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THE REDEMPTIVE IMAGINATION: THE FICTION OF JOHN IRVING

A Thesis
Presented to
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of
The University of Ottawa

by
Caroline Coltman

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ABSTRACT

THE REDEMPTIVE IMAGINATION: THE FICTION OF JOHN IRVING

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Using Richard Rorty's Contingency, Solidarity and Irony, John Barth's "The Literature of Replenishment," and Christian theology as frames of reference, this thesis argues that Irving recognizes the contingency of language systems which shape our personal and public networks of "beliefs, desires and experiences" and presents the imagination, which enters into, selects, and shapes various public and private "texts," as a moral and unifying force. From The Water-Method Man, The World According to Garp, and The Hotel New Hampshire through to The Cider House Rules, A Prayer for Owen Meany, and A Son of the Circus, Irving's view of the intertextual relationship between the imagination, metafiction and morality evolves. In his later novels, Irving suggests that ironic questioning of "final vocabularies" leads to both personal freedom and an increased tolerance for others. Thus, this thesis argues that Irving employs post-modernist means to present what is, in effect, a Romantic-humanist view of the world.

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CHAPTER ONE

The World and John Irving: An Introduction to Irving's Writing and the Critical and Popular Response

John Barth once noted that "a gifted writer is likely to rise above what he takes to be his aesthetic principles, not to mention what others take to be his aesthetic principles" (200). If John Irving were to stop writing tomorrow, this quotation could serve as a fitting epitaph to his literary career, since a number of critics have found his "aesthetic principles" wanting, and Irving's own literary criticism and statements about his aesthetic are vague and hard to reconcile with his literary practice. In fact, neither the writer nor his critics have adequately articulated how his portrayal of 20th century life as brutal, violent, and chaotic; his eccentric, marginal, yet triumphant characters; his compelling narratives; and his self-reflexive metafictional motifs combine to constitute Irving's vision of the world. Nor have they explained why these texts speak so compellingly to his large popular audience. The key to understanding Irving's vision is implied in Barth's use of the terms "gifted" and "rise above" to describe the process by which inspiration and originality lift the writer beyond theory into art. The creative imagination is the most important among many recurring motifs within John Irving's fiction: it unites his aesthetic and moral concerns and creates for both his characters and his readers a means of transcending the chaos and suffering of modern life. Irving's presentation of the ways in which the imagination shapes and gives meaning to human lives has evolved over the course of his career; and in leading him to rise above "what

he takes to be his aesthetic principles," it has also led him to capture the concerns of his readers and their times.

Irving has published steadily since Setting Free the Bears came out in 1968. To date, he has produced eight novels, which treat both the issues of the decades in which they were written and the fundamental moral and spiritual concerns of the late 20th century. In combining morality, traditional narrative, black comedy, and metafiction, Irving has created complex and eclectic works. As a result, his texts have met with diverse critical and public reactions throughout his career. With the enormous media attention and sales of The World According to Garp (1976), Irving realized the height of his popular success and acclamation thus far; however, his subsequent works have continued to be well received by the general public, as their many weeks on best seller lists attest. His first three works, Setting Free the Bears (1968), The Water-Method Man (1972), and The 158-Pound Marriage (1973) were praised by critics, who appreciated the combination of comic drive and complex structures, but they failed to reach a wide audience (LeClair and McCaffery 185). While Garp was very successful with the public, it received mixed and often hostile reviews. Ironically, in addition to its popularity, Garp now represents the pinnacle of Irving's critical success. After the first round of critical reaction, a number of papers and several book length studies appeared which reevaluated the novel and praised it for its metafictional motifs, narrative drive, and comic humanism.

Since Garp, Irving has published four more novels: The Hotel New Hampshire (1981), The Cider House Rules (1985), A Prayer for Owen Meany (1989), and A Son of the Circus (1994), none of which has received the critical attention of The World According to

Garp. Very little has been written about A Prayer for Owen Meany, for example, and A Son of the Circus has been discussed only in newspaper reviews. Since these two works in many ways represent the culmination of Irving's developing vision, they deserve more attentive readings than they have so far enjoyed.

Critical assessment of Irving's evolution over a twenty-six year period has been rather limited. Much of the criticism written in the 1980s addresses the relation between the growth in Irving's popularity and the development of his craft. In their 1986 book length study of Irving, Carol Harter and James Thompson assess Irving's evolution by focusing upon his popular success, the role of mass culture in his novels, and the conflict, as they see it, between these elements and serious literary endeavour. While recognizing that his "best fiction is embodied in artistically successful forms that will support serious analysis" (8), they see the works after Garp as a falling off, claiming that Irving's attempt to integrate "contrary interests, modes and styles" in The Hotel New Hampshire results in "artistic dissonance" (124), and that The Cider House Rules is a failed polemic "seriously flawed" by Irving's "correct political vision," which distorts the book's larger theme (134). In attempting to include contemporary fictional modes, issues and events in his later works, Irving, they imply, has found great popular success at the expense of artistic merit. And Harter and Thompson are not alone in implying that Irving's development over his first five novels reveals a downward trend. For example, Leslie Fiedler asserts that Garp is the product of a conscious decision to move from high art to low, or "from minority writer to majority writer" (Hill 41).

Yet the integration of metafictional and moral elements in Irving's middle and late

novels reveals a development which is both more subtle and more complex than a move from "high" to "low" art. While Garp does mark a move away from the early university novels and their complex aesthetic structures toward linear narrative and topical social issues, it is misleading to assert that it and The Hotel New Hampshire indicate a radical change in which Irving abandons the concerns of his earlier works to gain greater popularity. Embedded in the more accessible fictions of his middle novels are variations on the same ideas about structure, language and text which are found in the first three. Critics like Michael Priestley have claimed that Irving's first three novels are a working out of a world view which culminates in Garp ("Structure" 88). But although Priestley is speaking of only the first four novels, the trend he perceives holds true throughout Irving's career: an evolving aesthetic is clearly apparent. In fact, Irving employs metafictional motifs and probes the relation of imaginative structures to personal and public responsibility in all of his works.

What has troubled some critics is their perception that a tension exists between Irving's aesthetic and moral concerns, and their belief that this tension is related to his attempt to reach a larger audience. Thus, Harter and Thompson argue that, after Garp, Irving was unable to integrate his topical moral issues and aesthetic concerns without "artistic dissonance." Priestley, on the other hand, views Irving's morality as primarily aesthetic, seeing the metafictional structures in which it is embodied as more significant than the ethical implications raised by a variety of social issues. In short, none of Irving's critics has been able to reconcile his aesthetic morality to the moral questions implicit in contentious topical issues which figure prominently in Irving's texts: violence between men and women in Garp, terrorism and pornography in The Hotel New Hampshire, abortion in The Cider House Rules.

decadence and deceit in A Prayer for Owen Meany, and intolerance in A Son of the Circus. The solution to the aesthetic/moral debate lies in reconceiving Irving's worlds as places in which moral and aesthetic concerns are both related and embodied in metafictional "texts." Questions of language, structure, belief, value, beauty and truth are raised by Irving's artist figures - all of whom create organized belief systems or "texts" which define, structure and give meaning to their world - and in turn, related to the individual's responsibility to himself and to society at large.

The complex relation between contentious social issues, language systems, and metafictional motifs defines John Irving's vision and accounts for his continuing popularity with the reading public. Although Irving's eclectic and somewhat ambiguous critical theory is helpful in so far as it defines his major concerns, it does not directly clarify what that vision is. Throughout his career, in both his criticism and his fiction, Irving has returned to the same moral and aesthetic ideas and has repeatedly employed many of the same literary techniques: accessible fiction, ethical humanism, the Romantic concept of the imagination, the scope and form of the 19th century narrative, and pre-modernist, modernist and post-modernist modes. However, reconciling Irving's literary theory with his fictional practice is difficult.

While Irving's critical comments at first seem direct, clear and reassuringly egalitarian, on closer examination they become troublesome. He has repeatedly taken a populist's approach to the novel by championing accessible, emotional, entertaining fiction. For Irving, the models of the form are the great novels of the nineteenth century (NV 89) and "narrative momentum and emotional interest in the characters" are what make a novel

compelling (KN 223). The novel, he claims:

works more magic ... by moving the reader emotionally than by convincing the reader intellectually - although of course, these pleasures needn't be exclusive. I believe that the voice of the novel isn't really educational: it may be (to some) enlightening, it may nurture the spirit. I admit I'm more interested in speaking to the spirit than to the mind (NV 80).

Here Irving hints at an interesting idea: that which engages the emotions speaks to the spirit. Conversely, he implies that that which appeals only to the intellect does not. Against critical scepticism, Irving defends this assertion that our response to literature should be primarily emotional rather than intellectual by arguing that, in reacting against the "junk on television" (PS 22), we have developed a prejudice which favours intellect and equates emotion with stupidity. However, he does not clarify his suggestion that the emotions, not the intellect, "nurture the spirit," nor does he explain just how this nurturing occurs. In challenging the assumption that the novel is a "creation of and for the mind" (NV 88), Irving has argued against what he sees as increasing specialization in the world at large, specialization which has led in turn to an increasingly "narrow view of literature" (Miller 199). As he told Gabriel Miller, literature which is written for the "fit audience, though few cannot be construed as a higher form of intellectual communication because it's less communicative" (Miller 203). Irving believes that academic preference for difficult works stems from elitism: complex works are valued by "second-year graduate students" because only the highly specialized can "read with much comprehension" (Miller 201). "We must not confuse the intellect with a desire for elitism," he writes. However, instead of elaborating on the relation between

emotion and intellect on the one hand, and accessible and elitist fiction on the other, he defines elitism in tautologous fashion: "Elitism ... is not an intellectual position - it's a snobbism" (202).

While Irving states his democratic views with a refreshingly direct energy, many of his comments are similarly careless and unsupported. In praising Dickens in "The King of the Novel," he asserts that:

What [Dickens] is most unafraid of is sentimentality - of anger, of passion, of emotionally and psychologically revealing himself; 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 (219-220).

In this passage, Irving sets up a distinction between what he sees as the emotional, revealing and daring work of Dickens and the intellectual, self-reflexive and careful craft of the post-modernists. But his terminology and argument are vague: he does not distinguish between sentimentality and emotion, and he implies but does not demonstrate that emotional or sentimental scenes reveal more about the writer than do the self-conscious authorial personas of the post-modernists. This is criticism which embodies what it asserts: he writes with bold strokes and makes contentious statements which create strong reactions in his reader, but provides little material for intellectual debate.

In addition, by championing the emotion and narrative momentum of 19th century novels at the expense of intellectual conceits or aesthetic structures, Irving lays himself open to charges of being simplistic, disingenuous, or even hypocritical. Throughout the 1970s and

80s, he was a vocal critic of the "New Fiction," works which he criticized as self-reflexive, introverted, intellectual, and elitist. Yet despite his claims that his fiction marks a return to the form of the 19th century novel, Irving consistently incorporates into his work many of the same sophisticated literary techniques and metafictional motifs as the post-modernist authors he has criticized. It could also be argued that these elements do not contribute to narrative momentum, emotional engagement or accessibility, all of which Irving has claimed are what make fiction compelling and significant, because many are employed ironically or parodically and can only be perceived intellectually, by an informed reader. Irving's fiction then, if not his theory, is subtle and complex in its integration of metafiction, morality, compelling narrative, and emotionally engaging characters.

To complicate the issue further, elsewhere Irving seems to qualify his position that emotion not intellect constitutes the "heart of the novel," when he acknowledges that there is a place for the intellectual idea in the form. In a 1982 interview with Larry McCaffery, Irving stated that "Art has an aesthetic responsibility to be entertaining. The writer's responsibility is to take hard stuff and make it as accessible as the stuff can be made" (LeClair and McCaffery 186). Speaking to Michael Priestley, Irving further outlined his purpose: "a difficult idea can be easy to read and still hard to understand. That's what I'm trying to do in my work" (504).

What Irving calls the "hard stuff" or the "difficult idea" remains vague but this remark suggests another possible reading of Irving's juxtaposition of emotion and intellect on the one hand and the 19th century and contemporary novel on the other. The opposition could perhaps be more clearly defined as emotional engagement and ironic detachment. What

Irving really seems to respect in Dickens is boldness, immediacy, and most of all, certainty. Writing in a period in which ideas of God, truth and goodness were assumed and shared, Dickens was confident about his ability to move his audience and in so moving them to influence them to social action (KN 214). Writing in an ironic age, one in which we recognize the contingency and plurality of language and belief systems, Irving seems nostalgic for such certainty. He contends that we are more hard-hearted than the Victorians, but it is probably more accurate to say that we are more sceptical: we do not share their assumptions and thus are not moved in the same way. Unlike Dickens, who moved his audience with ease, Irving must employ careful craft to engage the emotions of his sceptical audience. Interspersing sentiment with irony, Irving creates worlds in which we see the contingency of all we hold dear, and thus he makes the "hard stuff," the questions of meaning and value in a secular age, accessible. In addition, he moves his readers emotionally as they recognize the tenuous nature of their existence. Combining Dickens' emotional force with his own late 20th century craft, in his fiction if not in his criticism, Irving acknowledges the contingency and detachment of his own age.

According to Irving, however, compassion not the complexity of ideas is what separates majority writers from minority ones; he writes, "what is always established in the great writer's voice is pity, is sympathy" (NV 88). In "Trying to Save Piggy Snead," his memoir about becoming a writer, Irving recounts his childhood cruelty to a handicapped man, Piggy Snead, Piggy's death in a fire, and Irving's first attempts to invent better realities by creating alternate fates in which Piggy not only survives but triumphs. Irving recalls that in telling his stories in the aftermath of the fire, "I understood that comedy was just another

form of condolence" (18). This newfound faith in the healing power of literature was almost immediately deflated by his pragmatic grandmother, who noted that he would not need to invent better worlds in his stories if he behaved with "a little human decency" in the real one (PS 22). Acts of compassion and artistic invention were thus linked as complementary endeavours in Irving's mind, and these remain a central concern in his work.

For literature to have value, Irving contends that it must be what he calls "a sign of life, rather than a celebration of death." He goes on: "if a novel doesn't address itself to something of human value, I don't see much worth in it. So, to that extent, I'd have to say I'm definitely on the side of 'moral fiction'" (LeClair and McCaffery 187). In this vague and superficial comment about the vitality and morality of literature, Irving again ties himself to writers of the 19th century like Dickens, for whom literature concerned people and society rather than intellectual conceits. But while Irving links himself to 19th century literary tradition, the most obvious connection is not the one he has seized upon. If we define humanism as "an ethic which places human happiness as its central concern," "is sceptical about the supernatural and transcendental," and emphasizes "mutual human responsibility" (Faulkner 1), then we can see close links between Irving's world view and 19th century humanism. According to this view, scepticism is a "method of enquiry for the humanist," who "differs from the nihilist in ascribing value to certain activities and relationships" (Faulkner 7). The sceptical method of enquiry which finds value in the human seems more in keeping with Irving's vision than the *humanitarianism* of 19th century writers like Dickens, who Irving claims are his models. While Dickens encourages compassion for our fellow beings, he recognizes a divine power and telos beyond the human which ultimately

determines value. Like the humanists, Irving sees the purpose and value of life not in an external order but in human achievements, from "art and politics to friendship and love" (Faulkner 7), and this is apparent in all kinds of human relationships in Irving's work: social, romantic, familial and most significantly, artistic.

