’ sexuality, whether either or both of the twins is gay. As the hunt to catch the killer intensifies, Inspector Patel intends to use John D as bait for Mrs Dogar/Rahul. He asks his wife Nancy to see how convincing John can be in using his sexuality to lure Rahul into their trap. Nancy, who has always found John D attractive, questions the actor and is bitterly upset by the result.

“He’ll do anything you tell him, if he knows what you want,” Nancy answered.

“And you think Rahul will go for him?” her husband asked.

“Oh yes,” she said bitterly.

“Dhar is a pretty cool customer!” said the detective admiringly.

“Dhar is as queer as a three-dollar bill,” Nancy told him.

Not being from Iowa, Detective Patel had some difficulty with the concept of how

“queer” a three-dollar bill was - not to mention that, in Bombay, they call a bill a note.

“You mean that he’s gay - a homosexual?” her husband asked.

“No doubt about it. You can trust me,” Nancy repeated. They were almost home

before she spoke again. "A *very* cool customer," she added.
 "I'm sorry, sweetie," said the deputy commissioner, because he saw that his wife couldn't stop crying.
 "I do love you, Vijay," she managed to say.
 "I love you, *too*, sweetie," the detective told her. (AS, 599)

After Rahul has been caught and taken off to prison, John D is resting in the Ladies' Garden of the Duckworth Club and contemplating the drama he has been part of. Part of his sense of sexual identity is also being evaluated, challenged, prodded:

[John D] was thinking that it had been years since he'd felt the slightest attraction to any woman; but Nancy had aroused him - it seemed to him that it was her anger that he found so appealing - and for the second Mrs Dogar John D had felt an even more disturbing desire . . . He was 39, an age when it was unseemly to have one's sexual identity shaken . . . Shit, I hope I'm not about to become interested in *women*! the actor thought. What a mess that would make of things. (AS, 750)

Finally after teasing us for the entire novel, not knowing if the twins will ever meet, Farrokh organises their plane tickets to their respective homes in such a way that John D and Martin Mills have to sit next to each other. Their meeting is something of an anti-climax. Not even Farrokh is allowed to know what really happens on that flight. We do learn however that, utterly disillusioned by the Jesuits and his Indian experiences, Martin Mills leaves the priesthood and finally "discovers" a safe space for his gay identity in the world in which John D lives.

It was to this social circle that John D would introduce his twin. An oddity at first - everyone is interested in a twins-separated-at-birth story - Martin made many friends in this community; in three years, the ex-missionary probably had more friends than the actor. In fact, Martin's first lover was an ex-boyfriend of John D's which Dr Daruwalla found strange; the twins made a joke of it - probably to exasperate him, the doctor thought. (AS, 808)

That is as final a say as Irving will allow on sexual identity. The world goes on, hormones keep raging, AIDS continues to kill people, the Bombay prostitutes keep on selling their body parts, in Canada and Zürich gay men still struggle for a niche in the world, and all over the globe heterosexuals continue fumbling towards infinity and multiplying after their own kind.

(3) Spiritual identity

Wrapped up with a constantly challenged world-view is Farrokh's problematic theological

belief system. Thrown into the religious melting pot of India, Farrokh's attempts to understand a worldview which believes in a Christ-centered universe are bound to be thick with challenges.

In India, Farrokh is assailed by the attempts of his environment to acknowledge his heart-cry for self identity. India becomes a congested meeting point for humble believers and religious extremists of every imaginable hue. Here he must try to contextualise his careful Anglican faith in the light of establishment Catholic Jesuits, the sacred cows and many gods of Hinduism, and the fanatical zeal of Islam. One morning as he contemplates the dogs in his apartment building going berserk at the presence of Vinod (his dwarf chauffeur) Farrokh's existential doubts are prodded.

Their insane barking disturbed the doctor because of its total irrationality; *any* irrationality reminded Farrokh of everything he failed to comprehend about India.

Only that morning he'd stood on his balcony and overheard his fifth-floor neighbour, Dr Malik Abdul Aziz - a model "Servant of the Almighty" - praying on the balcony below him. When Dhar slept on the balcony, he often commented to Farrokh on how soothing it was to wake up to the prayers of Dr Aziz.

"Praise be to Allah, Lord of Creation" - that much Dr Daruwalla had understood. And later there was something about the "straight path." It was a very pure prayer - Farrokh had liked it, and he'd long admired Dr Aziz for his unswerving faith - but Dr Daruwalla's thoughts had veered sharply away from religion, in the direction of politics, because he was reminded of the aggressive billboards he'd seen around the city. The messages on such hoardings were essentially hostile; they merely purported to be religious.

ISLAM IS THE ONE PATH TO HUMANITY FOR ALL.

And that wasn't as bad as those Shiv Sena slogans, which were all over Bombay. (MAHARASHTRA FOR MAHARASHTRIANS. Or SAY IT WITH PRIDE: I'M A HINDU.)

Something evil had corrupted the purity of prayer. Something as dignified and private as Dr Aziz, with his prayer rug rolled out on his own balcony, had been distorted by politics. And if this madness had a sound, Farrokh knew, it would be the sound of irrationally barking dogs. (AS, 203)

What is so angst-inducing in the doctor's theological musing is the abyss between belief for the individual versus belief within a community of others; here again the unavoidable meeting-point of self versus Other is the hinge on which so much postmodern writing teeters. As post-colonial commentators have asserted, at the heart of every imperial discourse is a

story which attempts to make sense of (or tries to explain away) binary divisions. Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin (1989, 171-172) in commenting on Fredric Jameson's work, observe how post-colonial discussion of the role of narrative fictions simultaneously articulates and deconstructs the "Manichean aesthetic" of post-colonial societies. In their words, "This aesthetic expresses the binary divisions of centre-margin, self-Other, good-evil, Black-white which [Jameson] argues, is the characteristic feature of such societies and their art" (172). Post-colonial critics seeking to develop an analysis of Manichean duality thus find a model for the reflexive relationship between social process and text, a model which emphasises that a text's relationship with "the historical subtext" is an *active* one. In this way the text paradoxically "brings into being that very situation to which it is also, at one and the same time, a reaction" (Jameson 1981, 81-82).

As Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin argue: "the 'truth' of post-colonial societies, like that of other oppressed, or repressed, or silenced communities is ideologically determined. It stems from a construction of the self as subject in relation to the Other" (172). Edward Said speaks about the nature of colonial discourse as "descriptions of 'the mysterious East', as well as the stereotypes about 'the African [or Indian or Irish or Jamaican or Chinese] mind', the notions about bringing civilization to primitive or barbaric peoples . . . 'they' were not like 'us', and for that reason deserved to be ruled" (Said 1993, xi-xii). This system of binary opposition can be expressed as a postcolonial (and postmodern) discourse which continually presents and re-presents the story of "us" and "them". Here, in Irving's postmodern treatment of an imperial theme, a native, a son of India, is pitted against the unknown others of the country he tries to understand, the very people he is trying to become "one" with again.

One of the first revealed truths in A Son of the Circus lies in Farrokh's exposure as the closet writer of the Inspector Dhar films. This is a relatively minor truth, in the light of subsequent revelations, which Irving brings out of the textual closet. It exists as a revealed truth about a material event, Daruwalla's writing career. In terms of Farrokh's deeper existential quest, one of the more spiritualised modes of revelation occurs as he grapples with his own faith and the melting pot of religions in India. Irving uses humour to defuse the normally explosive nature of religious argument. Farrokh's father is remembered for his vehement rejection of almost

every other faith.

[T]he younger Daruwalla [Farrokh] was quite pleased at the surprise he could instantly evoke by quoting his late father on the late Mahatma.

“He was a bloody charka-spinning, loin-clothed pandit!” the senior Daruwalla had complained. “He dragged his religion into his political activism - then he turned his political activism into a religion.” And the old man was unafraid of expressing his views *in* India . . . “Bloody Hindus. . . bloody Sikhs . . . bloody Muslims,” he would say. “And bloody Parsis, too!” he would add, if the more fervent of the Zoroastrian faith pressed him for some display of Parsi loyalty. “Bloody Catholics,” he would murmur on those rare occasions when he appeared at St Ignatius - only to attend those dreadful school plays in which his own sons took small parts.

Old Lowji declared that dharma was “sheer complacency - nothing but a justification for nondoing.” He said that caste and the upholding of untouchability was “nothing but the perpetual worship of shit - if you worship shit, most naturally you must declare it the duty of certain people to take the shit away!” (AS, 108-109)

As Farrokh remembers his father, these narrated memories carry the twisted analysis of other faiths and world-views. No-one can escape his scorn or his cynical jokes about claims to absolute truth. Dr Daruwalla’s father believes that the Catholic crucifix, Christ on the cross, is “a kind of Western pornography”; “that all Protestants were closet Calvinists - and that Calvin was a closet Hindu!”; he refers to the doctrine of divine predestination as “Christian dharma”; and is particularly fond of quoting Martin Luther who said: “What wrong can there be telling a downright good lie for a good cause and for the advancement of the Christian Church?” (AS, 110).

Old Lowji is a character whose religious views are thoroughly postmodern. The old cynic rejects any claim to absolute truth, dismissing all religious worldviews with equal scorn. He is no respecter of persons, showing a balanced measure of offense at all attempts to provide a spiritual answer. The beliefs which Farrokh’s father is prepared to entertain are: the belief in self-defined free-will (taken to be Old Lowji’s right to reject as many religious views as he chooses to); “so-called good works” (a loathing for “anything resembling the acceptance of human wretchedness”); and in “no damn God at all”. (AS, 110).