Irving's own criticism tends toward the over-simplification of this complexity. He has said, for example, that "at the end of every good story, there is the suggestion of the idea about how to live a new life" (NV 92). His theory, however, only hints at the complex role imaginative constructs play in life: in his fiction, intertextuality abounds in the self-conscious fictions of the artist protagonists and numerous metafictional motifs. The idea that texts serve to improve life thus resonates within the novels on several levels: a wide variety of texts shape and condition his characters' perceptions of the world; his artist protagonists complete a "text" prior to living a new life in accordance with the ideas embodied in that text; and at the end of the last three novels, Irving leaves his readers with clear suggestions about how to reconceive their place within the world.

"Texts" also provide the means of resolving the critical debate concerning topical issues and mass culture, aesthetic concerns, and morality in Irving's novels. Irving's concept of the creative imagination and his meditations on the nature and purpose of textual composition lift his novels above rigid definitions by allowing him to synthesise various traditions and modes, thus unifying each novel, and indeed his whole oeuvre. By tracing the various Romantic, modernist, and post-modernist resonances involved in Irving's treatment of the imagination, one can arrive at a better understanding of the complex role the imagination plays in the world according to Irving.

While writers and poets have meditated on the nature and process of inspiration, composition, and creativity for millennia, the Romantics were the first to assert that a human faculty, the imagination, rather than a divine order was the means of transforming and transcending material existence. Like the Romantics, Irving proclaims the value of emotion, intuition and spontaneity in the art of composition; and through his artist figures who control and shape their visions of the world, he demonstrates the Romantic conception that man creates the universe he perceives. For Irving, as for the Romantics, truth lies in the imaginative, idiosyncratic visions of individual writers rather than in mimeses of an external reality. Coleridge defined the imagination as the "essentially vital" faculty which dissolves fixities and definites unifying them into a new whole, and thus, for the Romantics, poetry became seen as a "dim analogue" of God's own creative endeavour. In his numerous father/author figures, most especially in the godlike Dr. Larch of The Cider House Rules, Irving reflects the Romantic idea that fiction-making is a "dim analogue" of God's creation. And like Coleridge, Irving is suspicious of any totalizing system (metaphysical or otherwise) which denies fundamental human value and emotion (LeClair and McCaffery 195).

Perhaps the most significant parallel between Irving and the Romantics regards Carlyle's concept of a spiritual revolution involving transcendence and redemption. Carlyle suggested that, by substituting imagination for logic, the poet could triumph over his senses and sense-bound understanding and achieve an individual apocalypse in which the old would be recreated and the new heaven of Revelations made available to each man. Thus, through his imagination, man would develop a new way of seeing the world, transcend material suffering, and attain the New Eden through a spiritual revolution. Retaining "the ancient

faith in the apocalypse", the Romantics reinterpreted it as a change in man's world view rather than a change in the world (Abrams 15). In his metafictional meditations on imaginative constructs, his engagement of empathy for his characters' plight, and his integration of Christian texts and images of transcendence into his narratives, Irving is either adopting or commenting on this Romantic notion of a spiritual revolution achieved through the imagination. However, since he is writing in the late 20th century, this revolution is no longer based in the "ancient faith in the apocalypse": it seems to rest entirely in the world of art.

While the Romantics thought of the imagination as the faculty through which man could achieve spiritual bliss, they still believed in a divine order which gave shape and value to the universe. For modernists this is no longer true. Coleridge's 20th century counterpart as theoretician of the imagination is Wallace Stevens, who suggests that, in the absence of the divine, poetry must take the place of religion and philosophy: "if the imagination is the faculty by which we import the unreal into what is real, its value is the value of the way of thinking by which we project the idea of God into the idea of man" (150). In a universe without shared public values, value becomes personal; it stems from the writer's intuitions and sensibilities. For this reason, modernists conceived of multiple, individual truths, and their experiments with point of view grew out of their need to convince readers of the validity of their private senses. Similarly, value in Irving's worlds is personal, and his characters must first arrive at their morality by constructing their own belief systems or "texts" before they realize that morality by sharing that view with others. Stevens wrote that the poet's function is

to make his imagination theirs and that he fulfils himself only as he sees his imagination become the light in the minds of others. His role, in short, is to help people to live their lives (NR 29).

In a world without God, the imagination is not a means of realising the divine on earth, as the Romantics believed, but of achieving the spiritual and moral value of the divine in a secular world. This idea is clearly apparent in Irving's last two novels.

All of this makes Irving not some sort of rear-guard traditionalist fighting yesterday's battles but someone attempting to synthesize a range of approaches. John Barth, an avant-garde novelist and theoretician, argues that post-modernist authors should synthesise or transcend the antitheses of pre-modernism and modernism (i.e. linearity:disjunction and simultaneity, middle-class moral convention: moral pluralism, naive illusionism: anti-illusionism, transparent language: self-reflexiveness, etc.). Irving then, could be an excellent candidate for Barth's ideal post-modernist writer. In his use of multiple "texts" - from the network news to St. Paul, and from his fictional post-modernist "Helmbart" to Thomas Hardy - within his narratives, Irving synthesises the antitheses of modernism and pre-modernism by incorporating all these elements. In creating a dialectic between these various texts, Irving employs both the techniques and ideas of modernism and pre-modernism: as a result, a new vocabulary emerges which dissolves all rigid distinctions such as those between serious or popular literature, aesthetic or moral value, mass culture or high art, by replacing them with a new way of seeing which articulates the concerns of his late 20th century reading public. Barth argues that the significant post-modernist writer neither "merely repudiates" nor "merely imitates" either the modernists or the pre-modernists but creates democratic fictions

which, while being neither morally nor artistically simplistic, reach beyond the devotees of "high art" (Barth 203). This seems to be a good definition of what Irving does, despite his protestations to the contrary.

If Irving's aesthetic pronouncements are to be treated with some scepticism, and the one found in his fiction is an integration or synthesis of 19th century and modernist ideas then how does one define his belief system? How do the imagination, morality, metafiction, emotion and intellect come into play in Irving's world?

They come into play through text, and pragmatist critic Richard Rorty's "liberal utopia" provides a useful paradigm for discussing the imagination and text in Irving's work. Like Irving, Rorty sees the imagination as the central human faculty, and he disputes the notion that intellect and logic are the means by which ways of seeing the world are changed. In this spirit, Rorty identifies a figure called the liberal ironist, one who recognizes that all vocabularies, or belief systems (or texts) are contingent; that truth is created not found; that the self is created by a vocabulary; that in entering into other vocabularies one redescribes one's sense of the world; that the process of self-creation is open and infinite; and that through continual redescription we make the best selves that we can. Irving's artist figures, the ones who constantly formulate and reshape their belief systems or "texts," are all liberal ironists in this sense.

Rorty posits what he calls a poeticized culture in which recognition of the contingency of language, and the process of redescription is central to the personal and public aspects of life. Like Irving, he recognizes the power of pop culture to shape our perception of the world. He also argues that the novel has become the principal vehicle of moral change.

because in our pluralistic world one vocabulary cannot encompass all the aspects of life. The novel places different vocabularies, or texts, in context of each other and thus creates a dialectic between these texts. As a result, a new vocabulary is formed which redescribes reality and changes the reader's perception of the world. Since one cannot comprehend a new vocabulary from within an old one, the reader must make an imaginative identification with the text in order to enter into it and understand it. Thus Rorty's view of the engagement of reader with text is cognate with Irving's: imaginative identification is, in effect, the empathy, or emotional engagement with a text which Irving sees as vital to literature.

Like Irving, Rorty sees literature as serving a moral function. He defines a liberal as one who thinks that cruelty is the worst thing we do. Given Irving's statements about the need for "sympathy" in a great writer's voice (NV 87), his contention that writers must write about our most important and extreme behaviour without being "soft" or "easy" on us (McCaffery 190), and his vivid portrayals of human cruelty and its attendant suffering in his novels, he sounds like a liberal too. In the liberal utopia, cruelty would be reduced through redescription and imaginative identification: as one enters into others' experience one gains a sense of solidarity with them and concern for their well being. As one chooses one vocabulary over another, one commits a moral act which results in both self-creation and a sense of solidarity with others. In the sequential development of Irving's protagonists, who must first achieve wholeness by developing personal visions and then realize their responsibility to others, we can see the same principle at work.

Similarly, Irving's calls for a moral and vital literature. His fictional rendering of the healing powers of texts, and his ultimate acknowledgement of the limitations of imaginative

redemption, echo Rorty's concepts of the moral power of texts and redemption through redescription. In Rorty's liberal utopia, the definition of literature expands to include any book which might have moral relevance and which allows one to see either the effects of social institutions and practices on others or the effects of one's own idiosyncrasies on others. Like the apocalyptic visions of the Romantics, redescription offers a form of redemption. Self-creation redeems one from the past; however, it offers redemption only from the human and linguistic. Stripped of the comfort of a totalizing vision, the liberal ironist can only recognize contingency and pain in the forces of the non-human and non-linguistic. Ultimately, Irving's characters are forced to recognize and accept the unsatisfactory results of the non-human and non-linguistic forces of life which they cannot control, but they are, at least, comforted by literature as a form of condolence.

Whether or not readers catch on to or are influenced by a particular writer's idiosyncratic fantasies depends upon the contingency of the historical situation and the needs of a given community at a given time, argues Rorty. Some writers' visions articulate the values and desires of their time and result in enormous popular success. We return, therefore, to where we began: the popularity, accessibility, and morality of John Irving's work. The popular success of both Charles Dickens and John Irving would seem to indicate that their idiosyncratic fantasies did indeed catch on with a large portion of the public. Irving has argued that Dickens didn't write for his audience as much as his personal vision articulated the concerns and needs of his time: "Dickens did not write what the people wanted. Dickens wanted what the people wanted" (KN 231). Can the same idea be applied to John Irving? It would seem so. His multi-layered works are more than comic narratives; they engage with the

philosophical, literary, moral and social concerns of our time in an accessible form. Just as Dickens wrote about the upheaval of the Victorian period, so Irving has articulated the concerns of his audience for the last thirty years: he wants what his readers want.

In the violent, fractious and uncertain late 20th century, Irving offers the imagination as a source of control, comfort, understanding and solidarity with our fellow man. According to him, it is our recognition of the contingency of our given belief systems which makes the imagination's selecting and shaping of them so important. Since a definitive truth does not exist, we must continuously build and rebuild our own ways of seeing the world as we measure our current beliefs against the language systems or "texts" which we encounter. Through texts we enter into other people's perspectives or ways of seeing and thus develop a sense of solidarity with them and concern for their welfare; we also redefine our sense of who we are and how we should behave. In The Magnificent Defeat, a work cited in the acknowledgements for A Prayer for Owen Meany, Frederick Buechner calls the "decisive war" of life, the war to "become fully human, which means to become compassionate, honest and brave" (43). For Irving's characters, being "fully human" means engaging imaginatively with all the texts they encounter and developing for themselves new ways of seeing which fulfil their private and public responsibilities.

In Irving's early novels up to and including The World According to Garp and The Hotel New Hampshire, the "decisive war" takes place on two fronts: the personal and public. The struggles appear to be sequential: once the artist figures have found the balance between the real and imagined in their work, they become whole, and this is manifested in their healed family relationships. First, these characters must make themselves whole by ordering their

worlds through art; then, they can be redeemed from suffering by human love. In the later works, The Cider House Rules, A Prayer for Owen Meany and A Son of the Circus redemption is found less through domestic harmony than through an integration of one's private and public responsibilities to oneself and others. The metafictional and moral elements in the later novels no longer seem to be sequentially related; instead, they are as complexly interwoven as the strands of DNA the amateur geneticist struggles to decode in A Son of the Circus. In The Cider House Rules, A Prayer for Owen Meany and A Son of the Circus, the demands of self-creation and solidarity with others are one and the same; the protagonists achieve wholeness when their imaginative constructions incorporate both elements simultaneously. In the course of the last 26 years, Irving's focus has shifted from the domestic, material world of corporeal desires and social responsibility to a more metaphysical and ironic questioning of the way texts inform our lives. In the later works, texts not only symbolize and reflect his characters' development, they come to seem almost sacred documents in their capacity to give meaning, dispense truth, provide guidance, create empathy, and inspire hope. This thesis will examine the changing relation between personal and public responsibility and metafiction in the evolution of Irving's vision.

CHAPTER TWO

Weaving New Worlds:

Self Creation and Artistic Invention

in Irving's Middle Novels

In Richard Rorty's liberal utopia, defining oneself is equated with inventing new texts to describe the world: "The process of coming to know oneself, confronting one's contingency, tracking one's causes home is identical with the process of inventing a new language - that is of thinking up some new metaphors" (Rorty 127). Self-creation, artistic invention and the contingency of language and belief systems are similarly linked in John Irving's middle novels. In The Water-Method Man, The World According to Garp, and The Hotel New Hampshire, Irving presents three artist figures who, through the course of each narrative, come to challenge their final vocabularies, to redescribe their personal beliefs or "texts" and to, in turn, create public "texts" which embody these new ways of seeing. For Bogus Trumper, T.S. Garp and John Berry, texts provide the means of transcending the brutality of the modern world, of redeeming themselves from past descriptions, and of developing sympathy for their fellow beings. In the course of each of these novels, the protagonist must come to an understanding of the world which balances imagination and reality on the one hand with an idiosyncratic personal vision and an acceptance of others' disparate views on the other. Having ordered their world through art, Irving's characters are rewarded with healed family relationships which console them in the face of the terrifying contingency of life.

All of these novels reveal a preoccupation with language and suggest that consciousness is a product of an open language system. Thus, each novel reflects Rorty's contention that "to create one's mind is to create one's own language" (27), because every human life is the working out of a sophisticated idiosyncratic fantasy "which is never completed because death interrupts" (42). In The Water-Method Man, The World According to Garp, and The Hotel New Hampshire, Irving's protagonists follow just such a method of sceptical enquiry, trying out vocabularies until they arrive at a new "final vocabulary" which imposes meaning and order on the world. This process continues until, like death, the end of the work interrupts it: "facts and histories are recorded, rejected, repeated, shaped and reshaped.... to test the material and so arrive at a truth" (Miller 17). Since these men are, to a greater or lesser degree, artist figures, the process of self-definition is reflected in the constructs they create, and their invention of metaphors to articulate new visions serves both their private and public needs.¹

The structure of The Water-Method Man is complex: it moves back and forth from first to third-person narration, through multiple time periods, and various modes (letters, transcripts of film and audiotapes, "real" and fictive translations of Trumper's thesis - the Old Low Norse epic, "Akthelt and Gunnel"). Trumper's life is in chaos, and the novel's complex structure mirrors its disorder and his confusion. Just as he opts for the water method of treatment over a more straightforward surgical solution to his painful urological problem,

¹Michael Priestley has noted that Irving's artist figures construct "journals, films, historical novels, fiction, illusions" and doctor terminal cases. He argues that they are all "artists" in so far as "their constructs establish order where none exists: their structures mitigate the awful pain of existence" (Priestley 96).

Trumper treats his other serious problems (marriage breakdown, adulterous affairs, failed scholarship, financial ruin, etc.) with wholly ineffective stop-gap measures: he drifts from event to event, unable to control the course of his life. It is only when he comes to see his life presented as a text - he is the subject of an experimental, documentary film, Fucking Up - that he realizes that radical measures are called for. Trumper takes charge of his life for the first time when he literally seizes control of his story. Splicing together outtakes and adding his own voice-over, he creates a filmic message to the director that the biographical project is over. Appropriately, this message is later incorporated into the film and becomes its ending. In creating this filmic text, Trumper begins to exercise some control over his destiny, to address his past mistakes and to move towards realising his responsibility to himself and others. Having been a translator and a sound-tracker of other people's visions, Trumper finally takes his first step toward being the "writer," not simply the reader or viewer, of his own life.

Using the metaphor of the artist, Irving explores the nature of personal texts, or networks of beliefs, desires, and experiences, and their place in defining and shaping our lives. To this end, the working out of an individual fantasy is not only the subject but also the form of The Water-Method Man. In the final chapter, Trumper begins a journal which starts with the same opening as Irving's novel. Therefore, we may assume that Irving's narrative is, in fact, Trumper's own memoir. At The Water-Method Man's conclusion, Trumper is finally in control of his life, and Irving's text represents Trumper's reworking of his past experiences, memories, and texts into a cohesive and meaningful structure. The multiple modes of The Water-Method Man can be read as fragments of Trumper's "final vocabulary" which he has

structured, transcribed and presented to us. Thus, Trumper's memoir reveals how a private vocabulary can be reworked into a structured text and offered to the public, in this case, as a comic, cautionary, and self-reflexive tale about defining and shaping a purposeful life.

As the title implies, The World According to Garp also concerns the need to shape our understanding of the world into a vision, and of course, T.S. Garp is a writer whose personal and public visions evolve throughout the course of the novel. Harter and Thompson argue that Garp's works of fiction are included in Irving's text to provide insight into Garp's development and state of mind (94). However, the evolution of Garp's artistic voice is bound up with his personal development, and neither can be considered in isolation: his works of fiction both grow out of and, in turn, reshape his personal language network of beliefs, desires and experiences. Throughout his life, Garp's personal network and his public texts engage in a continuous intertextual exchange. In other words, Garp's writing does not so much reflect a separate and autonomous life - as Irving's critics suggest - as convey his way of engaging with the world.

For example, Garp's early story "The Pension Grillparzer" reweaves his readings of Grillparzer and Marcus Aurelius and his first experience with death into an imaginative narrative. A comic, fantastic story, it reworks Garp's recent discoveries into a compassionate, redemptive tale of death and loss. Its writing enables him to make an imaginative leap beyond himself and the bare facts of his experience, and he creates a work which contains fully realised, imaginary characters, which deals with universal concerns, and treats both its characters and its readers with grace and compassion. Helen marries Garp because of this story, as if she were marrying the ideas, sensibility, and tone of his work rather than Garp

himself because, as she "would later say, it is in the conclusion of 'The Pension Grillparzer' that we can glimpse what the world according to Garp would be like" (169-170).

After his first early success, Garp loses the balance of "comedy (on the one hand) and compassion (on the other)" in his subsequent writing (237). Eventually, after a long hiatus, he reworks his domestic experiences into the story "Vigilance." Garp's boorish insistence that Helen give her full attention to reading it - ironically, it is a story about an obsessive man's attempts to protect his family - sets in motion a chain of events which lead to the realisation of his greatest fear: the death of one of his children. Again, Garp's fiction does not just reflect his life: it shapes it. Furthermore, the bleak and horrific "World According to Bensenhaver" grows out of the aftermath of adultery and Walt's death. Raw, violent and sensational, it is immediately successful and makes Garp rich and famous (much as Garp itself made Irving); however, "Bensenhaver" is a work "out of proportion to the world's need for sensual pleasure, and the world's need and capacity for warmth" (447). Lacking compassion for its characters, a balance between reality and imagination, and the promise of a hopeful future - the essential ingredients of meaningful fiction according to Irving - the novel comes to be described by Garp's editor as "an X-rated soap opera" which could well have been called "The Anxiousness of Life" (447). Wolf promotes the book by tying its bleak vision to Garp's personal misfortune, thus making Garp an instant celebrity which, in turn, creates public interest in his private views. The circular exchange between Garp's art and life completes another revolution as, once again, his writing shapes his life: Garp's fame proves fatal when he is murdered by an Ellen Jamesian outraged by his public attacks on the victims' movement. Ironically, Garp's book, which condemns rape and violence, is an agent

which leads to his murder by a woman protesting male violence toward women.

John Berry the narrator of The Hotel New Hampshire is a less obvious artist figure than either Trumper or Garp. John declares: "I am not a poet. I was not even the writer in the family" (404), but he becomes the chronicler of his family by default when his younger sister, Lilly, commits suicide. John is also a literal and metaphoric weightlifter who feels the need "to lift what weight [he] could lift off [his] brother and [his] sisters whenever the weight needed lifting" (404). In addition to John's narrative, the three Hotels New Hampshire can also be viewed as the Berry family's "texts:" they are constructs of Winn Berry's imagination, and they represent both his private and public vocabulary. Ironically, it is the last "hotel," the rape crisis centre, which comes closest to realising Winn Berry's vision:

If you come to a great hotel in *parts*, in broken pieces ... when you leave the great hotel, you'll leave it whole again. We simply put you back together again, but this is almost mystically accomplished - this is the sympathy space I'm talking about - because you can't force anyone back together again: they have to grow their own way. We provide space The space and the light (441).

As the caretaker of his father and the last Hotel New Hampshire, and as the teller of his family's tale, John continues his "weight lifting" as an artist figure: like the 19th century humanitarian novelists Irving praises so highly, John creates structures which attempt to heal and redeem the past and provide hope for the future.

In each of these three novels, the characters' changing visions are reflected in their attempts to control the ever-present forces of chaos and disruption which surround them. Through their texts, these men attempt to create better, controlled realities or to exercise

some influence over their present conditions. Ultimately, each man becomes successful when he creates a text which balances imagination with reality, and engagement with escape; embraces others' perspectives; and treats its characters with compassion. When Trumper, Garp, and the Berrys are able to achieve this balance in both their personal and public texts, they are redeemed from past descriptions and are able to live fully and freely in worlds of their own making.

For the Berrys, balancing engagement with escape means neither indulging solely in idiosyncratic fantasy nor in grim re-creations of reality; ultimately, they come to terms with loss, death and violence by inventing fictions which weave harsh reality and redemptive fantasy together. Their journey toward this understanding is apparent in the successive hotels the family inhabits; each hotel embodies a different final vocabulary. The first Hotel New Hampshire is an absurd, fairy-tale venture. With its combination of miniature bathrooms ideally suited for the dwarfs who eventually come to inhabit it, and bolted down furniture, it represents Winn Berry's childlike whimsy and impracticality. The Berlin Hotel New Hampshire is a nightmarish place of sex and violence, reflecting the rape, deaths, and terrorist and pornographic texts the family experiences. In contrast, the final hotel is a balance of dream and practicality; John and Susie practise an elaborate fiction for his father's sake when they tell the blind man that they are running an elite hotel. In this last hotel, Winn Berry's private fantasy is offset by the practical and public mission of Susie's rape crisis centre; and his private idealism is balanced by her public altruism.

In the world of these novels, balancing imagination and reality leads to another kind of equilibrium - that between self-interest and responsibility for others - because Irving sees

the imagination as the key to developing an awareness of and empathy for others. As Rorty points out, it is impossible to comprehend another's final vocabulary from within our own: a final vocabulary is "final" in the sense that if doubt is cast on the worth of these words, their user has no noncircular argumentative recourse" (73). Therefore, encountering another's belief system and way of seeing the world means making an imaginative and metaphoric leap of faith into that vocabulary. What Rorty terms imaginative identification then sounds strikingly similar to the empathy readers experience when they find themselves moved by a character who views and experiences the world in an unfamiliar way, and both Rorty and Irving suggest that such imaginative identification causes us to redescribe ourselves and reduce our cruelty to others.

The Irving novels under discussion help make clear what Rorty means by imaginative identification. In the most obvious and comic fashion, Bogus Trumper, the protagonist of The Water-Method Man, realizes his error in falsely accusing his girlfriend of infidelity through his reading of two texts: "Akthelt and Gunnel" and the biographical film, "Fucking Up." Formerly obsessed by himself and his own ideas, in viewing the film shortly after completing his translation of "Akthelt and Gunnel," Trumper is forced to recognize other perspectives or versions of the truth. Just as the Norse hero Akthelt finds out he has wronged his "true wife" (352), so Trumper finds out he has wronged his girlfriend Tulpen when he finally sees the scene in the film which in real life "he'd only [partially] overheard: Tulpen in the bathtub, telling Ralph and Kent that it was time for them to leave" (362). Up until this scene, Trumper finds the film of his life "all very predictable," but in viewing the incident he had misinterpreted as evidence of infidelity, he comes to redescribe his sense of the past.

And, after seeing himself as others see him, Trumper comes to recognize and assume his responsibility to others.

For Garp, developing a full humanity also means developing a vocabulary that recognizes the validity of other points of view. Ironically, Garp begins to appreciate the extremist feminists he so reviles when he is forced to dress up in drag to attend a women's memorial service for his mother. Dressed as a woman, he enters their vocabulary for the first time, and after struggling with his clothes and fighting off lecherous advances, he feels "a peculiar kind of unfairness overwhelm him" and is compelled to exclaim "fucking men" (504-505). Despite his dislike of the radical Ellen Jamesians whom Garp categorizes as extreme, self-righteous, fanatical and self-pitying, that is, the female counterparts of the man who murdered his mother (536-537), at long last he comes to recognize that their need was "genuine and great" (562). Despite his grudging acknowledgement of the women's experience, the novel is saved from a fatuous and politically correct conclusion in which harmony is restored through mutual recognition and respect. Indeed, its conclusion highlights the continuing tension between opposing vocabularies: the original and idiosyncratic vision of the individual artist and the totalizing and prescriptive views of the political activist. Garp's letter of apology to the Ellen Jamesians grows out of his desire to return to his fiction and to free his own imagination rather than from a true and compelling imaginative identification with their reality:

it was an act meant to clear his desk, not his conscience; he meant to rid his mind of the garden-tending, bookshelf-making trivia that had occupied his time while he was waiting to write seriously again. He thought he would make peace with the Ellen

Jamesians and then forget them (562).

Garp's sympathetic recognition is, therefore, fatally superficial: in believing he can "make peace" with the extremists who will not recognize the value of any other belief system, he leaves himself vulnerable, and ultimately, he is destroyed by them.

In Garp, excesses of the imagination lead to texts which fail to take into account others' perspectives, and which describe the world in ways which threaten or deny others' humanity. These texts are most threatening when they catch the public imagination, as Irving suggests through the recurring conflicts between private and public visions and constructed and received truths in The World According to Garp. He even told Miller about the novel:

I wanted to make it a sort of fierce sexual argument, in favor of individualism really, saying that we are a society beset with groups and group misunderstandings (493).

Garp identifies many visions or "worlds according to ...", and Irving seems to advocate a healthy idiosyncratic perspectivism in the face of radical and extremist totalizing systems. At the end of his life, Garp becomes "the weakest sort of liberal" because he is "full of imagining the whole, sad histories of his fictional family," and he is destroyed by his ideological opposite, the fierce and fanatical Ellen Jamesian, Pooh Percy. However, the dialectics between individualism and group ideology, and between liberal tolerance and fanatical orthodoxy, give way in the novel's epilogue to recognition of multiple perspectives as Irving describes the future of all his characters' lives 'after Garp.' What survives, and triumphs at the novel's end is the continuous process of redescription as his characters continue to make and remake their world in defiance of the forces of death and violence which surround them.

Therefore, while Irving's novels advocate a form of individualism, it is not a "wilful"

or privileged one: on the contrary, his characters must come to at least tolerate and sometimes embrace different views. The failure to recognize the value of other perspectives is a form of extremism which Irving also explores in The Hotel New Hampshire, as he explained to Gabriel Miller:

the great New World [decadence] ... is the wilfulness of terrorism - the belief in an idea to the extent that human beings caught outside or on the other side of that idea are simply expendable - it's the ultimate triumph of a kind of sophmoric Marxism, something that is fascistic in method but vaguely mystical in justification (183-184).

Extreme self-interest, whether simple self-centredness, or the destructive wilfulness of a political platform, is roundly condemned in Irving's work in favour of an idiosyncratic personal vision which balances a sense of self with an awareness of others. Only when his characters achieve this do they reach both personal and public fulfilment. For example, while Garp's distinctive vision gives him a strong voice, in the course of the novel, he must progress from writing solely about himself to writing about the world. In so doing, he moves from serving the needs of self-definition to acknowledging his public responsibility. As John Wolf points out, Garp is starting again before his death, and his work in progress seems destined to become a public text which reflects his newly balanced private vocabulary. Garp, however, doesn't live to realise his newfound compassion and conviction in this novel. Reflecting Rorty's view that "every human life is the working out of a sophisticated, idiosyncratic fantasy" which is never completed because death interrupts (42), appropriately, Garp's life ends once he has come to full understanding of both himself and his world.

Self-knowledge leads each of these characters to accept responsibility for others and one can read these novels as a progression of sorts. Trumper comes to accept his responsibility to his immediate family; after perceiving his life as a text, he begins to reconceive it, when he realizes "that he had never finished anything, and he [feels] a need, almost as basic as survival to find something he could finish" (322). Appropriately, his first accomplishment is a completed text. Eventually, he finishes his thesis, and then following through in other aspects of his life, he returns to Tulpen and his baby. Throughout Garp, the eponymous hero demonstrates responsibility to his family, but by the end of the novel he extends this family circle to include Roberta, Ellen James, and even the women at Dog's Head Harbour. In The Hotel New Hampshire, John's and Susie's work with rape victims marks a further extension beyond the family and familiars to demonstrate compassion for complete strangers. With each subsequent work Irving expands this circle of responsibility from immediate family, to acquaintances, and, finally, to the larger community.