It is no surprise, with a father like his, that Farrokh’s own views on religion are confused. As we discover in the novel, one of the truths Farrokh is intent on discovering is the reason for

his father's death in a car-bomb explosion. We are quickly informed with typical Irving black humour that "there was an old rumour at the Duckworth Club that it had been the brainchild of a Hindu-Muslim-Christian conspiracy - perhaps the first cooperative attempt of its kind" (AS, 110). Farrokh is quick to admit to himself how troubled he has been by the memory of such outspoken cynicism.

What Farrokh most resented about his father was how the contentious old atheist had robbed him of a religion *and* a country. More than intellectually spoiling the concept of a nation for his children, because of his unrestrained hatred of nationalism, Dr Lowji Daruwalla had driven his children away from Bombay. For the sake of their education and refinement, he'd sent his only daughter to London and his two sons to Vienna; then he had the gall to be disappointed with all three of them for not choosing to live in India.

"Immigrants are immigrants all their lives!" Lowji Daruwalla had declared. It was just another of his pronouncements, but this one had a lasting sting. (AS, 111)

The question of spiritual identity is arguably the point at which all searches for identity find their centre of gravity. When Martin Mills arrives in Bombay with missionary zeal, he has no idea that he has a twin, or that his twin is the infamous Inspector Dhar. His first experience of inter-faith ministry happens in the taxi he catches from the airport, when the driver mistakes him for his much-loathed actor brother:

The particular taxi-walla who'd seized the missionary's suitcase and now watched Martin Mills slide into the back seat was a violent-minded young man named Bahadur . . .

"I suppose you know where St Ignatius is," Martin Mills said nervously, once they were under way. "It's a Jesuit mission, a church, a school," he added, looking for some sign of recognition in the glare of the taxi-walla. When the scholastic saw that the young man was watching him in the rearview mirror, Martin did the friendly thing - at least he presumed it was the native-behaviour thing to do. He winked . . .

"You're supposed to be a Hindu," Bahadur told the Jesuit.

Martin Mills was thrilled. His first religious confrontation in the missionary kingdom - his first Hindu! He knew they were the majority religion here.

"Well . . . well," Martin said cheerfully. "Men of all faiths must be brothers."

"Fuck your Jesus, and fuck you," Bahadur remarked coldly.

"Well . . . well," said Martin. Possibly there was a time to wink and a time *not* to wink, the new missionary thought. (AS, 388-390)

Martin Mills is a devout searcher, one intensely focused on discovering the essential core of internal faith in an external doctrine. Mills has an extremely thorough intellectual faith fuelled

by the reading material he has brought to India. This consists of “the 1988 edition of the *Catholic Almanac* and many pamphlets of something called *Studies in the Spirituality of Jesuits*; there was a *Pocket Catholic Catechism* and a *Compact Dictionary of the Bible*; there was both a Bible and a Lectionary, and a thin book called *Sadhana: A Way to God* by Anthony de Mello, S.J.; there was *The Autobiography of St Ignatius Loyola* and a copy of *The Spiritual Exercises*” (AS, 385). He is also aggressively informed on the finer points of theological rhetoric, as his spontaneous argument with Dr Daruwalla on the nature of free will demonstrates.

“Aren’t you a Christian?” the missionary asked the doctor. “I believe my father said you were converted, but that you’re not a Roman Catholic.” . . .

“Are you familiar with the Calvinist, Jansenist position in regard to free will?” Martin asked Farrokh. “I’m greatly oversimplifying, but this was that dispute born of Luther and those Protestant divines of the Reformation - namely, the idea that we’re doomed by original sin and can expect salvation only through divine grace. Luther denied that good works could contribute to our salvation. Calvin further denied that our faith could save us. According to Calvin, we are all predestined to be saved - or not. Do you believe that?”

Farrokh suspects a trap and quickly says, “No - not exactly.”

“Well, good - then you’re not a Jansenist,” the scholastic said. “They were very discouraging - their doctrine of grace over that of free will was quite defeatist, really. They made us all feel that there was absolutely nothing we could do to be saved - in short why bother with good works? And so what if we sin? . . .

“If you’re suggesting that it’s almost impossible to reconcile the concept of free will with our belief in an omnipotent and omniscient God, I agree with you - it’s difficult,” Martin said. “The question of the relationship between human will and divine omnipotence . . . is that your question?”

Daruwalla suspects this *should* be his question and quickly nudges Martin on with a “Yes - something like that.”

“Well, that really is an interesting question,” the Jesuit said. “I just hate it when people try to reduce the spiritual world with purely mechanical theories - those behaviourists for example. Who cares about Loeb’s plant-lice theories or Pavlov’s dog?” . . .

“We must seem excessively strict to you - we Catholics to you Protestants, I mean,” Martin said. Dr Daruwalla shook his head. “Oh, yes we do!” the missionary said. “We are a theology of rewards and punishments, which are meted out in the life after death.

Compared to you, we make much of sin. We Jesuits, however, tend to minimize those sins of thought.” . . .”To us - to us Catholics, I mean - you Protestants appear, at times, to overemphasize the human propensity toward evil . . .” And here the missionary paused. . .

“The Leibniz assumption is that man’s freedom was not taken from him by his fall, which makes Leibniz quite a friend of ours - of us Jesuits, I mean” . . . “There is some Leibniz I can never forget, such as, ‘Although the impulse and the help come from God, they are at all times accompanied by a certain cooperation of man himself; if not, we could not say that we had acted’ . . . But, given that I am free to act – ‘although the impulse and the help come from God,’ of course - I must do what I can, not only to save *my* soul but to rescue the souls of others.” (AS, 404-406)

After his zealous conversation the priest falls asleep on the doctor’s couch with “his fingers interlocked on his chest, and with an utterly beatific expression, the missionary resembled a martyr en route to the heavenly kingdom” (AS, 407). What Irving demonstrates through this presentation of Mills’s missionary position is an obsessively intellectualised belief in God, a mind which theoretically knows all the spiritually-correct answers but fails to achieve a relational knowledge of spiritual truth. As his conversation demonstrates, Mills has understood some of the answers without understanding the essence of the questions.

Irving makes use of convoluted theological symbols and metaphors to raise questions about self-hood. The argument which places human free-will against divine omnipotence and predestined salvation is really a complicated confusion of existential angst. The enormity of the consequences of our choices in no way excuses us from the responsibility of being free to choose. In an existential world-view, being free is a burden - “an unbearable lightness of being” (to borrow the title of Milan Kundera’s novel) which we choose to carry. In this novel, Irving problematises the notion of free will. Even a tormented character like Rahul, churned up in an inner sexual maelstrom, must still take responsibility for his/her actions.

Mills wakes up in Farrokh’s apartment to the sound of Dr Aziz, the Muslim urologist:

“‘Praise be to Allah, Lord of Creation’ - Dr Aziz’s incantations to Allah drifted upward from his fifth-floor balcony and brought the new missionary to his feet” (AS, 410). Mills studies Farrokh’s Islamic neighbour with intense interest - his research interest lies in trying to make meaningful sense of religious faith.

He followed the prayers of Dr Aziz with the keenest concentration. There was always something one could learn from the holiness of others.

Martin Mills did not take prayer for granted. He knew that prayer wasn't the same as thinking, nor was it an escape from thinking. It was never as simple as mere asking. Instead it was the seeking of instruction; for to know God's will was Martin's heart's desire, and to attain such a state of perfection - a union with God in mystical ecstasy - required the patience of a corpse.

Watching Urology Aziz roll up his prayer rug, Martin Mills knew it was the perfect time for him to practise another exercise of Father de Mello's *Christian Exercises in Eastern Form* - namely, "stillness" . . . He stood so still that, 10 minutes later, a passing fork-tailed kite almost landed on his head. (AS, 411-412)

Martin's particular brand of mysticism and spiritual contemplation is practised with excruciating care, but to the people looking in at his life, he just seems very odd - a religious and thoroughly confused eccentric. Later in the novel, as Farrokh and Martin are speaking about their respective conversion experiences, Martin describes an encounter with Christ which is real enough to put him on the straight and narrow path of priesthood. Farrokh knows both of the twins, but is much closer to John D, who plays Inspector Dhar in his screen-plays. He is also extremely curious about John D's sexual orientation, and tries to talk to Martin about his possible homosexual inclination as a way of better understanding John D.

[It] would be an easier subject to broach with Martin than with John D.

"You say you were in love with a man, and that your feelings for him finally *lessened*," the doctor began.

"That's correct," the scholastic said stiffly.

"But can you point to any moment or to any single episode that marked the end of your infatuation?" Farrokh asked. "Did anything happen - was there an incident that convinced you? What made you decide you could resist such an attraction and become a priest?" This was beating around the bush, Dr Daruwalla knew, but the doctor had to begin somewhere.

"I saw how Christ existed for me. I saw that Jesus had never abandoned me," the zealot said.

"Do you mean you had a *vision*?" Farrokh asked.

"In a way," the Jesuit said mysteriously. "I was at a low point in my relationship with Jesus. And I'd reached a very cynical decision. There is no lack of resistance that is as great a giving-up as fatalism - I'm ashamed to say I was totally fatalistic."

"Did you actually see Christ or didn't you?" the doctor asked him.

"Actually, it was only a *statue* of Christ," the missionary admitted. (AS, 667)

What Farrokh hears is Martin's account of a vision in the form of a statue of Christ which intervenes at a moment of sexual crisis. While working as a teacher at an American school, Martin develops an infatuation for a fellow teacher. One night they are both staying late to

work at the school. The man's car will not start so he asks Martin for a lift home. Martin is suddenly confronted by the tangible availability of his long-meditated fantasy and tries to explain the feeling: "This is what I mean by how cynical I was," the scholastic said, "I was so totally fatalistic, I decided that if he made the slightest advance toward me, I would respond. I wouldn't initiate such an advance, but I knew I would respond" (AS, 668). Martin realises that this moment, those few minutes, are a threshold experience:

"Did the guy touch you?" Farrokh asked.

"I turned on the headlights before he had a chance . . . And there was Christ - he stood out very brightly in the headlights. He was exactly where I knew he would be."

"Where *else* would a statue be?" Dr Daruwalla cried. "Do statues move around in your country?"

"You belittle the experience to focus on the statue," the Jesuit said. "The statue was just the vehicle. What I felt was the presence of God. I felt a oneness with Jesus, too - not with the statue. I felt I'd been shown what believing in Christ was like - for me. Even in the darkness - even as I sat expecting something horrible to happen to me - there was a certainty that he was there. Christ was there for me; he'd not abandoned me. I could still see him." (AS, 669-669)

Farrokh's incredulous responses to Martin's story elevates the humour to utter disbelief. Yet Martin is serious, and this is the reason he chooses to resist his sexual feelings and takes his Jesuit vows. It will take the faith-shattering experience of missionary work in India to shake him from his calling. However at this stage in the narrative, Martin is simply telling the story of his coming to spiritual faith, to being able to make the existential leap into God.

Later in the story, driven by a sense of acute empathy for Martin when he has renounced his clerical vows, Farrokh tries to come up with a means of comforting the ex-priest. Farrokh sees in Martin's failed calling, a reflection of his own lifelong search for a place to belong.

John D was wrong; his twin wasn't a quitter. Martin Mills had abandoned a quest, but he'd given up the priesthood when the priesthood was in sight - when it was easily obtainable. He'd not failed to be ordained; he'd been afraid of the kind of priest he might become. His decision to retreat, which had appeared to be so whimsical and sudden, had not come out of the blue; to Martin his retreat must have seemed lifelong. (AS, 772)

Farrokh suddenly remembers the story of the vision of Jesus in the parking lot and uses it to try and break through to the real Martin, the human beneath the religious wrappings. Dr Daruwalla orders Martin to close his eyes, and tells him to visualise the parking lot with the Jesus statue. Then Farrokh asks him simply if Christ is still there, in the parking lot. When Martin admits that in his mind's eye he can still see the statue of Christ, the doctor reminds

him of this simple, faith-affirming act: “ ‘You saw Jesus Christ, didn’t you? What more do you want? . . . ‘You must realize that it’s possible to be a good Christian, as Christians are always saying, and at the same time *not* be a Catholic priest’ ” (AS, 773).

Farrokh sees in Martin’s quest for spiritual identity the same fear of displacement he knows is in his own search. Farrokh’s search for self through spirituality is as complicated as any character in the Irving textual library. Farrokh’s own coming to belief is based on an entirely mistaken “miracle” which pushes the doctor from healthy scepticism to Christian faith. It also inextricably ties his search for self to the thoroughly enigmatic Rahul. The succinct account of Farrokh’s coming to faith is ridiculously simple: “Twenty years ago, when he was drawn to Goa by his epicurean nostalgia for pork - scarce in the rest of India, but a staple of Goan cuisine - Dr Daruwalla was converted to Christianity by the big toe of his right foot” (AS, 228). The strands of his story however, are a little more complicated.

Before his conversion, the sceptical Farrokh is particularly amused by the story of St Francis Xavier whose body did not decompose after his death. His intact body is returned to Goa as a “miracle” to be viewed by crowds of worshipping pilgrims. Farrokh learns that one particular woman “with the worshipful intensity of the most devout, bit off a toe of the splendid corpse. Xavier would lose more of himself, too: the Vatican required that his right arm be shipped to Rome, without which evidence St Francis’s canonisation might never have occurred” (AS, 231). However, the mocking Farrokh believes he encounters God in a very real way, converts to Anglicanism, and years later tries to tell the disbelieving Martin Mills about his miraculous conversion experience.

“I dreamt I was St Francis’s corpse . . .” Dr Daruwalla began . . . “I dreamt that the crazed pilgrim was biting off my toe!” . . .

“You *felt* this?” Martin asked.

“Of *course* I felt it!” hissed the doctor . . . “When I woke up, my toe was *throbbing* . . . What happened to my toe wasn’t *common*!” the doctor cried. . .

“I’m not trying to take your miracle away from you. I’m only trying to make you see the *real* miracle. It is simply that you believe - not the silly thing that made you believe. The biting was only a vehicle.”

“The *biting* was the miracle!” Dr Daruwalla cried. (AS, 615-617)

What we learn from Irving is that the reasons for “belief” can be very strange indeed. An

initial idea or experience sets a consequence in motion, the connection may be arbitrary but the result profound. What actually happens to Farrokh's toe is laughable - the reason for his faith is ludicrous - but he will never know the real reason for his "miraculous" conversion. Faith is – in everyday terms – absurd. In Irving's view, it is consequently appropriate that whatever brings people to faith is absurd too. However, in a contradictory world, it is no adequate *dismissal* of faith to call it absurd, either. In fact, Irving may be arguing that this epitomises reality, represents the essence of things, better than the alternatives for just this reason. In a world plagued by fictions, to adopt the fiction of faith is paradoxically a blow for ultimate realism.

The doctor's own testimony is grounded on a what he believes is a "real" experience.

The doctor was dreaming that he was Francis Xavier, dug up from his grave and taken against his will to the Basilica de Bom Jesus in Goa. More accurately, he was dreaming that he was Francis Xavier's miraculously preserved *body*, and things were about to be done to his body - also against his will. But despite the terror of what was happening to him, in his dream Farrokh couldn't give utterance to his fears; he was so heavily sedated with food and wine that he was forced to suffer in silence - even though he anticipated that a crazed pilgrim was about to eat his toe. After all, he knew the story. (AS, 336)

What the sleeping doctor does not know is that Rahul, intent on seducing John D (who is staying in the same Goa hotel apartment with Farrokh's family), has climbed a vine up to the balcony where he thinks John D lies asleep in a hammock. Actually, it is Farrokh who is asleep in the hammock under a mosquito net with only his toe exposed:

In the darkness - not to mention that he was blinded by his overeagerness - Rahul was confused . . . Rahul at first fought against the desire to bite him, but he gave in to this urge and slowly sank his teeth into the squirming toe; then he once more resisted the compelling impulse to bite - then he weakened and bit down harder . . . When he at last released the doctor's foot, both Rahul *and* Dr Daruwalla were gasping. In his dream, the doctor was certain that the obsessed woman had already done her damage; she'd bitten off the scared relic of his toe, and now there was tragically less of his miraculous body than they had buried. (AS, 336-337)

In the midst of all his attempts to make us laugh (and it is difficult not to laugh) what is Irving doing with all these pictures of selves in search of other selves? Through the character of one man, Farrokh, obsessed by his need to belong, to have a place where he can be himself, Irving develops the idea that we are all in some way in search of that place inside us where we can

locate our self. By telling the story of a DP (Displaced Person) Irving touches on themes which connect the seemingly unconnectable elements of living in today's world of displaced selves. His story, which threads together Canada and India (via Vienna) picks up the problems of identity in both parts of the world. Most important of these is a fundamental need in every human to be accepted as we are.

When Farrokh returns to Toronto after the whole Bombay murder mystery is resolved, he has a final encounter which enables him to reach some sense of conclusion, a moment of being able to release his angst, and accept himself as he is. He is waiting on a street corner for his wife to pick him up and take him to a reading in downtown Toronto by an unknown Indian writer "perhaps a Sikh, possibly a Hindu, maybe a Muslim, or even another Parsi" (AS, 823). Across the road a mother is also waiting in the snow for someone to pick her up, with her little boy. As both the doctor and the young woman wait for their lifts to arrive, Farrokh becomes aware of the racial threat he visually presents to this woman. He is an Indian, in Canada, and the woman is terrified that he means to harm her in some way. Yet the little boy is fascinated, not frightened, by the exotic stranger and sticks his tongue out at Farrokh. Impulsively the doctor sticks out his tongue too which further terrifies the child's mother. What happens next is perhaps one of the true miracles in the novel.

However, her son had no fear of the foreigner; their tongues in the snow seemed to connect them. The kinship of their extended tongues took immediate effect on the small boy. Farrokh's childish, unconscious gesture must have overridden the boy's natural reluctance to speak to strangers, for he suddenly broke free of his mother's grasp and ran with outstretched arms toward the astonished Indian.

The mother was too terrified to give clear utterance to her son's name. She managed only a gargling sound, a strangled gasp. She hesitated before stumbling after her son, as if her legs had turned to ice or stone. She was resigned to her fate; how well she knew what would happen next! The black topcoat would open as she approached the stranger, and she would be confronted with the male genitalia of the *truly* inscrutable East. . .

Farrokh nearly cried out: Excuse me, pretty lady, but there is no episode here!

That was when the little boy touched him; it was a firm but gentle tug on his sleeve - then the miniature mittened hand grasped the doctor's gloved index finger and pulled...

"Excuse me," the little gentleman said. "Where are you from?"

Well, that's the question isn't it? thought Dr Daruwalla. It was always the question. For his whole adult life, it was the question he usually answered with literal truth, which in his heart felt like a lie. (AS, 826-827)

This finally, is Farrokh's threshold experience, the moment at which he is asked who he really is. In the same way that Jacob wrestling with an angel on the bank of the Jordan river is asked "What is your name?"⁴ Farrokh here is asked a question which probes to the heart of him. Jacob is asked by that divine messenger to give an account of himself, to own the self which is his alone. This little boy in Toronto asks Farrokh a similar question which cuts to the quick.