The progressive development of these characters' personal visions is apparent in the public texts they produce at the end of each novel. Trumper's text, in which he has reworked his extreme fantasies, becomes The Water-Method Man and demonstrates the new balance, structure, and sense of responsibility for others which he has developed over the course of the novel. Garp releases a collector's edition of "The Pension Grillparzer" with illustrations by his son and, in doing so, marks his return to writing about the world, a trend the reader assumes he will continue in the novel he is working on at the time of his death. John and Susie's awaited baby, Winn's fantasy, and the practical altruism of the rape crisis centre bring family love, romance, and compassion for others together under the roof of the last Hotel

New Hampshire and make it a truly balanced, and humane institution. In thus tying the narrative and thematic threads of his stories together so neatly, Irving meets his own criteria for accessible and optimistic fictions. In writing about writing, he also draws attention to the mechanics of various kinds of text-making and to the constructed nature of all texts.

Furthermore, the numerous references to other literary works in these novels suggest how, in our secular world, literary texts have become the texts which shape our view of the world.

In The Hotel New Hampshire and The Water-Method Man, texts such as Moby Dick and The Great Gatsby provide symbols of hope and transcendence for the characters, and these recurring metafictional references also serve to reinforce Irving's themes. As Trumper struggles to make his "own version" of Moby Dick - in which "the story according to Trumper was the whale-as-hero, Moby Dick as unvanquished king" (339) - come alive for his son, Colm, he thinks, "why not? I can't provide the kid with God or a reliable father, and if there's something worth believing in, it ought to be as big as a whale" (345). Colm's later dismissal of it as "only a story" moves Trumper to tears, and forces him to recognize that the power of the text is finite: as his vehicle for redeeming his relationship with his abandoned son it is limited, as limited as his superficial reading of Melville's text. While Trumper can redescribe his world, he cannot erase his mistakes through employing textual redescription, as Colm's scepticism regarding both his father and Moby Dick suggests.

While Irving's characters recognize that, in their contingent world, fiction and metaphors of self-creation - rather than religion, or philosophy - have become the beacons of hope and vehicles of redemption, they are ultimately forced to acknowledge that texts can redeem us only from the human and linguistic. As the doomed student of American

literature, Fehgelburt, tells the Berrys:

the single ingredient in American literature that distinguishes it from other literatures of the world is a kind of giddy, illogical hopefulness. It is quite technically sophisticated while remaining ideologically naive (HNH 309).

Belief in human texts has answered the Berrys' need for a transcendent, life-affirming force, but the suicidal Fehgelburt sees such unfounded hope as ideologically naive. Eventually, even John Berry is forced to recognize that the power of art is finite:

'Nothings really dead,' I said. 'Nothing [Trotsky] said is dead,' I said. The paintings that we can still see - they're not dead,' I said. The characters in books - they don't die when we stop reading about them'.... But I knew I had kept no one alive, not ever.... And despite what Trotsky said, he was dead: Mother and Egg and Iowa Bob were dead, too - despite everything they said, and everything they meant to us (317).

Irving's characters must also come to face the limitations of their own linguistic structures. Irving has called Franny the hero of The Hotel New Hampshire because he gave her "two of the most horrible things to overcome I could imagine - one extremely violent and one extremely delicate - the violence being the obvious rape, that betrayal, and the delicate part being that her brother is in love with her" (Miller 186). Franny's journey through the book culminates in her finally acknowledging and confronting both of these problems. John and Franny enter into an incestuous relationship in order to face and reject it. The same evening they have consummated the relationship, John runs into Chipper Dove, and Franny is forced to come to terms with her rape. Up to this point she has used her imaginative fancy to escape from it, because as Susie says:

It's fear that makes her do it - write to him all the time. Because if she can address him, in a normal voice - if she can pretend that she's having a normal relationship with him - well ... then he's no rapist, then he never did actually do it to her, and she doesn't want to deal with the fact that he did (294).

When Franny finally decides to face her past, the family again creates an imaginative structure to confront reality, shape it and provide their own form of redemption.

Appropriately, it is the writer who comes up with the means of exacting revenge on Dove:

"Lilly, the author, spoke up. Our little Lilly, the creator: she had the best imagination" (391).

Lilly's revenge play casts the family as caricatures of themselves, and their post-rape trauma is exaggerated and turned to their advantage: intent on damaging Dove's confidence and happiness as much as he has theirs, they present themselves as a circus strongman, a transvestite, a delusional would-be-bride and an authoritative nurse, all bent on revenging Franny's rape with a like crime, and they succeed in frightening Dove profoundly. Several critics have pointed out the inadequacy of this revenge drama: Miller says that the poetic justice of the revenge is "inadequate to the realistic tragedy of Franny's rape trauma, as if Irving is struggling for catharsis of a real-life hurt by means of make-believe therapy" (168); and Harter and Thompson argue that Irving is trying to integrate socially relevant themes with the romance mode and that in this scene "he fails both as artist and as concerned humanist" (24). Both readings appear to miss Irving's point for the Berrys themselves are left feeling that their revenge is inadequate. They feel "letdown," which, John says:

should be documented in any fair study of revenge. Whatever we had done, it would never be as awful as what he had done to Franny - and if it had been as awful, it

would have been too much (403).

They cannot completely transcend Dove's brutality and violence through imaginative art, as the recurring motif of *The King of Mice* reminds them. "LIFE IS SERIOUS BUT ART IS FUN!" (404). Thus, Irving himself acknowledges that make believe therapy is inadequate for healing a "real life hurt". What is moving and cathartic about the revenge drama, however, is the love and commitment with which Franny's siblings dedicate themselves to it for her sake, and their ability to redeem themselves from their earlier pain and humiliation and use it to their sister's advantage. In *The Hotel New Hampshire* as in *Garp* and *The Water-Method Man*, the power of linguistic structures is limited: what ultimately consoles and redeems Irving's characters is domestic love.

At the close of *The Hotel New Hampshire*, John Berry echoes the end of *The Great Gatsby*:

So we dream on. Thus we invent our lives. We give ourselves a sainted mother, we make our father a hero; and someone's older brother, and someone's older sister - they become our heroes too. We invent what we love and what we fear (447).

Because our dreams escape us, we need something to keep sorrow at bay, and for John that means keeping his family alive through his narrative, and living a happy new domestic life with Susie the bear. As he says of his new domesticity, "so I'm all right too. You have to be all right if you're expecting a baby" (450). The ending of the novel is optimistic, life-affirming and full of promise for the future, but, as John reminds us, this text is an invention. Given that we each have the power to determine what we are and what we fear, Irving suggests that our private and public needs will be best met by inventing texts - like the last

Hotel New Hampshire - which celebrate and foster human relationships.²

Just as John Berry draws all the threads of his narrative together and concludes with an image of family love and domestic harmony, so Bogus Trumper concludes The Water-Method Man with the three couples, children and assorted dogs celebrating Throgsgaffen Day in Maine. It is on this holiday that Trumper finally celebrates his responsibility and commitment to first and second families and friends; having done so, he begins to write his story. The new life symbolised by the three new babies and Trumper's new endeavour seems a fitting and redemptive conclusion to his tale. Harter and Thompson have observed that Irving embraces a traditional comic vision in The Water-Method Man, which is not so much an affirmation of conventional morality as it is an affirmation of life itself. Indeed, the same is true of Garp and The Hotel New Hampshire, where the concept of family expands to absorb the unconventional: a transsexual, a tongueless poet and a lesbian who dresses as bear. Garp's renewed creativity at the end of The World According to Garp means his fiction is coloured by the same sympathy which rules his domestic life: immediately before his death "he was full of imagining the whole, sad histories of his fictional family; thus full of sympathy, he was a soft touch in the real world" (564). And after his death, Garp is further redeemed by the love of his family. It is appropriate that the man who described the novelist as "A doctor who sees only terminal cases" is himself kept alive by the loving memories of his extended family, as the extensive epilogue "Life After Garp" documents.

²As Barbara Coe has suggested, at the end of The Hotel New Hampshire Irving extends our sympathy through John and Susie and their fairy tale hotel/rape crisis centre to "celebrate the life sustaining activity possible through extending family nurture to the larger human family of society's victims and outcasts" (119).

In The Water-Method Man, The World According to Garp, and The Hotel New Hampshire, Irving employs metafictional motifs to explore the nature of texts and text making, and their relation to self-definition and public responsibility. Irving seems to suggest that, in the absence of an organizing principle or external power, truth lies in the imaginative idiosyncratic visions of individuals. Our individual responsibility rests in developing belief systems or texts which balance both imagination and reality and our own needs and vision with those of others. While our constructs give us a structure for perceiving and engaging with the world, ultimately we are still subject to the chaos, violence and contingency of life. These novels imply that when our constructs fail us, our consolation rests in the love, security, and warmth of our domestic relationships.

CHAPTER THREE

"Rewriting the Rules: Mythology, Narrative, and Heroism in The Cider House Rules"

In The World According to Garp, The Water-Method Man, and The Hotel New Hampshire, the struggle for survival forces Irving's protagonists to develop belief systems and imaginative constructs which allow them to engage with the world on their own terms, and to either transcend or accept material suffering; then, once they are at peace, they gain a sense of solidarity with, and responsibility for, those outside their family circle; ultimately, they are redeemed from the pain and struggle of existence by human love. Frederick Buechner, a Christian theologian and Irving's former teacher, articulates two forms of struggle which are helpful in defining the transition between these middle novels and The Cider House Rules. Buechner recognizes that St. Paul's metaphor of life as a battle is "familiar and hackneyed," but argues that it is still a useful conceit because "growing" and "becoming" involve waging war against many adversaries (36). He identifies two kinds of war: the war of conquest, "myself, or myself and my family, or myself and my country, or myself and my race, which are all really myself writ large" against the world, or the struggle for survival; and the "war to become 'whole and at peace inside our skins'" which means the war to "will good" and "to become at last truly human" (38-41). In The Cider House Rules, Irving leaves behind the "war of conquest" and the domestic, social realm of the earlier novels and focuses upon what Buechner defines as the "decisive war:" the war to become "fully human, which means to become compassionate, honest, and brave," which is "a war against darkness which no man

fights alone" (43). The war of conquest, of self and family against a harsh and violent world, is subordinated to an internal war, which incorporates both a struggle for self-definition and an awareness of responsibility to others: in The Cider House Rules finding peace and "willing good" are necessary and equal parts of becoming fully and truly human. Buechner argues that God fights this war along with us, and that God will, if we find faith, lead us out of darkness and relieve our suffering (42). In The Cider House Rules, there is a source of light, guidance, and comfort, but it is neither the cosy hearth of a happy family nor the light of divine guidance: it exists in the healing spirit of human texts.

Several critics have documented links between Irving's sixth novel and 19th-century fiction. Noting Irving's use of the quotation from Charlotte Brontë in the preface, a quotation which distinguishes between conventionality and morality, and religion and self-righteousness respectively, Barbara Coe asserts that Irving thus aligns his fiction with traditional novelists who assert the centrality of both morality and religion (48). By incorporating textual fragments of Dickens into his narrative, Irving, Christopher Gittings argues, creates a new hybridization of "the nineteenth-century novel of instruction with a reflexive narrative," which in turn, alludes to "Dickensian moral and social sensitivity" (63). It is true that in The Cider House Rules Irving aligns his fiction with 19th century novels of entertainment and instruction and writes in a traditional, chronological narrative, and that he appears to do so with a clearly moral purpose. However, his inclusion of 19th century textual fragments, his employment of traditional narrative, and his examination of a contentious contemporary social issue are not ends in themselves; rather, Irving uses our literary past as a means of exploring the relation between personal and public "texts" - literary and otherwise.

19th and 20th century - and moral action. Besides the numerous allusions to Dickens and Brontë in Cider House, Irving also invokes other 19th century texts - Gray's Anatomy and Victorian pornography, for example - as well as B-movies, religious comic books, mail order catalogues, and early television broadcasts to reveal how many disparate texts serve a moral and religious function in shaping both our personal and social texts, the laws, rules and values which guide our lives.

From the opening paragraphs which describe the idiosyncratic system of naming the new babies in the St. Cloud's orphanage, Irving signals a preoccupation with language, and with the contingency of language or belief systems which shape our lives. The human self is created by the vocabulary she uses, and throughout this novel, Irving invites his readers to examine both their own and others' vocabularies. While the novel concerns the moral and legal question of abortion, it transcends the social issue to look at how we conceive of and treat both life and death in the language we use, and how we frame these concepts into codes, rules, and laws which guide our actions. Metafictional motifs operate on multiple levels in The Cider House Rules: within the larger narrative sequence and structure; in allusions to and parody of, other texts; and in Irving's characters' experience of their own and others' texts. This emphasis on the creation and appropriation of language systems reminds the reader that rules governing behaviour or language are not privileged by their relation to an internal or external power; like fiction, they are simply a product of a particular network, and Irving suggests that we must continuously examine and assess their worth. Numerous intertextual references reveal how our personal texts, what Rorty calls a "set of words which [we] employ to justify [our] actions, [our] beliefs, and [our] lives" are, in turn, shaped by the texts which

we encounter (73). For Irving, the process of redescription is open and continuous, and each person must develop a personal text which both meets the needs of self-creation and acknowledges a responsibility to others. In this fiction about the power and place of texts in our lives, Irving plays on the notion of the "good book" and suggests that in a secular age, works other than the bible can also be "good books" offering both guidance and hope in each individual's struggle to achieve a full humanity.

To that end, The Cider House Rules is a "good book" which performs the moral function of making the reader reassess his values and way of seeing, and it is also a book about goodness. Critics have complained that this novel lacks the vitality and violence of Irving's earlier works and that without an evil comic opposition to the ethically admirable characters it contains "a strangely predictable world" (Harter and Thompson 143). Indeed, the world of this novel does seem safe and benign compared to those of Irving's earlier works. While dreadful things occur in it - incest, rape, botched abortions, and WW II - for the most part, they occur "off stage." This is a world controlled by an omniscient narrator, one who focuses upon characters struggling to define and lead good lives within the confines of their small communities.

This larger narrative focus on small controlled worlds is reflected in the journals of the dedicated humanitarian, Dr. Larch, the "self-appointed historian" of St. Cloud's, and another of Irving's artist figures who shapes his world through imaginative constructs. Larch's journal entries, which figure prominently in the narrative, begin most often with the phrase "Here in St. Cloud's," words that differentiate between the controlled world of his own making and his observations about what goes on "In other parts of the world" (4). In both

Larch's text and the larger narrative, the world outside the St. Cloud's orphanage and the idyllic apple orchard at Ocean View is kept at bay. The exaggerated, selfless altruism of St. Cloud's and the industry, material comfort and social harmony of Ocean View identify them as idealized worlds; in their respective representations of the good life, they seem to be concrete realizations of the idiosyncratic networks of beliefs and desires of their leaders: Wilbur Larch and Olive Worthington.¹ For Larch and Olive, personal texts are a means of achieving peace and control in the face of the terrifying contingency of the "rest of the world." In focusing on only these idealized worlds, the larger narrative concentrates on the way language structures or personal "texts" define our world and organize our attempts to behave well within it.

In Cider House, Irving's characters are not called to define themselves in the face of death or dismemberment but rather in response to difficult questions of love, honour and duty. While this is a quieter, less tempestuous universe, the conflicts within it are no less acute; however, they largely concern internal negotiations between belief and desire, and between self-interest and sacrifice rather than an external struggle against a hostile and deadly world, and this internal movement is reinforced by the novel's narrative structure. The potential for chaos is established but averted, and ultimately these idealized worlds are protected from external destructive forces. For example, at the climactic moment in Homer and Candy's developing relationship, characters who have been long separated - Melony,

¹Olive Worthington, is, in a sense, a fiction herself: the former Alice Bean, a clam digger's daughter, she has reinvented herself by changing her name and her accent, and has metamorphosed into the elegant and efficient proprietor of the Ocean View Orchards. In contrast to the idealised "good life" at St. Cloud's, which runs on the principle of selfless altruism, Olive's "good life" - material success and domestic harmony - realises the values of the social world.

Mary Agnes and Homer - are convened in one location: the stage is set for a violent confrontation which will shatter Homer's peaceful existence at Ocean View; instead, chance intervenes, and as the wind blows a lock of Candy's hair out of Homer's wallet, violence is averted and the course of the story is changed: Homer and Candy's ensuing declarations of love cause them to miss the movie and the almost certainly disruptive or violent meeting with Melony. One need only think of the climactic car accident in Garp or the bloody terrorist attempt on the opera house in The Hotel New Hampshire to realize that this is a different universe from Irving's earlier novels. The climax leads not to a conflict resolvable by death and destruction, but one which requires moral negotiation and compromise, a love affair that creates a delicate situation in which all the moral issues are clouded. Consequently, the war that Homer and Candy are called to fight is a war common to many in the late 20th century, "the war to become whole and at peace" and to "will good" in the face of conflicting hopes, desires and relationships. In the absence of an external power which defines goodness, they can achieve this only by developing personal "texts" or belief systems which allow them to recognize and reconcile their obligations to themselves and others.

While recognizing that we live in a de-centred universe, Irving still invokes the moral and spiritual force of pre-modernist forms. In "The Narrative Voice," he writes, "what I always try to hear in the narrative voice is the sound of a potential myth, a possible legend," and he cites the opening paragraph of The Cider House Rules to demonstrate his attempt to capture the voice of legend and the sense of telling a very old story (89). While maintaining that storytelling must never be subordinated to preaching, Irving further suggests that a narrative, like a traditional legend, contains moral implications since its ending projects what

will happen in the future and thus suggests a way to live a new life (92). In Cider House, he not only attempts to capture the narrative voice of legend, but he also invokes two kinds of legend, Christian and mythic, in his descriptions of life at St. Cloud's. These motifs further reinforce the idea that texts are integral to the definition and achievement of a "full humanity."

St. Cloud's is an other-worldly, isolated place, in which the orphans are addressed as royalty, and Larch appears as a Merlin-like "sorcerer" (161). First called Clouds for the constant fog that hovers over the violent river, "later renamed St. Clouds because of the fervent backwoods Catholic instinct, to put a saint before so many things," (3) its name conjures up a dream-like world. Throughout the novel, Homer, the orphan protagonist, also encounters clouds and mists in a variety of texts. Each reference has dangerous, dark, or corrupt associations: the mists over the marshland gibbet in Dickens' Great Expectations; the uncertain "veiled future" of David Copperfield; and the "faked clouds" and "funereal or reverential mist" of the pornographic Victorian photograph (26, 200, 90). Thus, for Homer and for Irving's readers, mists appear to have fictive and mysterious qualities, properties which St. Cloud's itself seems to share. An institution, it is run on routines and rules established by the administrator, Dr. Larch, and thus, like a fictional world which can be ordered, regimented, and rendered understandable, it runs smoothly and seems "better made ... and more real than real" (556). However, it also conceals the truth, because "the clouds of St. Cloud's [allow the orphans'] parents to slip away, unseen" (26), and in its enactment of the "Lord's work" it covers over the past violence and unhappiness of the women who go there with their unwanted pregnancies, just as the fog covers over the violent river in the town.

Life in Larch's orphanage is dedicated to both what his colleagues at medical school called "the Lord's work," delivering babies, and "the Devil's work," performing abortions. Larch, however, sees both delivering babies and delivering mothers as "the Lord's work." Secretly and in defiance of the law, he and his nurses have dedicated their lives not only to caring for the orphans born at St. Cloud's but also to performing abortions for the desperate women who seek their help. Thus, St. Cloud's is both fictional (it is not what it purports to be) and larger than life; in its selfless altruism, it is the embodiment of Larch's system of values and beliefs. The compromises and negotiations which take place in the social world, necessitated by the tension between love, desire, and will on the one hand and duty, honour, and integrity on the other - are not part of the fabric of St. Cloud's, which runs on Larch's clear and simple code of utility and service.

Given its mythical associations, The Cider House Rules can be read as both a bildungsroman which traces the journey and development of the orphan Homer Wells, and as a morality tale about heroic people's handling of ethical dilemmas. Homer is "The Boy Who Belonged to St. Cloud's," as the title of Chapter One announces, and there are mythic, quest-like elements to his journey out of the closed, ordered, institutional world of St. Cloud's to the world of the Ocean View Orchards, which is situated between the aptly and allegorically named Heart's Haven and Heart's Rock. The orphan Homer, as his name suggests, seeks the solace and comfort of a family which he finds at Ocean View, but ultimately, like all heroes of chivalric literature, he is bound by honour and duty to return to his place of origin; as a changed man, he is then ready and able to restore and renew his community. The impetus for Homer's quest and the moral imperative which drives him to leave and finally return to St.

Cloud's have been instilled in him by the language of his early childhood. In addition to nightly readings from Dickens, Dr. Larch delivers a literary benediction to the boy's dormitory in the orphanage. He addresses the boys as "Princes of Maine, and Kings of New England" and, for Homer, the heroic nomenclature fulfils the function of a traditional prayer or blessing:

The Princes of Maine that Homer saw, the Kings of New England that he imagined - they reigned at the court of St. Cloud's, they travelled nowhere: they didn't get to go to sea: they never saw the ocean. But somehow, even to Homer Wells, Dr. Larch's benediction was uplifting, full of hope.... these orphans of St. Cloud's - whoever they were, they were the heroes of their own lives. That much Homer could see in the darkness: that much Dr. Larch, like a father, gave him (72).

These mythical invocations inspire Homer's attempts to be good and in Larch's words, "of use" to others (35). Ironically, they later inspire his desire to leave St. Cloud's, to escape Larch's world and to free himself by defining his own beliefs and values. Only after his sojourn in the social world does he perceive the enduring value and strength of the orphanage: "life in St. Cloud's seemed timeless, placeless and constant ... it seemed grim but caring ... it seemed somehow safer than life in Heart's Rock or Heart's Haven" (422).

When Nurse Caroline arrives late in the novel to help Larch with the "Lord's Work" and his battles with an interfering board of trustees, she too contrasts St. Cloud's with the world that supplies its patients and perceives Larch and his longtime assistants as "dinosaurs." In their heroic dedication to their service and their unwillingness to compromise, they are indeed larger than life, "not just prehistoric but also almost wilfully too

large for the world" (515). As such, the selfless doctor and his nurses are mythical models of heroic action, against which the complacency and compromise of Homer's daily life in the social world will be measured. In addition, the mythical associations of St. Cloud's suggest ways in which legends and other texts provide us with the means of redescribing ourselves through their larger than life models of noble action. In connecting Larch and his practice of providing illegal abortions to legendary heroic motifs of quest and sacrifice, Irving links an idiosyncratic redescription of conventional beliefs and rules with past narratives of heroic action, and suggests, by implication, the possibility of a utopian future in which we all may come to redescribe ourselves and our world and thus realize our potential for "princely, even kingly behaviour."

Irving's use of mythical motifs reinforces the legendary elements of his narrative and heightens the moral implications of his text. His invocation of biblical texts, however, is more complex and ironic. As critics have noted, St. Cloud's is both a pre- and post-lapsarian world: on the one hand, an ironic Eden featuring Homer as an innocent Adam and Melony as a violent Eve, and on the other, a fallen place, in the midst of a ravaged forest, the end result of both "individual and collective failure" (Harter and Thompson 141). But one should distinguish between the orphanage and the town in any assessment of the biblical motifs; and the pre- and post-lapsarian significance can be broken down along these lines. The town itself is "fallen," a semi-ghost town left behind by the insatiable Ramses Paper Company which has destroyed the landscape and then moved on, leaving behind only marginal people who serve no purpose to the company or its workers: "the older, and the less attractive prostitutes, and the children of these prostitutes" (5).

Not only does the orphanage provide a contrast to the fallen, social world, it is also an inverted Eden. Melony, the eldest female orphan and Homer's counterpart, is convinced that Larch is withholding special knowledge from them (specifically, their mothers' identities). In a perverse inversion of the biblical story, Melony intimidates Homer with a snake, shatters his innocence by giving him a pornographic photograph, and bribes him into searching Larch's office for the forbidden knowledge with the promise of sex (87). When Homer hides the photograph under his mattress, and searches Larch's office for the documents, he deceives his "father," Larch, for the first time; and in time, the chain of events set in motion by Melony's desire for knowledge leads to Homer's challenging Larch's authority, his falling from grace and leaving St. Cloud's. Thus, Homer's loss of innocence leads to him leaving the garden and venturing into the outside world. In a further irony, he leaves what is in reality a barren, treeless lumber town for the edenic apple orchards of coastal Maine, thus exchanging his dark and gloomy Eden for what, at first, appears to be paradise.

The biblical motif which runs through the first half of the novel culminates in the events of Chapter 5, which features a parodic apocalypse and a satiric portrayal of the dangers inherent in a passive and superstitious faith in religious texts. The chapter begins with the introduction of the station master: "a lonely, unattractive man - a victim of mail-order catalogues and of an especially crackpot mail-order religion" which insisted on "the presence of the growing numbers of the restless, homeless, unsaved dead" in texts of "an almost comic book form" (162). The station master believes that Judgement Day is at hand: walking past the orphanage at night, he is so frightened by seeing the enormous shadows of Larch and Homer and hearing Larch observe that his shadow makes him seem "a sorcerer" that he

believes the "time for him and all the world had come" and dies of shock (160-165). Felled by the fear and superstition which have been fanned by his "crackpot religion," and have led him to misinterpret the significance of the world around him, the station master reads events as a parodic vision of the apocalypse, a vision reflected in other judgements arrived at in the chapter. The most significant judgement, the one that marks the end of Homer's obedience and devotion to Larch, occurs when he arrives at his own position on the question of abortion: he determines that abortion is morally wrong and refuses to assist Larch in the procedures. Thus the parodic apocalypse in this chapter signals the end of the mythical Christian world established in the first half of the book: Homer leaves St. Cloud's for Ocean View at the end of the chapter, thus initiating a move away from a mythic religious world to a secular, social and material one. More importantly, he departs from the received doctrine of his mentor, Dr. Larch, and decides instead to write his own text. Not only does this chapter mark the end of Homer's life as a child and as an obedient disciple of Larch, but through its comic and ironic reversals, and juxtaposition of the credulous station master and earnest Homer, it questions the value and place of conventional religious texts and received doctrines in shaping our encounters with the world.

In keeping with the biblical motif, Larch's nurses -suggestively named Angela and Edna [Eden?] - nickname him St. Larch. But his stature is actually godlike: he wills the St. Cloud's orphanage into existence, he is the law and rule maker of the community and he makes life and death decisions on a daily basis (Reilly 104, Harter and Thompson 140). For Larch, playing God is not presumptuous; he sees it as the only option for control in a chaotic world ruled by contingency. He writes: "Men who believe in good and evil, and who believe

that good should win, should watch for those moments when it is possible to play God - we should seize those moments. There won't be many" (97). Larch not only exercises a physician's control over life and death, but he is also the historian of St. Cloud's, and his authorial role as creator confirms his godlike status. In both endeavours, he cheats death and redeems past mistakes by creating new futures. Melony claims that he plays God as "he gives you your history or he takes it away," but, in fact, Larch does not record the orphans' pasts (97); he is, in that sense, less a historian than a creator. His records begin only with each orphan's adoptive parents, and thus are "for an orphan's future" (94).

Ironically, Larch claims that he is not in the "business of reuniting orphans with their biological beginnings [because] that is the storytelling business" (95); but Larch himself is one of the storytellers of The Cider House Rules. The narrative contains fragments of Larch's own text, a massive tome comically named A Brief History of St. Cloud's, which is a work in progress that terminates with Larch's death. It contains factual history, fiction, opinion, letters, photographs, memories, and personal journals and is a concrete embodiment of what Rorty calls the never completed network of idiosyncratic beliefs which constitute a person's final vocabulary. Appropriately for one dedicated to public service, Larch's "text" is both a private vocabulary and a document of public responsibility, since it contains both institutional and personal philosophy and history. Larch serves others by manipulating destiny, both as a doctor of medicine who creates either "an orphan or an abortion" out of unwanted pregnancies and thus alters the course of women's lives, and as a writer who "doctors" or manipulates the truth (74). As Larch says of himself: "I love to lie. When you lie, you feel as if you have cheated fate - your own and everybody else's" (339).

Where science fails, fiction can succeed, and Larch's first foray into fiction occurs when Fuzzy Stone, an orphan who significantly resembles an underdeveloped fetus, dies of an incurable respiratory disease. Unable to save him through medicine, Larch brings him "to term" by writing a completely fictional account in which Fuzzy survives, because "Wilbur Larch hadn't liked the actual endings, hadn't wanted to record the actual outcomes to those small foreshortened lives" (145). What Wilbur Larch wishes for Homer Wells, an ideal adoptive family, medical school at Harvard and following in Larch's footsteps to internships in obstetrics, is given to Fuzzy Stone. After Homer leaves St. Cloud's, Larch channels his love for Homer into his expanding fiction about Fuzzy. Thus, he embarks upon his own form of redemptive fiction in which he saves both the dead Fuzzy and the recalcitrant Homer, who has rejected Larch's plans for him to carry on the "Lord's work." Later, this fiction begins to develop in response to events in the narrative, and ultimately it takes over the main narrative of Irving's novel. Larch creates in Fuzzy a substitute for himself, and one who as a documented anti-abortionist missionary would be acceptable to the increasingly suspicious and hostile board of trustees. Just before his own death, Larch "kills off" Homer Wells in his text, so that Homer can return in role as Dr. Stone and take up Larch's position. Thus Larch's A Brief History of St. Cloud's becomes a parodic New Testament, in which the Creator sacrifices his son, so that he may rise again and redeem mankind from its original sin of disobedience. In finally returning to St. Cloud's as Fuzzy Stone, Homer not only atones for his original sin, his first deception and later defiance of Larch, but also recognizes and accepts the justice of Larch's law and his own role as the servant of the "Lord's work." Additionally, he also saves the "Lord's work" at St. Cloud's, and in so doing, the women who

are unable to obtain a legal abortion in the State of Maine.