"I'm from India," the doctor would say, but he didn't feel it; it didn't ring true. "I'm from Toronto," he sometimes said, but with more mischief than authority. Or else he would be clever. "I'm from Toronto, via Bombay," he would say. If he really wanted to be cute, he would answer, "I'm from Toronto, via Vienna and Bombay." He could go on elaborating the lie - namely that he was from *anywhere*. . . Dr Daruwalla could *seem* as comfortable with the places he'd lived as he was, truly *uncomfortable*.

But suddenly the boy's innocence demanded of the doctor a different kind of truth; in the child's face, Dr Daruwalla could discern only frank curiosity - only the most genuine desire to know. It also moved the doctor that the boy had not let go of his index finger. Farrokh was aware that he had no time in which to formulate a witty answer or an ambiguous remark; the terrified mother would any second interrupt the moment, which would never return.

"Where are you from?" the child had asked him.

Dr Daruwalla wished he knew; never had he so much wanted to tell the truth, and (more important) to feel that his response was as pure and natural as the currently falling snow. Bending close to the boy, so that the child could not mistake a word of his answer, and giving the boy's trusting hand a reflexive squeeze, the doctor spoke clearly in the sharp winter air.

"I'm from the circus," Farrokh said, without thinking - it was utterly spontaneous - but by the instant delight that was apparent in the child's broad smile and in his bright, admiring eyes, Dr Daruwalla could tell that he'd answered the question correctly. What he saw in the boy's happy face was something he'd never felt before in his cold, adopted country. Such uncritical acceptance was the most satisfying pleasure that Dr Daruwalla (or any immigrant of color) would ever know. (AS, 827-828)

In this moment Farrokh realises that the self is exactly where it has always been - inside us, at the heart of those things we attach most value to. Irving merely points out a fact we have always known, he shows us where to look - at something which has always been right here before our eyes. Farrokh *is* who he *is*. The truth concerning an authentic knowledge of self could not be simpler. Nor can it possibly be more profound. In another formulation, the travelling circus of experience is, finally, also a home, one without specific location. Indeed, for it to have a location would be to negate the nature of its existence, its general non-specific

locus. Farrokh's deep sense of the circus as "home" is a realisation, a special realisation, one which binds him to the others who have shared it.

Farrokh, like Irving and Dickens, is also a writer. This is by no means a mistaken identity. To someone like Irving who admires Dickens, the meaning of the circus in Hard Times cannot be utterly absent: becoming the place of imagination as opposed to utilitarian "facts". The point is, surely, that Farrokh *is* who he *makes* himself, he is the character he writes himself into. Dr Daruwalla belongs finally to the world of *his* imagining, his "reality" as the circus. The blood he has taken from the dwarves in India is now, vampirishly, his own. To reiterate an earlier point, in a world plagued by fictions, to adopt the fiction of faith is paradoxically a blow for ultimate realism. To say it another way, in a circus of spangles and pompoms, against a backdrop of farting clowns and drunk circus dwarves, "faith" is an appropriate costume.

/son.ends

Endnotes to Chapter Four.

1. Baudrillard wrote a book on the deconstructed “reality” of the Gulf War, arguing that due to the highly manufactured account of the war experience by the American military, no such thing as a tangible Gulf War occurred. The title of his work explains why it provoked such philosophical controversy: The Gulf War Did Not Take Place (1995).

2. Milan Kundera offers his view in discussion about characters being “alive” in The Unbearable Lightness of Being:

[Tereza] has small breasts with areolae that are “very large, very dark circles around her nipples,” as if they were painted by a primitivist of poor-man’s pornography”; that information is indispensable because her body is another of Tereza’s main themes. By contrast, where Tomas, her husband is concerned . . . his body, as well as his face, remains completely unknown to us because the essence of his existential problem is rooted in other themes. That lack of information does not make him the less “living”. Because making a character “alive” means: getting to the bottom of his existential problem. Which in turn means: getting to the bottom of some situations, some motifs, even some words that shape him. (1988, 34-35)

3. J U Jacobs uses Docherty’s modes of characterisation to explain postmodern elements in “Naming a crisis: André Brink’s States of Emergency” (1990, 35-48).

4. In the Biblical account Jacob wrestles with an angel of God for an entire night on the bank of the Jordan River. Jacob’s hip is dislocated by the angel in a final effort to force him to stop wrestling - but not without Jacob demanding a blessing from the stranger:

The man asked him, “What is your name?” “Jacob,” he answered. Then the man said, “Your name will no longer be Jacob, but Israel, because you have struggled with God and with men and have overcome” (Genesis 32:27-28). The NIV notes indicate that *Jacob* means “he grasps the heel” (figuratively, “he deceives”) and *Israel* means “he struggles with God”.

/ends

Conclusion

In the process of postmodern fiction-making in the texts by Jeanette Winterson and John Irving, the process of meaning-making with words is always involved in the same project. Every human judgement in this journey is, as Lawrence Cahoon and Mark Taylor argue, “limited, transitory, uncertain, never able to grasp or adequately represent what it seeks” (Cahoon 1996, 514). Any writing, or account of living, which is prepared to acknowledge this context must admit that its very nature is “erring”. This perpetual journey of truth in the process of revelation is “the nonoriginal origin of everything that is” (Cahoon 1996, 514).

In Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit Winterson explicitly uses Biblical frames - the first eight books of the Old Testament - as more than just a contrapuntal discourse of “setting off” her “books” against the Biblical texts in a process of binary contrast. She transforms the textual experience of investing and inhabiting Biblical “ways of seeing” into a means of re-writing, re-presenting the “official” texts in terms of a radically divergent personal experience - a woman’s love for another (an *other/Other*) woman. Through her central character’s growth to consciousness through the experience of two closed systems, the text shifts, errs, oscillates between two radical worldviews. On one level the text is accessible and context-friendly to a reader with experience of fundamentalist Christianity, yet it is also a radical manifesto for gay experience, an entire re-working of Otherness.

Gut Symmetries presents new possibilities for knowledge through the bringing together of art as fiction and the new physics embodied in the characters of Jove and Alice, two minds engrossed in re-presenting the Grand Unifying Theories (the GUTs) of scientific research. In this novel Winterson re-presents new ways of connecting with the spiritual, with what is unknown to her, through the extensive contemplation of physics (what can be physically measured and known) and through love (which cannot be measured and remains quantifiably unknown). In this way love, its expression through sexuality, and its severe testing and re-presentation through infidelity, become the postmodern equivalent of former spiritual experiences.

As Belsey says in her discussion of postmodern love (1994, 72) the postmodern condition

implies an unbridled culture of superficial consumerism, yet love remains a value which manages to elude this constructed market process.

While sex is a commodity, love becomes the condition of a happiness that cannot be bought, the one remaining object of desire that cannot be sure of purchasing fulfilment. Love thus becomes more precious than before because it is beyond price, and in consequence its metaphysical character is intensified. More than ever, love has come to represent presence, transcendence, immortality, what Derrida calls proximity, living speech, certainty, everything, in short, that the market is unable to provide or fails to guarantee. (Belsey 1994, 72)

However in the face of postmodernism's scepticism, the question asked of any claim to love is, as Belsey states (72), "Where, in the light of our experience, the statistics, our philosophy, or any documentary evidence outside popular romance, are *its* guarantees, its continuities, proof of its ability to fulfil its undertakings?" Winterson responds to such a question by producing accounts of love which allow her central characters to decide for themselves. By this I do not intend to claim that Winterson portrays autonomous free agents, but her fictionalised women are often in the process of making difficult choices within the narratives they occupy. Jeanette, the central character in Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit, has to choose between what her community upholds as spiritual, Biblical "truth" and the new "truth" being revealed through her experiences of love with other women. Alice, in Gut Symmetries, is involved in a triangular love affair where she must decide what is "true" for her, and whether her love for Jove is more important than the marriage she is intruding on. When Alice also falls in love with Stella, Jove's wife, the space which her love occupies becomes more than just a binary relationship.

As Belsey argues (77), "Postmodern writing knows that metaphysics is not an option; it takes for granted that the process of representation can never be the reconstitution of presence; it repudiates the modernist nostalgia for the unrepresentable, ineffable truth of things; and it variously celebrates or struggles with the opacity of the signifier". The subject who speaks within a postmodern text is the voice who speaks, writes, reads and signifies. In rejecting former expressions of the metaphysical, postmodernism requires new re-workings, new representations of old questionable "truths".

In using the phrase "spiritual inquiry" I am not demanding that *spiritual*¹ has to be religious

or that it needs to be Christian. Yet in the larger system of religion, the terms and the vocabulary of spirituality are included, and Irving and Winterson are writers who explicitly invoke and write against, or re-present a Christian worldview. The direct challenge faced by a contemporary spiritual inquiry is how to move on from the usual old definitions of Christianity, to be able to redefine, even remake, Christianity in a postmodern setting. A theologian like Mark Taylor, in presenting a “postmodern a/theology” shows how deconstruction can be made a partner in reflection on the spiritual aspects of human existence. Just as Derrida foregrounds the necessity for writing, Taylor sees spirituality grounded essentially in text, in scripture, “not in the sense of ancient books, but as the process of generating, reading, and rewriting ‘the word’ ” (in Cahoon 1996, 514). Through this analysis, what seems an impossible combination: postmodern theology is given a contemporary context.

It is this constant creation of meaning through an active process which links Winterson’s postmodern concerns with a type of spiritual search which is a constant journey, a constant wrestling with truth. Winterson, in both of her novels discussed here, is right to take on the former belief systems which once promised to deliver the truth. In her reaction to Pentecostal Christianity, Winterson’s character Jeanette is attempting to re-define a former worldview which is no longer adequate for her experience of reality. As Alice lectures on the problematic aspects of former models of physical reality, she too is re-defining her worldview. On a macro level her understanding of the universe’s interconnected symmetries is narrated in parallel with her experience of a bisexual love which celebrates an interconnected symmetry between Jove, Stella, and Alice as their shared lover.