Larch's narrative actually becomes the narrative of Irving's novel, as Homer abandons his life at Ocean View and steps into the role of Fuzzy Stone. This metafictional merging of a parodic biblical story with the larger narrative reinforces the moral and mystical elements of Irving's tale. The larger narrative, however comically or ironically, tells an irreverent alternative biblical story of noble action and sacrifice. In offering a parodic metafictional version of the New Testament as the ending of his novel, Irving seems to assert the place of ironic, self-reflexive, anti-authoritative, idiosyncratic texts in defining the values, and guiding the behaviour of our secular age. These modern texts are redemptive in so far as they redeem us from past vocabularies, which in their prescriptive judgements about the nature of sin, duty, sacrifice and suffering fail to recognize and account for the totality of human experience. In parodying the New Testament narrative of redemption and sacrifice (especially with a narrative of a man's struggle against and eventual acceptance of the practice of abortion), Irving raises serious questions about the value of traditional religious versus idiosyncratic personal texts in determining moral choice.

Harter and Thompson see "Irving's use of Larch as a surrogate artist ... [as] little more than a reflex action" and complain that Irving's pro-choice "polemic" is weak because it fails to "explore the rich, if painful ambiguities of the [abortion] issue," and because the topic obscures the "larger significance of 'choice' [which] involves the tension between freedom and restraint in a whole range of human situations" (137-140). In concentrating on the moral question of abortion, they may have missed the unifying principle of Irving's novel, for Larch's dual role as doctor and writer integrates a moral and aesthetic exploration of language

systems, moral precepts, rules and choice. As Richard Rorty points out, in the absence of a theological or metaphysical "order beyond time and change which both determines the point of human existence and establishes a hierarchy of responsibilities" there are "no algorithms for resolving moral dilemmas" (xv). Like Rorty's liberal ironist, Larch recognizes that belief systems are individual and contingent; since truth is only a function of language there is no universal "right" against which we can measure our choices and actions; and therefore each individual must resolve for himself the ambiguities of the pro-life, pro-choice debate. In a world of multiple perspectives, the only way we can minister to our own needs and the needs of others is not by seeking some universal human essence or moral truth but through developing compassion for our fellow humans on an individual basis. We can only reduce suffering by redescription, by making the best selves that we can. By "increasing our sensitivity to the particular details of the pain and humiliation of other unfamiliar sorts of people" through imaginative identification with them, we can create a vocabulary which allows us to reconcile the moral conflicts which we are unable to resolve (Rorty xv).

According to this view, Irving's "polemic" is less about the pro-choice position on abortion than about recognizing the contingency of language and belief systems which rule every aspect of our lives. This recognition leads to a belief in the need for idiosyncratic personal vocabularies which, in allowing us to recognize and acknowledge a dialectic between various perspectives and conflicting views, compel us to write the "narratives" or stories of our lives in which we both realize our best selves and reduce the suffering of others. As Larch tells Homer, "only a god can pick and choose" (568). Faced with others' suffering a human must, like Homer, settle for the realization "that there were possibly as

many cider house rules as there were people who had passed through the cider house" (457). Since there is no metanarrative to help us sort out our most difficult choices, each person must create a private vocabulary which allows her to acknowledge others' "texts" and freedom of choice, and be "of use" by giving "them what they want" (568).

Through the hypocrisy of religious characters such as the Calvinist Drapers and the prudish and disapproving trustee, Mrs. Goodhall, and the comic portrayal of the absurdly superstitious station master, Irving suggests that rigid belief systems which condemn those who fail to conform to narrow ideas of moral propriety, are themselves immoral, and that fearful and unquestioning acceptance of received doctrine reveals a dangerous and foolish lack of imagination. For Wilbur Larch, the greatest sin is "moral pride" or such exclusive faith in the rightness of one's belief system that it blinds one to the suffering of others. Larch rejects all totalizing systems which impose their views with authority, most notably organized religion, political philosophy, and the law. A pragmatist, Larch does not share Nurse Caroline's socialist narrative of progression toward a better world; his fictions are all for "this world" because he takes "this world as a given" (473). Ironically, Larch, himself a mythmaker and storyteller, cannot wait for these narratives of a better world to come true, for he believes that we are called to act and work in the present: "I don't have time for philosophy, or for government, or for religion. I don't have enough time," said Wilbur Larch" (473). While Larch recognizes the need for private dreams, he condemns meta-narratives or belief systems which allow one to exclude or marginalize those who do not share one's vocabulary, and to tolerate their suffering in light of the promise of better worlds to come. According to Larch, a belief system which does not address the urgent needs of those in

distress is a form of metaphysical escapism. He tells Homer that if one wishes to help others "you are not permitted to hide.... you are not permitted to look away" (188). In response to Homer's refusal to return to St. Cloud's and perform abortions because he believes the fetus has a soul, Larch writes, "He should believe in what he can see! If he's going to play God and tell us who's got a soul, he should take care of the souls who can talk back to him" (546). For the pragmatic Larch, immediate needs take precedence, and he believes the individual is not free to hold to a personal value system which denies other more pressing realities:

As long as [abortions] are against the law, how can you refuse.... The women have no choice. I know you know that's not right **HOW CAN YOU FEEL FREE TO CHOOSE NOT TO HELP PEOPLE WHO ARE NOT FREE TO GET OTHER HELP?** (518).

Knowing and acting upon what is right are both necessary and heroic (58): according to Larch, waiting to choose the correct course of action is a luxury we cannot afford when people are in need (359). Thus, in Larch's law, each person is obligated to develop a personal network of beliefs and values, a vocabulary, or text, which allows him to recognize realities other than his own and to then be prepared to act on them.

Since we cannot understand a new vocabulary from within an old one, reformulating one's personal vocabulary requires imaginative identification with a new text which allows us to enter into it and see, as it were, from a new perspective. Larch uses ether to inspire him and allow him to transcend the material world, but for the orphans he provides literature as a source of inspiration, solace and guidance. Like religion, literature serves the moral function of teaching a sensitivity to, and recognition of, other realities.

The point is variously made in The Cider House Rules. Homer is not only a fictional character in Irving's text: he is, in a sense, also the creation of Dickens and Brontë because his earliest perceptions are shaped by the Victorian novels he encounters in the nightly readings at the orphanage. The readings from these texts serve a religious function in allowing the youngest children to find peace and the older ones to transcend their loneliness and suffering: for those too young to understand the words "it was a successful soporific," and for those who could understand "it provided a way for them to leave St. Cloud's in their dreams, in their imaginations" (26). Dickens, the novelist whose great subject is the prodigal parent, proves the ideal choice for the orphans, and his texts feed their imaginative fantasies. At night, in his imagination, the young Homer follows the women leaving St. Cloud's: "he boarded the train with them, he singled out his mother and followed her" (18). And reading Dickens "provided him with sharper details when, falling asleep, he would follow the ghostly mothers" (226).

In addition, Larch feels that the Victorian narratives are ideal mental preparation for the rigours of real life (27): and these texts provide Homer with his only clear and coherent vision of the world.² Indeed his childhood at St. Cloud's has led him to conceive the world in fictional terms. When he first becomes aware of an imminent log drive which will sweep

²Unlike the closed and ordered worlds of the Victorian novels, the language and texts of Homer's teachers are without structure and thus are incomprehensible and meaningless: they seem to parody post-structuralist ideas of language and text as open systems of signs without form or boundaries. His English teacher gives him passages of scrambled hymnals to correct and punctuate, "o lorde mi got wen I en ausum wundor," and his history teacher, a senile man who teaches the "world from memory," bleeds together narratives about Mesopotamia, Rome, Troy and Elba into a meta-narrative which gives a sense of the "scope of history" but which makes no sense (25).

away the Winkles, his would-be adoptive parents, he recognizes it in literary terms from the foreshadowing of their helplessness rather than from a sensuous perception of the ground shaking:

the ground began to shake under him. He knew this more from certain badly told stories, in badly written children's books, than from the felt recognition of the moving ground itself: in those children's books, when something terrible is about to happen the ground *always* shakes (33).

Appropriately, Homer's "first talent" is reading Dickens aloud in "a proper voice" for the tale, and as he grows older, he takes over the nightly readings of David Copperfield and Jane Eyre for the boys' and girls' divisions respectively (32). He doesn't get his first "accurate view of the world" until he leaves St. Cloud's for Heart's Rock: when he views a map of the world in the high school there, he is surprised to discover England's size because Dickens had given him the impression of something "much bigger" (344). Homer, a child of fiction, is ill-prepared for the real world: his perceptions of it are based on Victorian novels which with their clear structure, their compassionate portrayals of human suffering and their faith in a divine telos and meaning are both bigger and better made than real life. Thus, Irving once again affirms both the power and value of nineteenth century narratives and the place all texts play in shaping our perceptions of the world.

Homer and Melony transcend the darkness of their lives through their imaginative engagements with these Victorian texts, and in the light and dark imagery which runs throughout the novel, there are echoes of Buechner's assertion that faith is a means of escaping darkness and achieving a full humanity. By employing citations from other literary

texts and describing the imaginative visions of his own characters, Irving presents the imagination as a source of light throughout this novel. Like the Gospel of John in which the word is God which is the "life and the light of men," the words of Dickens and Brontë illuminate the world for both Homer and Melony and help them to find peace and achieve a full humanity. Melony's particularly grim life makes her a harsh critic of the sweeter moments in Jane Eyre: taking special exception to the orphan Jane's celebration of the "gleams of sunshine" in her life (77), Melony derisively nicknames Homer, the reader, "Sunshine." However, robbed of her own story and her plan to track down and murder her mother by Larch's refusal to keep records, Melony is forced to reinvent herself and she comes to listen attentively to the novel as if "it were her life story," and to substitute Jane Eyre and Homer for her missing history and family (110). When Homer breaks his promise never to leave St. Cloud's without her, Melony steals the orphanage's copy of Jane Eyre (which Larch takes as a "hopeful sign," concluding that "she would not be without guidance, she would not be without love, without faith, [for] she had a good book with her" (228)) and goes searching for him. For Melony, both Jane Eyre and Homer provide "Sunshine:" the inspiration, solace, love and faith which Larch sees offered by the text of a good book, are conflated in Homer's roles as reader, dependable companion and potential hero, and Melony is unable to embark on an independent life without them. Appropriately, it is Brontë's text itself, in a moment of literary epiphany, which provides her with the inspiration to abandon it and begin to live an independent life and make her own meaning: "'I must part with you for my whole life,' she read, with horror. 'I must begin a new existence amongst strange faces and strange scenes.' The truth of that closed the book for her forever" (321). In recognizing the need to let go of

her past, Melony begins her journey toward peace and a full humanity, and the text of Jane Eyre is instrumental in leading her out of St. Cloud's, and toward a new life where she finds the love and peace which she seeks. The truth-teller of the novel, Melony is responsible for Homer's heroism fifteen years later, and her honesty redeems her at last from the anger and darkness of her early life. Homer realizes at her funeral that, like the Victorian texts they shared, Melony, in pointing out his moral failings, has been both educational and inspirational.

In addition to the "gleams of sunshine" found in Jane Eyre, further light imagery reveals the role the imagination plays in the lives of ordinary people. The orphan Homer recognizes the black migrant workers at the Ocean View Orchards as fellow outsiders, and the cider house where they sleep reminds him of St. Cloud's: "there seemed to radiate from the room a kind of dormitory anger and apprehension [which] he recognized from his nearly twenty years in the boy's division at St. Cloud's" (246). Like the orphans, and the abandoned women of St. Cloud's, the migrants are marginal figures, and as such do not share in the benefits of the larger society, nor are they included in its "texts" since its rules, values, and dreams are either incomprehensible or inaccessible to them. Excluded from the "texts" of the larger society by racism and illiteracy, the migrants have their own, separate code of rules which govern their behaviour and their contact with whites. Like the orphans, they realize their full humanity through their imaginative fantasies of worlds of their own making: from the cider house roof, they watch the distant moving lights at the Cape Kenneth carnival and invent stories about them. When Homer begins to explain that the revolving lights are, in fact, a distant ferris wheel, the crew boss, Mr. Rose, cuts in and tells the men that Homer, like

his namesake "the world's first storyteller," is only making up stories (329). In a subsequent visit to the carnival which ends in muted violence, Rose shows Homer that in the racist 1940s' world, the carnival is off-limits to blacks; and he argues that, given that reality, the workers are better off indulging their wonder and fantasy than in knowing a truth which does not include them (329). Denied a place in the larger society, the migrants sit in the dark on the roof of the cider house and create their own worlds.

Throughout The Cider House Rules Irving portrays people on the margin who are invisible to the larger society and are excluded from its benefits. The women who go to St. Cloud's for abortions, arrive and leave in the dark. Grace Lynch, the battered wife, is enclosed by a "thousand-gallon cider tank" (280), and Rose Rose the daughter of the picking boss, is sexually assaulted by her father on "a darker night than usual" in the unlit cider house (564).¹ Because they do not share equally in the freedoms and benefits of the society, these marginal figures have little say in the rules which govern their lives. In an ideal society such as Rorty's liberal utopia, "the point of social organization is to let everybody have a chance at self-creation to the best of his or her abilities," but in Irving's America of the first half of the century, the larger social texts fail to provide this freedom to all members of society (20).

Against this background, Irving's protagonist must find his own moral identity by placing the books, characters and beliefs which he encounters in context of each other, and

¹In contrast to these figures whose suffering is forgotten or ignored by the larger society and symbolized by the darkness which surrounds their lives, the rich and powerful live in an idealized world of constant sunshine and are able to get what they need in spite of society's rules. As a young doctor, Larch is taken to the wealthy Channing-Peabody's house on the coast to perform an abortion (61-67); the house is bathed in brilliant sunshine and its owners' wealth allows them break the law freely and without consequence .

through the dialectic created by this "intertextual exchange," come to revise his own final vocabulary to incorporate both his need for self-creation and his public responsibility to others. In his early life, Homer encounters three very different Victorian texts, and his imaginative engagement with each of them leads him to revise both his sense of himself and his obligation to society. For Homer, David Copperfield becomes an almost sacred text, and he returns to it throughout his life for guidance and consolation. At two seminal moments in his adult life - at the age of thirteen, just before Larch initiates him into the secret activities of the hospital at St. Cloud's and later, upon the death of his "father" Larch, when he is called upon to take up Larch's job as obstetrician and abortionist - he repeats the opening passage from David Copperfield, which has for him "the effect of a litany:" "Whether I shall turn out to be the hero of my own life, or whether that station will be held by anybody else, these pages must show" (71, 562).⁴ Homer's "life's crucible" is the question of whether or not he belongs to St. Cloud's (514) , and he turns to David Copperfield at times of duress, using it as a "prayer" to "calm himself" during his struggle (301). Unlike David, who stands aside "to see the phantoms of those days go by" and who, when they are gone "resume[s] the journey of [his] story," Homer cannot shake his past (304). Resolving the question of whether or not he will be the "hero of his life" means deciding between Larch's view of the world and his own idiosyncratic view, and it means coming to terms with the textual fragments, memories and beliefs which stem from St. Cloud's and which haunt him throughout his life at Ocean

⁴Irving's use of this quotation is, as has been noted, emblematic of self-conscious fiction: the reference is to the text of both David Copperfield and The Cider House Rules, which will show whether or not Homer is the hero of his own life (Gittings 62).

View.

Before Homer leaves St. Cloud's, however, he encounters two more significant texts which contribute as much to his way of seeing the world as David Copperfield does, and which lead him to diverge from Larch's views. Melony discovers a pornographic Victorian postcard in an abandoned dormitory and after his initial shock, Homer is immediately struck by a vision of "the evil manipulator of the woman, the pony, the clouds of Heaven or the smoke of Hell. The mists of nowhere on the earth, at least, Homer imagined" (90). Homer's reading of Dickens has prepared him to understand constructed fictions, to feel hatred for those who cruelly exploit others, and to feel compassion. Thus, he condemns the "evil manipulator" who created it and is even rendered temporarily impotent by his empathy for the woman in the picture (100). Reading Dickens, however, has not prepared him to recognize that "the clouds of heaven" or the "smoke of hell" in the photograph symbolize a very real ugliness and human sexual cruelty: uninitiated into the real world, Homer is, as yet, unable to imagine such evil existing "on earth" (90). Angered by Homer's first deception of him, and aware that the boy's sexual interest in the photograph reveals a new maturity, Larch acknowledges that it is time for Homer "to know" about the darker truths of life (106). While the photograph signifies an obvious sin to Homer, it does so even more acutely for Larch. But in Larch's case, the association is entirely personal. The woman in the photo is the first woman ever to request an abortion from him: because he hesitated, she had a backstreet abortion which killed her. Larch's profound remorse at hesitating out of the sin of "moral pride" motivates his life of service at St. Cloud's (51). In an ironic exchange, Larch forces Homer to look into the shadows of the photograph and see what cannot be clearly made out.

Larch intends to reveal to Homer the limits of his adolescent experience: "Well?" Larch asked. It's not in David Copperfield. It's not in Jane Eyre either - what you need to know," he added almost nastily" (106). What Larch expects Homer to see is her pigtail and to recognize her individuality and humanity; instead Homer imagines a pool of blood in the shadows. Together the two readings of the "truth" in the shadows reveal the dehumanizing cruelty and violence of the image.

Having exposed Homer to what he "need[s] to know," the ugly realities of life, Larch concludes that he is now ready for a new text. He replaces the "tough to look at" pornographic photograph with his well worn copy of Gray's Anatomy, which was his "only road map" during his medical service in WW I (106). Like a map, Gray's Anatomy is a guide for action and the only means Larch knows of combatting the evil symbolized by the shadowy picture. By giving Homer Gray's Anatomy, another text, Larch begins to initiate him into medical practice and to teach him to be "of use" fighting the forces of darkness either by delivering babies or performing abortions. For Homer, Gray's Anatomy is more than an anatomy textbook, and it becomes his textual map for defining a personal vision. Homer's desire for freedom and for experience outside St. Cloud's informs his response to the text (116) and begins the process which will see him part company from Larch's beliefs and St. Cloud's itself. With Melony he examines it "as if it were the intricate map they had to follow if they were ever to find their way out of St. Cloud's" (116).

The personal concerns readers bring to their understanding of texts, as symbolized by Homer and Larch's disparate "readings" of the pornographic photograph, reveal an intertextual exchange between memories, experiences and the text being read. Homer Wells'

growing maturity can be measured in his changing response to the received texts of others. As a young adolescent, he condemned Jane Eyre as a "whiner - a sniveler" (75) and concluded that Dickens was a superior writer to Brontë, but his experiences with the photograph, Melony, and a frightened pregnant woman show him a variety of new perspectives which affect his understanding of the texts he encounters:

Something in the way he read Jane Eyre struck Homer as different too - as if this or any story were newly informed by the recent experiences in his life: a woman with a pony's penis in her mouth, his first sexual failure, his first routine sex, Gray's Anatomy and a live birth. He read with more appreciation of Jane's anxiety, which had struck him earlier as tedious. Jane has a right to be anxious, he thought (108).

For the first time, Homer is able to empathize with someone from outside his vocabulary, and his new reading of Jane Eyre reveals the beginning of the development of a personal view which will incorporate both self-definition and public responsibility. In response to his recent experiences and his new texts, Homer begins to question Larch's values and to knit together an idiosyncratic personal system of beliefs. In Gray's, Homer discovers that "a fetus, as early as eight weeks, has an expression" and thus, ironically through a scientific text, not the bible, Homer comes to feel "in the presence of what others call a soul" (168). Having decided that a fetus is alive and that abortion is killing it, Homer reaches his own judgement:

Let Larch call it whatever he wants, thought Homer Wells. It's his choice - if it's a fetus, to him, that's fine. It's a baby to me, thought Homer Wells. If Larch has a choice, I have a choice too (169).

In seizing control of his language and naming the fetus a baby, Homer asserts both his

independence and the moral power of language in his choice of words for the unborn; in naming it a baby, he recognizes its life and its humanity. Homer's newfound beliefs, lead to his refusal to perform abortions; this divergence from Larch's law, Homer believes, represents both a heroic and a moral stance.

In choosing to perform the abortion, tell Wally and Angel the truth, and then return to St. Cloud's as Dr. Fuzzy Stone, Homer plays symbolic roles of doctor, God, hero, prodigal son, and novelist. Homer "saves" Rose Rose and becomes her "hero," he saves the "Lord's work" at St. Cloud's, and he saves himself by becoming fully human as defined by Buechner, "compassionate, honest, and brave." He takes Larch's offered role, and thus, becomes a character in fiction, but more importantly also a kind of novelist "for a novelist, in Candy's opinion was a kind of imposter doctor, but a good doctor nonetheless" (584). In imaginatively combining love and compassion for others with his personal texts, Homer becomes at last, not just a writer but an artist like Larch. He has already restored the garden in St. Cloud's by planting an apple orchard on the barren hillside, and as he takes the woman's arm and escorts her inside, he performs a further symbolic act of welcoming the fallen woman back into the garden, an idealized place, a better world. At the novel's conclusion, fiction triumphs over other texts, as Larch's elaborate lies fool the board of trustees and allow the "Lord's work" to continue in defiance of both the law and the conventional values of the board members.

Thus, The Cider House Rules exemplifies Rorty's idea of a poeticized culture in which recognition of the contingency of language and the process of redescription is central to the personal and public aspects of life. Irving's metafictional meditation on language

systems examines the relation between topical and aesthetic morality and recognizes that language creates reality. In the absence of an external referent which defines goodness, we must recognize and meet the needs of others through a process of redescription. In redescrbing our world to include an awareness of the suffering of others, we expand our sense of solidarity with other, unfamiliar sorts of people, and thus increase our chances of limiting our cruelty toward them. Individually and collectively the process of redescription, both redeems us from the restrictions of past descriptions, and allows us to realize the best of Victorian morality and social responsibility as we engage in an intertextual exchange between contemporary experience and traditional texts. For both readers of existing texts and "writers" of personal texts who are constantly revising their beliefs in response to the texts and experiences they encounter, this process of redescription is open ended and ongoing. As Rorty argues, the only way we can realize a better world in which we increase personal freedom and reduce suffering is by making the best selves for ourselves that we can and by reconceiving our world to include people outside our circles of family, country or race which are all really "myself writ large" (Buechner 38). Irving seems to suggest that we must create personal narratives in which we can realize our best selves and our responsibility to others: these narratives will grow out of an imaginative engagement with other texts, and will be the stories that we write in the process of "growing" and "becoming" fully human. Thus at the end of his novel Irving does seem to suggest a model for living a new life, in which his readers, like his characters may conceive of themselves as larger than life heroes, or redeemers of their fellow men. In demonstrating their compassion for others they can become, like Dr. Stone, and Dr. Larch "who were - if there ever were - Princes of Maine.

Kings of New England" (587).

CHAPTER FOUR

"The Courage to Be:

Faith, Imagination and Irony
in A Prayer for Owen Meany"

As in The Cider House Rules, in A Prayer for Owen Meany, Irving looks at the role texts play in shaping our private selves and our public lives, but here the focus is less social. Rather than mores, laws and practices, this novel explores mystical and spiritual longing and the relation of private beliefs to personal and public responsibility. In Owen Meany, Irving looks at narratives that connect the present with the past, suggests how religious and secular texts affect public values, and shows how either an idiosyncratic personal interpretation of existing texts or the creation of a new vocabulary best serves both our personal and public needs.

Rorty suggests that in replacing the sermon and the treatise as the vehicles of moral change, narratives fulfil the functions previously served by religion and philosophy (xvi). According to him, novels work to redescribe our final vocabularies by placing various belief systems in context of each other because, in encountering a dialectic between various vocabularies, "we revise our opinions of both the old and the new. Simultaneously, we revise our own moral identity by revising our own final vocabulary" (80). In similar fashion, by structuring his narrative as John Wheelwright's memory, Irving creates a metafictional play on moral texts; on one level, the text is John Wheelwright's attempt to come to terms with his past through his prayer to God, and, on another, Irving's novel creates a dialectic which

serves to redescribe the recent past in moral terms and to suggest ways in which we can realise elements of the divine by healing ourselves both individually and collectively through redescription.

A Prayer for Owen Meany is John Wheelwright's prayer for the healing of his damaged self and his damned and corrupted nation, as well as for the resurrection of his best friend and hero, Owen Meany (127). Trapped between his doubt and disbelief, on the one hand, and certainty and faith, on the other, as well as between the past and the present, John's life is ruled by his memory, which he calls "a monster" which "hides things from you - and summons them to your recall with a will of its own" (41). In a sense, John's prayer and memory are synonymous. As part of the same vocabulary, they engage in a continuous intertextual exchange: his prayer for the future grows out of his past, and his memory of the past is coloured by his current values and desires. At the start of the novel, he declares: "I am a Christian because of Owen Meany," and John's narrative shows us how he is "doomed to remember" Owen because Owen is the reason he "believe[s] in God" (13). Because he perceives Owen's life as "miraculous," John's life becomes a life lived in prayer, and a life governed by two texts of the past: the "monster" of his memory, and the New Testament. And throughout this novel, Irving examines both the mimetic and creative power of texts to reflect and shape our view of the world.

John's memory is also his idiosyncratic network of beliefs, desires and experiences, which is reflected in the structure of Irving's text. Remembered incidents and texts are interspersed with present day diary entries, and Irving creates a dialectic by placing Owen and John's texts, biblical passages, and quotations from Hardy, Frost, and Fitzgerald in

conjunction. For example, religious texts are juxtaposed with Hardy's secular humanism. Hardy's view that "NOTHING BEARS OUT IN PRACTICE WHAT IT PROMISES INCIPIENTLY" is set against Christian texts, and the dialectic suggests that the promise of Christianity will ultimately be unrealised (459). This is borne out by Irving's own narrative: while Owen is redeemed and freed by his faith, John Wheelwright's uncertainty and his perception that his country is still consumed by sin despite Owen's heroism suggest that this Christ-like narrative of sacrifice and redemption does not necessarily deliver what it promises. Although Owen's life, a heroic story of sacrifice and redemption, as recalled by Johnny Wheelwright, could be read as an affirmation of the Christian narrative, ultimately, it fails to deliver on its redemptive promise. Twenty years after his death, the world is more corrupt and misguided than ever. If, as Rorty suggests, metaphysicians believe that "the right redescription can make us free" while ironists "offer no similar assurance," then Irving would seem to be clearly in the ironists' camp (90). For, if the Christian vocabulary was the "right redescription" and if embracing it were enough, we might at the very least expect John Wheelwright to experience freedom and exhilaration through his faith, but he does not. Instead, John's faith and Owen's life fail to "BEAR OUT IN PRACTICE WHAT [THEY] PROMISE ... INCIPIENTLY."

The dialectic between Hardy's suggestion and the argument informing Christian texts draws together Irving's observations on the relation of the past to the present, his ideas about the creation of idiosyncratic personal texts, and Christian and ironist notions of predestination, freedom and redemption. Throughout *A Prayer for Owen Meany*, the creative interpreting or building of texts is inspirational and life-affirming: through the dialectic

among Christian, secular and personal texts. Irving seems to suggest that the further we travel through time away from the inception of a text or a belief, the less directly it speaks to both our personal and public needs for self-creation and solidarity. The aptly named Wheelwright follows paths set by others. He lacks sufficient imagination to be a true metaphysician, because while he enters the Christian vocabulary, he is unable to sustain a vital and living faith on his own. Progressively more uncertain and unsatisfied as the miracle of Owen's life recedes with time and lacking the power within him to sustain his faith, John can only pray for the return of Owen. In creating a dialectic between Christian and modernist texts, Irving creates a new vocabulary which contains both. He suggests that the true value of the divine lies in a dynamic and creative faith in which the past is continuously made present, and that this faith is synonymous with the creative and critical imagination of a writer or reader.

Several critics have observed the connection between imagination and faith in this novel. Noting that in Irving's earlier works, the creation of literature provides a means of living a purposeful life despite life's forces, Edward Reilly suggests that Irving pursues a variation on this theme in Owen Meany, where survival "requires prayers and faith" (143-144). To support his claim that A Prayer for Owen Meany is essentially a religious work, Bradley Quiring cites Mircea Eliade's contentions that "the religious perceive the world as imbued with sacred significance" and that the "ability to regard one's world as sacred is essentially a creative act" (5-6). He also cites David M. LaGuardia's discussion of Wallace Stevens to suggest how the imagination comes to perform a religious function in a secular age: because the world is "in process," the mind shapes the view of reality it perceives - thus as we reject an absolute and fixed authority we substitute "for the divine the spirit of the holy

that [individuals] generate for themselves by individual acts of the imagination's perception" (10). Indeed, Irving's novel is a meditation on the religious impulse and its relation to the appreciation and creation of texts. But Irving is often more sceptical and ironic than these formulations suggest.