The notion of “symmetry” is also precisely that sense of balance which Alice breaks. “Symmetry breaking” is a proposed quality of the universe’s forces and particles in the modern theory of the “weak” force, and in many Grand Unifying Theories (GUTs) of the 1970s. Alice disallows any comfortable balance and symmetry which conceals truths. As an agent of anti-symmetry, she is rather like a human Higg’s particle.

In terms of multiple possibilities for making meanings in a postmodern context, Winterson

often plays with definitions of love. Love, the signifier, is connected and re-connected to a number of possible meanings. When reading Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit, we are presented with at least three sites of meaning: love for God and the corresponding possibility of God's love for humankind; love for *others/Other*s in terms of community; and love for one significant *other/Other*, the "beloved" in which elements from both of the former loves combine. Faced by a community which rejects her, Jeanette finds it difficult to believe in divine love expressed through human agents, yet she does not dismiss the possibility of God loving her. Her problem lies in the kind of love communicated by "God's servants", as she calls them.

In A Prayer for Owen Meany, Irving is concerned with the type of experience it would take to make a "believer" of him. Here the postmodern becomes a process of deconstructing a former system of truth, and in the process of that deconstruction recovering the possibility of meaning. John Wheelwright, Owen's childhood friend who narrates the story, is transformed from a sceptical atheist in his youth to a believing Anglican who is still religious twenty years after Owen's death. Irving links the story of a man who survives a "Damascus Road" experience with the doubt of an American who has "escaped" to Canada from the disintegration of America. John's perpetual prayer for Owen becomes, on a parallel level, a prayer for America which has slid from the Sixties' Vietnam crisis to the Iran-Contra scandals of Reagan's government in the Eighties. A search for personal truth also becomes Irving's search for truth on a national scale, trying to make sense of the spiritual decay the United States has experienced.

Irving and Winterson portray situations which are spiritual in character, yet each writer may well be referring to different phenomena when they use, or invoke the "spiritual". What I am suggesting is that Irving and Winterson are separate yet equal in the spirituality of their concerns. In Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit, Winterson demonstrates how a woman's love flies in the face of a community's belief system and undergoes something like John of the Cross's "dark night of the soul"², a wilderness experience, through love and betrayal. In Gut Symmetries, she suggests that the alchemist's quest personified by Paracelsus and re-presented through quantum physics is about more than turning lead into gold, or deciding on the precise behaviour of sub-atomic particles. In her view, the outward pursuit of scientific

knowledge becomes a mirror for the inner transformation of personal “lead” into transcendent “gold”. Irving through the characters of both Owen and Dr Daruwalla, portrays an individual’s mystical quest for identity and self-hood through adverse experience, and the complex challenges presented by the life “lived” in that narrative.

Part of Irving’s project through his novels is to celebrate writing itself. In commenting on his writing Irving says:

The novel itself, its structure, its story, its characters - this means more to me than any agenda that can be extracted from a novel . . . I am a nineteenth-century novelist - at least an old-fashioned one. I like plot, developed characters, the passage of time; the seamlessness of a novel’s storytelling matters to me, a purposeful structure to the story. My idol is Dickens. Even the “contemporary” novelists I like are old-fashioned storytellers: Grass, Garcia Marquez, Robertson Davies, Salman Rushdie. (A “modern” exception would be Graham Greene.) (1997, private correspondence)

In terms of the specific spiritual content of A Prayer for Owen Meany Irving is more careful to identify the context from which he speaks:

I don’t think about God. I don’t go to church. In OWEN MEANY I was detailing the kind of story that would possibly make a believer out of me; in short, I would have to be a witness to some kind of miracle, something utterly inexplicable. And even then, it is not God who makes a believer out of Johnny Wheelwright; it is Owen Meany - he’s the miracle. So I have never been entirely convinced that OWEN MEANY is a “religious” or even a “spiritual” novel. (1997, private correspondence)

What Irving does in A Prayer for Owen Meany is to re-tell an old story, the coming to faith of an unbeliever through “some kind of miracle, something utterly inexplicable”. The link in terms of postmodern discourse is the process of making meaning, the discovery of significance, not in a fixed place or attached to absolute “Truth”, but along the way, in the concrete circumstances of the journey itself.

In A Son of the Circus, Irving tells the story of a man who embarks on a quest-like journey towards self-discovery. Farrokh Daruwalla is a man in search of a number of elusive truths. From the start of the novel we find him in Bombay, as an orthopaedic surgeon intent on identifying the mysterious gene responsible for dwarfism by studying the performing circus midgets. As the narrative unfolds we learn that he is also a closet screenwriter who creates B-grade movie stories about Inspector Dhar. Part of the novel is concerned with unravelling the real-life story of John D, a twin who plays the detective on-screen.

Dr Daruwalla also becomes involved in a murder case, trying to identify a trans-sexual serial killer whom he first encountered twenty years previously. Mixed up in all these searches is the doctor's own search for a place he can belong. The doctor is born in Bombay, has been trained at university in Vienna, and practises medicine in Toronto. India provides the multiple-religious setting for Farrokh, an Anglican trying to decide how Indian he actually is. At the novel's conclusion Farrokh realises that the only place he can really call "his" is the circus - a fictional space of multiple possibilities which is simple enough for a child to understand, and elastic enough to accommodate the uncertainties of the doctor's identity. Farrokh/Dr Daruwalla begins his scientific research in the circus, and it is in the circus that his search is contextualised - the hunt for an unknown gene becomes the symbol for all of the doctor's quests. The "truth" embodied by a single strand of DNA located "somewhere" in the blood samples he takes from the Indian dwarfs is right beneath his eyes on the microscope slides, if only he could find it.

Not to make too much of a point about it, it is interesting to note that Dr Daruwalla, Inspector Dhar, John D, and even the mysterious Mrs Dogar are all textually connected by the first letter of their surnames. They also become at least four crucial threads to the web of characters within A Son of the Circus, anchor points without which the novel's plot could not be as deliberately interconnected as it is.

"Circus" is a very suggestive metaphor for connection between postmodernism's constant wavering and wandering between the opposites which deconstructive criticism constantly inverts, perverts and subverts, and the spiritual journey towards personal truth. Spiritual answers lie as close to a Christian living in a postmodern world as the answers to Dr Daruwalla's gene-hunt lie in the blood he continually examines. This is the postmodern paradox. Former systems of interpreting reality, particularly modernism's view that a "systemization of human knowledge was possible based in the certainties of modern logic combined with a scientific explanation of 'sense data' " (Cahoone 1996, 6), have been revealed as wholly inadequate. Such "totalising narratives" tried to fix meaning in a definite, empirical space. Postmodernism believes that fragments of truth are scattered everywhere but resist all our attempts to pin them down to specific points. It is through this understanding

that possibilities for truth and meaning lie within the process of gathering and reading clues.

Cahoone (1996, 13) acknowledges that giving a definition of postmodernism is difficult - some would say impossible - “not only because there is much disagreement among writers labelled postmodern, but also because some postmodernists would deny having any doctrines or theories at all”. However, he does offer a list of some of the more significant themes and ideas appearing in postmodernist work. According to Cahoone, four themes make up the objects of postmodern criticism while the fifth is the process of its positive method.

Postmodernism offers criticism of: 1) presence or presentation (versus representation and construction), 2) origin (versus phenomena), 3) unity (versus plurality) and, 4) transcendence of norms (versus their immanence). It is seen to actively offer an analysis of phenomena through constitutive otherness. To get right to the heart of this inquiry: What are the implications of Cahoone’s model when applied to Irving and Winterson’s texts?

Cahoone (1996, 14) states that Presence “refers to the quality of immediate experience and to the objects thereby immediately ‘presented’ ”. Presentation actually presupposes representation, treating any claims to objective truth with solid scepticism. In her two novels under consideration, Winterson tackles the presentation of formerly presented “truths” by a Pentecostal Christian community, and by the previous models of “reality” presented by physics paradigms. Both of her central character-narrators are women, challenging the patriarchal presentation of fictionalised “truths”, and both are engaged in the construction of lesbianism as an alternative worldview to Biblical heterosexuality in Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit and the unspoken rules for marital infidelity in Gut Symmetries, where Jove can take a lover, but explodes when he discovers that his lover has entered into an affair with his wife.

Winterson takes two existing models of knowledge (Christianity and physics) and inverts them, re-presenting them as new ways of making meanings from life’s experiences. The “presence” she continually problematises is the “story” of heterosexual love, the implicit rules which her characters break by crossing the threshold into lesbian love. By offering us representations, Winterson is providing re-readings of old texts, and we err in our reading if we fail to re-examine the claims and restrictions of “blind”, religious, rule-bound Christianity

and if we fail to see that the new models of physics celebrated by Jove and Alice offer new possibilities for interpreting “reality”.

Irving challenges the notion of what “coming to belief” means, in the interwoven stories of Owen and his friend John Wheelwright in A Prayer for Owen Meany, as well as in the search for selfhood experienced by Farrokh Daruwalla and characters such as Rahul, Nancy and Martin Mills in A Son of the Circus. Owen is a cartoon Christ, a trouble-maker who challenges the systems of knowledge he negotiates, such as his school head-master’s attempts at discipline, and by playing a transformed “Baby Jesus” in the Sunday School nativity play and a terrifying “Ghost of Christmas Yet to Come” in the performance of Dickens’s “A Christmas Carol”. Through the miracle of Owen’s bizarre interpretation of what he believes is his divinely appointed mission from God, John Wheelwright comes to believe in God. Irving re-presents a possibility for radical conversion which attempts to answer Frederick Buechner’s challenge, “If there were no room for doubt, there would be no room for me” (Irving, epigraph to A Prayer for Owen Meany).

In A Son of the Circus, Farrokh has to negotiate the re-presentation of his own identity in India. Faced by the religious “circus” of India’s multi-faith dimensions, Farrokh tries to understand why the Anglican experience of God is the most meaningful for him, just as John Wheelwright finds more comfort in the safe, ordered readings of The Book of Common Prayer than he does in the confusing multiple texts of the Bible. Farrokh also struggles to understand the re-presented nature of himself in India. Is Farrokh Indian or Canadian, or a conglomeration of both? Similarly John Wheelwright must decide if he has truly become an anti-American Canadian, whether his identity has been transformed over the twenty years since Owen died. The postmodern problem with presence is sometimes expressed in the phrase, “There is nothing outside the text” (Cahoone 1996, 14) which does not dismiss the “real” world outside the text, but argues that only through the language of texts, representations and mediation can we encounter real inroads to meaning-making possibilities.

When postmodernism challenges Origin, it is criticising “the notion of the source of whatever is under consideration, a return to which is often considered the aim of rational inquiry” (Cahoone 1996, 14). The rationalist project of modernism sought to see *behind*, to travel

beyond phenomena to their ultimate foundation. Cahoon (14-15) says that “for modern philosophies of the self (eg existentialism, psycho-analysis, phenomenology, even Marxism), the attempt to discover the origin of the self is the road to authenticity”. The postmodern project, where it can be tracked, denies this possibility of ever returning to, recapturing, or rediscovering “the origin, source, or any deeper reality behind phenomena, and casts doubt on or even denies its existence” (Cahoon, 15). One of postmodernism’s more famous formulations, “Every author is a dead author” is in Cahoon’s analysis “an example of the denial of origin, because it denies that the meaning of a text can be ‘authoritatively’ revealed through reference to authorial intentions” (15). By this the intentions of an author are dismissed as being no more relevant than any other considerations in terms of understanding a text, because an author is not the *origin* of a text and can claim no privilege over any other elements.

In Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit, Winterson explicitly tackles the origins of meaning-making through her use of the first eight books of the Old Testament which become a textual grid laid over her narrative. She uses Old Testament names (Genesis to Ruth) but re-writes the Biblical stories setting her central character inside those re-constructed texts. The origins of the Biblical Genesis become as problematic as Jeanette’s adoption into a Pentecostal family and church community. In Gut Symmetries Winterson takes a triangular love affair and invests it with as much “weight” as the dialogues on time and space which Alice and Jove debate in their travelling lectures. Alice, in loving a woman and the woman’s husband at the same time, questions the origin of love - whether love resides in a fixed heterosexual place or whether it can exist in symmetry with other simultaneous loves.

Irving takes the problematic account of Owen Meany’s conception and uses it as a claim for Owen’s possible divinity, at least in the mind of a character like John. What is Owen’s origin? We cannot attach it to a fixed place. He exists as a textual phenomenon. On a macro level, by writing a parallel story of America’s spiritual decline, Irving can only point to key phenomena - the Vietnam crisis, the radical change in American thinking in the Sixties with regard to the notion of individual “freedom”, the Iran-Contra “lies” which Irving sees America blindly accepting from the mouth of Ronald Reagan. At no point does Irving present, or attempt to re-present a fixed origin for Owen or America’s story: they exist as

textualised phenomena.

In A Son of the Circus, Irving presents a narrative deeply engrossed in trying to discover the origins for certain phenomena. Farrokh wants to know where his identity can be found. Rahul seeks a deeper answer for his and “her” trans-sexual desires, as fervently as Martin Mills wants to discover the “real” Jesus who will never leave him, and Nancy seeks to confront the origin of her sexual fears as a means of gaining personal freedom. Yet none of these characters can find a specific origin to negotiate. Each of them can only point to superficial phenomena which Irving never attaches to deeper “truth”. Farrokh only feels comfortable, only feels “real” in the superficial world of the circus. Rahul draws cartoon elephants on the bellies of his women victims, an act of superficially textualising a deep childhood anxiety about his Aunt Promila and his own enraged sexuality. Martin Mills chooses to abandon the priesthood because it offers him no original answers, and instead comes out of the closet as John D’s gay twin, preferring a new and uncertain sexual existence to his former vows of chastity. Nancy must forsake her origin as a confused smalltown girl as an identity she can never comprehend. The question can be asked, is Nancy’s a case of an inauthentic solution to her identity crisis, her “crisis of representation”? She deliberately chooses a policeman who will represent/re-present a “safe reality” rather than the uncertain and unpredictable one she can no longer handle. Her “reality” is set in India with her Indian policeman husband, not in the past with the sexual nightmares of a drug-dealing boyfriend and the crazed trans-sexual who bludgeoned him to death. Like the ridiculous acts of the Bombay performing midgets, Irving presents a novel of intriguing phenomena which continually defies any attempt to locate an absolute origin as an attainable end to the search for self.

Postmodernism problematises the concept of Unity as a means of destabilising former “centres” of knowledge. Cahoone (1996, 15) suggests that “Virtually in every kind of intellectual endeavour, postmodernism tries to show that what others have regarded as a *unity*, a single, integrated existence or concept, is plural”. Applying this to the structures of human existence, words, meanings, experiences, human selves and societies can only be constituted in terms of their relations to other things. Because these relational connections are usually plural (i.e. words are defined in relation to other words, new meanings are made in opposition or relation to other established meanings, experiences are weighed up against

other experiences, human selves and societies find an identity in relating to other selves and societies) the individual becomes plural as well. Nothing in this analysis is simply itself, immediate or totally present. In the postmodern mind no “reading” of anything can be whole or final.

As Cahoon explains (15):

[A] text can be read in an indefinitely large number of ways, none of which provides the complete or true meaning. The human self is not a simple unity, hierarchically composed, solid, self-controlled; rather it is a multiplicity of forces or elements. It would be more true to say that I have *selves*, than a *self*.

It is this world of constructed *selves* that Winterson writes directly into. Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit takes the story of a young woman who is trying to make sense of her self as she undergoes a process of forbidden love. Her church community constructs the self in terms of Biblical definitions and religious labels. When Jeanette violates that religious definition by entering a lesbian relationship, she acknowledges a new, emerging, potential definition of her self. She is not just a “Nice Christian Girl” but a sexually awakened woman too. Through each experience she undergoes, Jeanette realises that her former self is being re-defined and re-created. The title of the novel speaks to this fact. Jeanette’s mother says categorically that “oranges are the only fruit” but Jeanette learns quickly that there are many more varieties and instances of “fruit” (new sexual and spiritual experiences) than her mother’s or her church’s “oranges”.

In Gut Symmetries, Alice also realises that a given self can only be understood in terms of the multiple selves it consists of. The self called Alice is at one instance a woman who lectures on Paracelsus and the new physics. Yet an *other* self, also called Alice, is the woman who falls in love with Jove, an *other* self who is “working on a new model of the cosmos, dimensionality of hyperspace, ghost universes symmetrical with ours” (GS, 15). Further into the novel, this former self called Alice, falls in love with Stella, Jove’s wife, and becomes further problematised. At each step of this postmodern text, just as we begin to formulate a notion of a character’s stable self, that self is challenged, fragmented, and re-presented in a new fictionalised structure.

When Irving creates a character like Owen Meany, we experience a character in the process

of trying to locate his self. When Owen hits the baseball which kills his best friend's mother, he starts to ask if his selfhood is now defined as an entity whose hands are God's instruments. As Owen's story is narrated through the focalising voice of another character, John Wheelwright, we realise that the *self* we know as Owen Meany is difficult to track down. At times in the text he is the Baby Jesus with an erection in the nativity play, and at another he becomes the terrifying ghost of "Christmas Yet to Come" who sees his own death date which prophetically appears on Scrooge's tombstone. At school as a Christlike troublemaker who enrages the upholders of moral behaviour, Owen's self is at one instance "The Voice" that preaches about school politics in upper case letters from the pages of the Gravesend school newspaper. At another moment Owen becomes the mastermind convincing the school basketball team to carry the headmaster's VW beetle up the stairs into the school assembly hall without damaging it in any way. The car is subsequently wrecked by the school staff's attempts to remove it. However, the most problematic challenge is how to account for Owen's "miraculous" foreknowledge of his own death. The key problem faced by John Wheelwright is how to account for the self he has experienced as Owen.

In A Son of the Circus, Irving presents a novel packed with characters whose identities cannot be attached to separate selves but must be defined in relation to other characters, and to former instances of their own earlier selves. Farrokh is a central self, constantly engrossed in understanding the selves he has been - Bombay born, Viennese educated, naturalised Canadian. Is he a successful doctor engrossed in useful research, decoding the genetic cause for dwarfism, or is he a failed artist who must be content with writing B-grade Inspector Dhar movie scripts? The novel's account of Martin Mills's journey from troubled childhood, through his term as a Jesuit missionary, to his final unveiling as a gay twin presents several *selves*. The same can be said for the radical transformation of Rahul the "uncomfortable" boy who becomes the second Mrs Dogar through a sex-change but cannot let go of his sexual rage against "real" women. Irving creates a world of fragmented selves, none of whom can be located in one specific presentation of text.

The last important feature which Cahoone diagnoses in a postmodern worldview is its denial of the Transcendence of norms. In his argument, "Norms such as truth, goodness, beauty, rationality, are no longer regarded as independent of the processes they serve to govern or

judge, but are rather products of and immanent in those processes” (Cahoone 1996, 15). For example, where a Christian might use the idea of belief in a personal saviour to make sense of social order, postmodernism regards that belief as itself the product of the social relations that it serves to comprehend. In other words, the idea is seen as having been created at a certain time and place (the first century church in fact) and re-interpreted through each church movement to serve certain interests, and is thus dependent on a particular intellectual and social context. As Cahoone (15) moves on to assert, this position in effect rejects idealism, or any dualism which claims that some things, for example Goodness and Justice, are independent of nature or semiosis, experience or social interests. Cahoone’s formulation is useful:

The concept “good” and the act of calling something good are not independent of the things we want to call “good”. This leads postmodernists to respond to the normative claims of others by displaying the processes of thought, writing, negotiation, and power which produced those very normative claims. It does not mean that postmodernists fail to make their own normative claims, but that they unleash a form of critical analysis which makes all normative claims problematic, including their own. (Cahoone, 15)

In both of Winterson’s novels an ideal which is highly problematised is love. Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit holds up a church community’s ideal of love (heterosexual, sanctified by God through marriage) against Jeanette’s new experiences (homosexual and outside of any possibility of marriage) and shows how that claim of *love* is in place to serve interests like the stability of a family structure and is dependent on a specific intellectual and social context, viz. the Pentecostal interpretation of Biblical texts in 1950’s England. Winterson challenges that world view’s construction of love, especially when it is compared to a young woman’s experience of same-sex love, and its life-changing consequences for her. In Gut Symmetries, Winterson challenges heterosexual love inside marriage as a problematic ideal. Her central character Alice falls in love, at the same time, with both a man and his wife, offering the possibility of a love which is at the same time inside and outside marriage. On a macro level, Winterson uses Alice and Jove to challenge former ideals of Physics’ conceptions of reality. Alice attaches Paracelsus to new physics, and Jove is set on locating ghost universes symmetrical with ours. Both characterisations of the “new” scientist as a pioneer on the threshold of discoveries which will change our views of existence present a rejection of and scepticism about former claims to knowledge about relationships, both personal and scientific

ways of relating to *others*.

Irving creates an entire narrative which asks what it would take to transform a radical anti-theist into a “believer”. Through Owen Meany he investigates normative claims to divine truth revealed through miracles, and offers John Wheelwright’s “Damascus Road” encounter as a case-study. Owen as a cartoon Christ challenges the notion of an historical Jesus, presenting a textualised character (like the problematic identity of Jesus in the gospel accounts) who resists the attempts of others to comprehend his “mission” from God. Owen believes he knows four divinely revealed things: that his uncanny voice will never change; that he is “God’s instrument”; that he is going to die on a specific date; and the way he is going to die (OM, 432-433). Through the privileged knowledge we carry of Owen’s miraculous life, and of John’s difficulty in understanding the story of Owen, Irving provides a challenge to the notion of what constitutes belief in God. To use Cahoon’s term, the “norm” which Irving tackles here is authentic belief.

Through A Son of the Circus, Irving creates a text which attempts to unpack the notion of identity. The novel is made up of characters on identity quests, from the search for the “real” Farrokh to the search for a serial killer’s identity. Irving, in postmodern fashion, shows that identity does not reside in a fixed place. Like Daruwalla it moves perpetually, just as he drifts from Bombay, to Vienna, to Toronto, and back most years for his medical “pilgrimage”. Some identities make large moves, like Nancy’s original drifting from an Iowa pig farm to her uneasy and insecure identity in India. The sub-textual stories of the Bombay circuses and the Bombay Hollywood productions of pantheistic soap operas and Inspector Dhar movies reiterate a postmodern obsession with superficial phenomena. In this way Irving points to glossy surfaces, to the epidermis of experience, the *pornographic*, which postmodernism foregrounds to the detriment of “truths” we were previously led to believe “lie beneath the surface”. One has to ask, Which is more real: the idiotic antics of the circus dwarfs and Inspector Dhar’s problem-solving skills or the fictionalised accounts of Farrokh’s search for identity?

In A Son of the Circus for instance, there is a constant slippage between the identities or *selves* we attach to Inspector Dhar. At times Dhar is Irving’s fictional construct, a character contained in Irving’s narrative. At other times (occupying two parallel spaces simultaneously)

Dhar is Farrokh's construct, the hero of his detective movies. To the consuming Bombay audience, Inspector Dhar is also the subject of a love-hate obsession. He is adored by Indian women "groupies" (an irony reinforced by their ignorance of his being gay), and despised by "real" Indian policeman who hate his character's virulent attacks on corrupt police and their ineptitude. There is also the question of Inspector Dhar's off-screen character who becomes involved in a textually "real" murder enquiry which profoundly affects John D as the "real person" within the text as he interacts with *other* characters like Nancy and the malevolent Rahul/Mrs Dogar.

As a framework for applying the above four ways of re-presenting material, postmodernism uses the idea of *Constitutive otherness* to analyse the world as it perceives it. In Cahoon's overview (1996, 16), "What appear to be cultural units - human beings, words, meanings, ideas, philosophical systems, social organisations - are maintained in their apparent unity only through an active process of exclusion, opposition, and hierarchization". Postmodernist strategies re-present external phenomena as foreign or "other". They do this by re-presenting a hierarchical dualism in which the human being, word, meaning or other "cultural unit" is privileged and favoured whilst the *other* is devalued in some way, thus inverting the traditional modes of hierarchy. Postmodernism challenges this artificial dualism where a privileged group actively maintains and produces its "elite" position by picturing itself in thought, literature, law and art as not having the properties of under-privileged groups, or by constructing an account of these groups which emphasises their lack of "privileged" properties.

Cahoon argues that this process is best expressed metaphorically in the idea that it is "margins that constitute the text" (16). An informed postmodern analyst will focus on the textual elements which have been seldom mentioned, are virtually absent, and implicitly or explicitly devalued. This applies "not only to the stated message or theme of a text, but to its style as well. Linguistic tropes, such as metaphors, which other readers may take as secondary or peripheral to the meaning of a text, are read by postmodernists as crucial to the constitution of the text's privileged theme" (Cahoon, 16). It is this process of reading-against-the-grain which postmodernism explicitly employs in its construction of meanings. This means that postmodern texts will re-read former dualistic approaches in their own narratives,

foregrounding elements which were previously marginalised:

Sometimes implicit and sometimes explicit in this kind of analysis through constitutive otherness is the claim that the process of exclusion or repression is false, unstable, and/or immoral: false in that it is mendacious, a lie; unstable in that the repression must sooner or later be admitted, forcing an acceptance of the excluded factors into the representation of the privileged unit; immoral when it takes the form of social oppression. Every text is built on some kind of exclusion or repression, hence it belies itself and, when read carefully, undermines its own message. Once we become aware of the constitutive otherness in the text, we see that the text itself, despite its own intentions, alerts us to the dependence of the privileged theme on the marginalized element. The repressed eventually returns to haunt us. (Cahoone, 17)

This active re-reading strategy appears in the work of texts which can be classified as postmodern. In Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit, Winterson uses a Biblical framework to read against and foregrounds those phenomena which were omitted, overlooked, or underprivileged in traditional texts. She uses the same labels, the names of Old Testament books, and re-presents their stories. Instead of a chosen people, she tells the story of one woman living against the dominant thinking of her Pentecostal community. Jeanette's struggle is foregrounded. The story is told from her point of view: her emerging sexuality as an *other* against religiously defined heterosexuality as Winterson reads against the grain of a blurred religious worldview.

In Gut Symmetries the story of an unfaithful husband is re-presented from the previously marginalised perspective of a female lover caught between a husband and wife. Alice is bi-sexual. Confronted by the hurt and complexity of betrayal across the gender line, her intimate access to both Jove and Stella allows Winterson to comment on love as a common and equally problematic experience. The symmetry between the sexes is foregrounded, as Winterson looks for connection between *others* rather than just the experiences which divide people.

Irving makes Owen Meany a marginalised cartoon character who becomes a hero and thus the means to belief for John Wheelwright. The parallel story in A Prayer for Owen Meany is the collapse of meaning in America as it moves from the angst of the Vietnam years to Reagan's notorious administration. Irving's novel is narrated from the margins, by an anti-American Canadian who has found belief through Owen's enigmatic life story. In A Son

of the *Circus*, Irving sets a man on a quest for self knowledge. Farrokh is a voice from the margin, a person-of-colour, an Indian-born man from the East who encounters racism in all of the Western cities he passes through. In Vienna he faces the racial slurs of post-war British expatriates and the Austrian beer-drinking public. In London, he hears his father insulted by white “peers” in the Royal College of Surgeons, and in Toronto he knows that white women particularly are nervous of his Indian complexion. Yet in India too, Farrokh is uncomfortably marginalised by his years in the West, by the *otherness* he has unknowingly cultivated away from his country of birth.

Winterson and Irving articulate all of these postmodern concerns in their writing and explicitly employ the strategy of *constitutive otherness* to tell the stories of characters in search of identity and a more coherent knowledge of themselves. The spiritual aspect of their writing arguably lies in the foregrounding of “spiritual” concerns. In the place where one least expects to discover spiritual concerns, here the connection lies. What Taylor argues from a theological position, what Belsey diagnoses as the postmodern yearning for a believable love, and what Cahoon identifies as a postmodern strategy, are the spaces for meaning-making which lie in the gaps, in the margins of texts.

In the move from Biblical narratives, the wisdom texts of the Judeo-Christian worldview, to the postmodern texts of contemporary writers like Winterson and Irving the same questions are continually being asked. To borrow from Dan Wylie’s analysis of the spiritual concerns of poetry,³ three key questions applicable to contemporary writing are: What is the role of fiction in expressing spirituality? Of what value is writing in our lives? and most challenging, What are we doing here, in this life, now? (Wylie 1997). The easy answer to offer for such an inquiry is that where language ends, true spirituality starts. In other words, the realm of spiritual experience (as a site of value, purpose and meaning) is being communicated through contemporary fiction as “real” yet at the same time it remains out of reach through language.

It is more difficult to locate the meaning of spirituality in our postmodern context. When postmodernism is seen as a worldview which criticises presence, origin, unity and transcendence through the strategy of constitutive otherness the answer may lie in re-presenting spirituality as firmly grounded in today’s postmodern context. What Winterson

and Irving show through their texts is that the former claims to truth maintained by a Christian world view are problematic. Christianity, as a world view in the postmodern world, finds its validity in the process of moving towards a truth embodied in Jesus Christ. The experience of such a relationship is textual - in making meaning from the Biblical accounts of Jesus, and applying these readings and multiple re-readings back to life.

Christianity, like postmodernism, is actively involved in criticising presence, origin, unity and transcendence as sites of meaning. Four questions a Christian might well ask are:

How can a person tangibly experience the presence of the Holy Spirit, the divine *Other*?

What exactly is the origin of life-changing belief in a personal saviour? How can an individual find spiritual unity within a community of *others* who might not understand the nature of this mystical quest or journey? and, Can a person move beyond the limitations of a rule-bound faith to an understanding of deeper transcendence or connection with “God”?⁴

What this clash between postmodernism and traditional Christianity reveals is the need for a set of new definitions of the Christian quest which would accord with postmodernist restrictions and both epistemological and ontological constraints. The account of “transcendence” above still credits God as a “transcendental signifier” somehow knowable beyond the ways in which he is (textually) presented and re-presented to us. Starting from Levinas’s viewpoint, a postmodern worldview seeks to redefine the “spiritual” as a construction or interpretation to account for the elements of otherness/Otherness which impinge unbidden upon an otherwise textual reality. In other words, this is the “fictional” mirror of otherness/Otherness, since all “other” instances of realities (by tying together signifiers and definite signifieds) automatically disqualify themselves.

In today’s world (c.1999) a relationship with a divine *Other* is a journey towards meaning, continuously deferred through the experience of living. Postmodernism is a process of reading and constructing texts and is intimately involved in a project which seeks to distinguish between the word itself (logos), apprehension of the word, and interpretation of the word, where *word* designates textual phenomena as a site of meaning. Cahoon’s analysis (1996, 17) of the postmodern project offers a three-part classification, parts of which are intentionally overlapping and “indicate the kind of aims that can be embodied by writing called postmodern”.

Historical postmodernism argues that “the social and/or political and/or cultural organisation of modernity has changed fundamentally, so that we now face a novel world”. With this perspective, postmodernism becomes an historical claim, that “Modernity is at an end, or is undergoing a deep transformation” (Cahoone, 17). Methodological postmodernism rejects the possibility of establishing any foundations for knowledge, and is deeply sceptical about the reliability of claims to knowledge. This type of postmodern enquiry is “purely negative, that is, it claims or shows the inadequacy or problematic nature of other forms of writing and talking and theorising, but does not explicitly offer an alternative” (Cahoone, 18). Positive postmodernism is a *positive* reinterpretation and re-presentation of any phenomenon presented through traditional theories of knowledge and linguistic meaning, or the human interests evident in the construction of such distinctions. As Cahoone explains, such a representation reconceives “the self, or God, or nature, or knowledge, or society, or art, or anything, given the critique of unity, origin, presence, etc” (18) and utilises a type of writing which “applies general postmodern themes to particular subject matters in order to offer a new vision or understanding of them. It offers an alternative” (18).

What I suggest in addition to Cahoone’s analysis is a niche of existential postmodernism probably most easily absorbed into the realm of positive postmodernism summarised above. In this way a proto-postmodern world view such as existentialism can be re-presented and re-invested with new vision and understanding. In the works examined by both Winterson and Irving, traditionally existential issues such as the nature of radical freedom and the importance of individual choice and responsibility are re-presented in the debates around Winterson’s presentation of sexuality and spiritual choices, as well as the quest for artistic integrity and authenticity revealed in Irving’s constructed worlds. The problematic realm of the murky spiritual locale of the other/Other is given a context for debate when postmodernism’s rejection of absolutised forms is read against existentialism’s acceptance of painfully responsible choices.

Winterson and Irving as postmodern writers, are mostly Positive in their creative projects. Winterson shows through her two novels that Pentecostal Christianity and traditional physics are not the only frameworks against which to analyse or make meaning from sexuality and

love experiences. Irving demonstrates that there is an intricate process involved in locating the self and personal identity. In other words, both writers have taken traditional definitions of love and the quest for identity and offered a challenging criticism of them. Having shown us how the objects of their writing are problematic, both writers then offer a positive alternative.

Winterson finds grace in the alternative offered by same-sex love, and through the application of newer, more questioning models of reality. Or if this seems too extreme, consider that Winterson uses lesbianism as a catalyst which allows an openness and receptiveness to otherness/Otherness following logically from her disturbance of heterosexual stereotypes. Irving presents identity as an internal definition which can only be written by the self experiencing the quest for it. By offering answers in the margins of the meaning-making journey, both writers use the postmodern strategy of constitutive otherness where an encounter with *others/Others* is of particular importance.

In detailing the spiritual aspects of the epistemological and ontological journeys described in the writings of Winterson and Irving, a central question is: How does Christianity connect with the postmodern project? At the heart of the Christian project is the “character” of Jesus. A number of questions follow: What is the character of Jesus? Who is he? Is “the way of the cross” merely the heroic act of a good man? Is it a symbolic act only, a metaphor, a loaded sign? In today’s postmodern age of doubt and sceptical questioning, the mystical quest for a cogent way of criticising presence, origin, unity, and transcendence through a process of contemplating and re-presenting constitutive otherness is shared by both the Christian quest and the postmodern project.

In three gospel narratives the “character” Jesus tackles each of these concerns by asking his disciples a key question which unlocks the door separating the postmodernist and the Christian. The exact question occurs three times:

“But what about you?” he asked. “Who do you say I am?”

(Matthew 16:15 NIV; Mark 8:29 NIV; Luke 9:20 NIV)

In effect this question becomes: Who do you say I am? What text will you use to *read* me? What character will you assign to me? Postmodern texts do not offer closed meanings because the “responsibility” for meaning-making is transferred from the writer to an other/Other who attempts to make sense of what has been said. This process is initiated and sustained through the medium of a text, where the responsibility, the onus for meaning-making is shifted, relocated, offered to the reader. Perhaps an *Other* way of re-presenting this process is to ask if the reader will become both a hearer and a doer of the word.

This process of meaning-making is shared by Winterson and Irving as postmodern writers and with Christianity, a reading process which constructs belief. Both authors are writers whose work demonstrates elements of the postmodern, offering a distinct challenge to previous ways of knowing. The spiritual aspect of their work, particularly evident in the ways the characters in their novels construct personal meaning through and against Christian models of knowledge uses the postmodern strategy of constitutive otherness to offer a positive alternative.

In a literary world where postmodernism and Christianity are seen to be incompatible worldviews, Jeanette Winterson and John Irving offer an opportunity for both systems of knowing to meet. It is clear though that certain questions raised by both writers (such as “what is spirituality?”) cannot be answered categorically in the terms accepted jointly by this thesis and these novelists. If one sees either the postmodern view or the Christian view as the only authentic process towards a better understanding of the question “What are we doing here, in this life, now?” then we lose out on the meaning-making possibilities offered by an honest consideration of both. If (and this is an omnipotent if) we look at the connections which deepen each world view’s knowledge of the world it seeks to understand, then we begin to experience the rare delight, the ecstasy and the textasy, of glimpsing the balance between earth and sky.

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Endnotes to Conclusion.

1. *Spirituality* as a tangible concept, like *postmodernism*, defies all attempts to pin down its exact meaning. For instance, speaking as a self-defined ecofeminist, Charlene Spretnak writes:

The contemporary spiritual awakening assumes many shapes: the return of Central and Eastern Europeans, including numerous Soviet citizens, to Christian churches . . . the spiritual revitalisation in Latin America located in the base communities; the sincere piety in fundamentalism and the fanatical political uses of it . . . the renewal movement within Judaism; the growing interest in Native American spirituality; and perhaps most widespread, the unnamed personal searching for spiritual grounding in modern cultures, which have quite deliberately denied the importance, if not the very existence, of such concerns (1993, 2).

2. John of the Cross refers to this “dark night” as a direct challenge to the “believer”:

At a certain point in the spiritual journey God will draw a person from the beginning stage to a more advanced stage. At this stage the person will begin to engage in religious exercises and grow deeper in the spiritual life.

Such souls will likely experience what is called “the dark night of the soul.” The “dark night” is when those persons lose all the pleasure that they once experienced in their devotional life. This happens because God wants to purify them and move them on to greater heights.

After a soul has been converted by God, that soul is nurtured and caressed by the Spirit. Like a loving mother, God cares for and comforts the infant soul by feeding it spiritual milk. Such souls will find great delight in this stage . . . But there will come a time when God will bid them to grow deeper (Foster & Bryan Smith 1993, 42).

3. Dan Wylie’s original formulation resulted from his attempt to lecture on “Spirituality and Poetry” and encountering a difficult problem he posed to his students and himself:

“What is the role of poetry in expressing spirituality?”, which is a narrowed way of asking, “Of what value is poetry in our lives?” Which is further, I underline with a forefinger, a narrowed way of phrasing the only question worth asking: What are we doing here, in this life, now? (Wylie 1997).

4. The immediate response to this last challenge might well be to ask whether such transcendence is a legitimate goal. Is there an “hors d’texte”; and must the meaning of transcendental claims be uncovered in their contexts in the here and now, and nowhere else of which we can speak?

/ends

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