Owen compares religious belief to *any* idiosyncratic belief system which requires an imaginative investment from either its creator or reader. When John struggles to understand Hardy's Tess of the D'Urbervilles, Owen tells him, "YOUR BOREDOM IS YOUR PROBLEM.... IT'S YOUR LACK OF IMAGINATION THAT BORES YOU" (281). "READING IS A GIFT," Owen maintains. While you don't "NEED ANY SPECIAL TALENT, YOU ... HAVE TO PAY ATTENTION TO WHAT SOMEONE WANTS YOU TO SEE:" that is, you have to transcend your own vocabulary to perceive the writer's view of the world (444, 282). Owen explains the connection between Hardy and Christianity:

DONT 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 DONT LEAVE YOURSELF MUCH ROOM FOR PHILOSOPHICAL DETACHMENT.... NEVER CONFUSE FAITH OR BELIEF - OF ANY KIND WITH SOMETHING EVEN REMOTELY INTELLECTUAL (458).

John's lack of imagination is tied to his lack of faith. "FAITH TAKES PRACTICE" says Owen, and for John who suffers from a learning disability, learning to read with sympathy will also take practice. Owen first teaches John how to imagine and therefore read sensitively

and only then how to believe. Thus, at the end of the novel, John is both a reader and teacher of English and a believer in God. John's religious faith seems to be a logical extension of his reading: both require a suspension of disbelief, the ability to invest and interpret events or things with meaning or special purpose, and an imaginative leap into a new vocabulary which re-describes the world.

While Owen suggests that being able to read with sympathy is comparable to having religious faith, and that having faith means creatively interpreting the texts one encounters, his faith in one text, the New Testament, is unshakeable. As John notes, Owen lived his life as if he were on "divine assignment following God's holy orders" (478). While he doesn't feel called to re-describe his Christian final vocabulary, Owen's faith is not passive but dynamic, and he makes his own meaning by creatively interpreting and living out his belief in religious texts. As an eleven year old, he orchestrates the Nativity pageant in accordance with the hymn, "Away in a Manger," and literally has his life "in Christ" by casting himself in the role of the baby Jesus. Furthermore, Owen's observation of Christian doctrine is both extreme and devout. As John observes: "I knew there was no such thing as 'too literal' for Owen Meany, who grasped orthodoxy from wherever it could be found" (155). Thus, Irving uses Owen's world view to explore what is essentially the religious antithesis of historicism such as Rorty's. For Owen nothing is contingent, and the underlined passages in his copy of Thomas Aquinas reveal his belief in a shaping purpose at work in the world:

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 a bed could be accomplished by putting a saw or a hatchet to

work without the carpenter to use them. Therefore, there must be a first mover existing above all - and this we call God (473).

Of course, Aquinas himself, Kant, Russell et al. have apprised us of the logical flaws inherent in this argument, but for Owen, faith is not to be confused with "SOMETHING EVEN REMOTELY INTELLECTUAL" (458). Owen's belief leaves no room for the "PHILOSOPHICAL DETACHMENT" inherent in ironism, and his obstinate refusal to recognize other realities leads him to what Rorty calls the "common sense defense" of his final vocabulary, which Rorty defines as the predisposition "to take for granted that statements formulated in [one's own] final vocabulary suffice to describe and judge the beliefs, actions and lives of those who employ alternative final vocabularies" (74). For example, Owen condemns disbelievers when he asserts that coincidence is

A STUPID, SHALLOW REFUGE SOUGHT BY STUPID, SHALLOW PEOPLE WHO WERE UNABLE TO ACCEPT THE FACT THAT THEIR LIVES WERE SHAPED BY A TERRIFYING AND AWESOME DESIGN - MORE POWERFUL AND UNSTOPPABLE THAN THE FLYING YANKEE (171).

Owen is "strictly by the book" (40) in his adherence to Christian texts, but he also searches beyond conventional Christian doctrine for meaning. While exploring the rooms of the boarders at Gravesend Academy during the Christmas vacation, Owen's "behaviour in the rooms was remindful of a holy man's search of a cathedral of antiquity - as if he could divine some ancient and also holy intention there" (146). In addition to searching both texts and life for signs of divine significance, Owen also creates "texts" loaded with emotional and mystical meaning. Rorty has suggested that using a metaphor is a change of communicative

tactic, like resorting to a slap in the middle of a conversation. Under certain circumstances, he argues, one's message is better carried out through a metaphor than through a literal sentence because "the unparaphrasability of metaphor is just the unsuitability of any such familiar sentence for one's purpose" (18). When literal language cannot convey the enormity of his emotion, Owen speaks in visual metaphors: he gives John his treasured baseball cards, and amputates the armadillo's claws so that it resembles "Watahantowet's totem, the tragic and mysterious armless man" which the Indian chief had used as his symbol when deeding his land to John's puritan ancestor (86).

A second example of Owen's use of metaphor occurs when he bolts an immense stone statue of Mary Magdalene to the stage floor of the Assembly Hall in order to communicate the injustice of his expulsion from Gravesend Academy. The headless, armless statue conveys the censorship of his voice and his helpless victimization at the hands of the headmaster, while its massive weight and welded-in bolts suggest the enormity of Owen's suffering and the permanence of his presence. John says that Owen's symbols require "consideration" and that his communications are "open to interpretation and dispute," and thus they reveal his creative and inventive nature as well as his assumption that, like readers carefully analysing a text, his audience will "PAY ATTENTION TO WHAT [HE] WANTS YOU TO SEE" (357, 454, 444). Owen also becomes known as THE VOICE for his editorials at Gravesend Academy, and as a compelling and honest writer, he commands attention and naturally becomes the leader of both his class and his town. All this is tied directly to his fresh and original perspective. Rorty notes that "if a metaphor is used habitually, it becomes denuded of special meaning, and we will cope with it in the same

unthinking way we deal with most sentences" (18). Through his creation of metaphors, his writing, and ultimately through his actions, Owen creates a new vocabulary which revitalizes received notions of Christianity. At the same time, the novel also suggests that habitual and conventional use of religious symbols and texts denudes them of special meaning.

Even before the narrative begins, Irving indicates that a true and vital Christian faith requires exceptional devotion and sacrifice by quoting Leon Bloy's contention that "Any Christian who is not a hero is a pig" (11). While the view of Christianity in Irving's text is not as contentious nor as pejorative as Bloy's, the novel does suggest that smug, superficial, unquestioning and conventional faith is in fact, unheroic, hypocritical and irresponsible. While the text suggests that private and public morality should be kept separate and not confused - "the only people who are adamant in their claim that public and private morality are inseparable are those creep-evangelists who profess to 'know' that God prefers capitalists to communists, and nuclear power to long hair" (329) - it also suggests that with faith comes the responsibility to live according to the Christian ideal, which means actively searching for meaning, helping others, and never assuming that one's perspective is privileged. Owen, for example, "would never have claimed that he 'knew' what God wanted.... He hated anyone who claimed to 'know' God's opinion of current events" (329).

Through parallels to St. Paul, Irving sets Owen up as an ideal Christian, for "the picture of Paul in Acts has, as at least one of its objects, the setting forth of an ideal of Christian devotion and service" (Coggins 217). Owen's real name is Paul O. Meany, Jr., and just as Paul is Jesus' chosen instrument, so Owen believes himself to be God's instrument. The book of Acts tells the story of Tabitha who "filled her days with acts of kindness and

charity" and was miraculously raised from the dead by Peter, thus converting more people to Christianity (Acts 9). In an ironic take on this story, Owen, who has benefitted greatly from John's mother's kindness and charity, creates an icon of Tabitha Wheelwright's dressmaker's dummy which figures prominently in John's staged "miracle" when Tabitha rises from the dead and restores his father's lost faith. John's narrative is written twenty years after Owen's death and contains both his own memories of events and conversations and excerpts from Owen's own diary. In a sense then, the relation between Owen's and John's version of events is parallel to the relation of Paul's own letters to the Book of Acts. "Acts is a later book, with its own understanding of the events of the earliest Christian days, a perspective that at times differs sharply from that of Paul himself," and in matters of faith and politics John's perspective often seems at odds with Owen's (Coggins 215). Owen appears to believe that he is the result of a virgin birth, which John considers a monstrous superstition. Yet Irving's novel is ambiguous enough to support either reading. While John is prepared to trust in the miracle of Owen's foreknowledge and the resurrection of his spirit because he believes he has evidence and experience of both, he is otherwise conventional and narrow in his faith. Owen, on the other hand, while being truly devout and certain in his faith, is more idiosyncratic and mystical: although he doesn't compare himself to Christ, he believes that his story is as likely to be true as any other story (477).

Despite his unwillingness to accept the notion of immaculate conception, John does see Owen in Christ-like terms. Formerly an unbeliever, John re-conceives past events from a Christian perspective: his faith colours his perception of the past because belief "entails a change of reality, and activity, of being" (Gaboury 34-35). The enormity of the change in his

world view wrought by his experiences with Owen and his resulting faith cause him to wonder if "perhaps Owen had even changed my memory" (503). Owen is variously described by John as "a descending angel - a tiny but fiery god sent to adjudicate the errors of our ways" (71), as an all knowing Christ figure (198), as "an unmanageable icon" (201), as a "crucified innocent" (354), and in the iconography of the pieta as he lies outstretched and dying in a nun's arms (540). Coe has argued that "in performing a recreative act upon the inherited images and symbols of his time, the artist renews, restores, reshapes, and revitalizes them to meet contemporary spiritual needs" (43). Thus Irving adopts the Christian narrative to suggest both a contemporary version of devotion and sacrifice at odds with our secular world, and our need to become morally responsible both as individuals and as members of a larger public. But, in addition, he employs Christian stories and symbols ironically to comment upon our need to create new stories or revitalize the old ones in order to capture the mystery and significance of religious texts fully in the present. Paradoxically, then, Irving infuses the traditional Christian story with vitality by bringing it into the present while suggesting that for the majority these received texts fail to meet the spiritual needs of the present.

Owen creatively mythologizes his world, and he develops a network of beliefs in which his diminutive size and unusual voice are not just unfortunate accidents of nature but part of a divine purpose. As John notes, "on the subject of predestination, Owen Meany would accuse Calvin of bad faith" (99). His belief in the logic, order and harmony of the universe causes him to interpret three events - the death of John's mother, a vision of his own tombstone during his performance as the Ghost of the Future in A Christmas Carol, and a

dream about his own death - as portents of his destiny. While Dan Needham asserts that Owen's only power "is the power of his imagination" (225), Owen recounts his dream with the "certainty and authority" of the "undoubting parts of the bible" (419). Believing that Owen's vision is self-induced and the result of an unusually high fever, John sees Owen as the master of his own destiny who has given himself a certain amount of time. But despite his scepticism, John is left wondering, like Scrooge: "Are these the shadows of things that Will be or are they shadows of the things that May be, only?" (230).

Through Owen, Irving poses the question of what a life lived in full and obedient accordance with ideas of faith and predestination would be like. Owen does die on the appointed date and in accordance with the details of his dream. However, it could be argued that Owen's own actions make the prophecy come true. Believing he knows his destiny, Owen embraces this "pre-ordained future" when he joins the army, practices the shot and arranges for John to join him on the date he envisioned on his tombstone. This ambiguity suggests the reflexive nature of belief in Irving's novel in particular and in texts in general. Owen's belief defines his reality, and so his life develops in accordance with that belief. As the author of his own life, Owen suggests a parallel between an author's shaping of a text to achieve harmony and resolution and a shaping purpose at work in the world which gives life meaning and dispenses justice.

The images of rock, stone and granite which surround Owen connote the foundation of certainty on which his self-transcendent faith rests. This certainty is not to be confused with rigidity. Ironically, as an active and creative interpreter of his world, Owen demonstrates more freedom to realise himself than John Wheelwright, who doesn't imagine

his destiny is preordained. Once John experiences the "miracle" of Owen's precognition and heroic sacrifice, he is converted, but having entered the Christian vocabulary, he fails to develop it further. Living according to a final vocabulary and following it faithfully and passively without redescribing either himself or the world, John experiences a form of predestination. If one conceives of only one text, then one's future is preordained by the text set out in that final vocabulary. Just as he is trapped in his memory and continuously drawn to the past, so too is he trapped and defined by his experiences and preconceived ideas in the present. Through John's failure to realize a dynamic faith and to live fully in a present of his own making, Irving implies that a passive and uncreative acceptance of received texts is confining and deadly.

John's private failing, his inability to sustain his imaginative self-transcendence and create a living and evolving description of the world, finds its public counterpart in the rise of a popular culture which fails to stimulate the public imagination and which encourages a passive consumption of its media. Owen contends that most people are influenced by the obvious, such as a writer's style or the television evangelist's staged miracle, but that true imagination or faith requires effort: he says we must dig deeper so that we can "BELIEVE WITHOUT SEEING" (277). If Dan Needham's view that the public entertainment of the period distinguishes it as clearly as "its so-called politics" is in fact, Irving's opinion, then he seems to suggest that in the 1980's America is reaching a cultural and political nadir. For John's grandmother, contemporary culture indicates "how steadfast [is] the nation's decline, how merciless our mental and moral deterioration, how swiftly all-embracing our final decadence" (235). In contrast, she believes reading to be "an unselfish activity that

provide[s] information and inspiration" (231). Reflecting her Puritan heritage and belief that good works move one closer to salvation, Harriet Wheelwright perceives reading as noble and beneficial to the soul and the intelligence because it requires effort. And through this parallel, Irving again suggests the notion that reading and writing texts are moral endeavours which, by engaging our imaginations, lead to a form of salvation.

The growing simplification and shallowness of contemporary culture is also evident in Hester's career: in the early 60s, she failed as a folksinger because her songs lacked irony, but with the advent of rock videos which John calls "those lazy-minded, sleazy associations of 'images' that pass for narrative ... irony is no longer necessary" (452). In the sense that new forms of entertainment lack irony and are made up of loose associations of images requiring little interpretation or imagination on the part of the audience, then the fate of a generation of television viewers is also predestined, since they fail to shape imaginatively the texts they encounter and thus live according to received notions and predetermined texts. Unlike reading, television watching is passive, and Irving emphasises this through frequent references to Harriet Wheelwright and Owen talking back at the television in exasperation. Such a "dialogue" has political as well as cultural implications. The lack of accountability, and the prevaricating nature of both the government and television medium are emphasised by Owen's one-way conversation with the television set. After the Tonkin Gulf Resolution and Johnson's assumption of special presidential powers, "Owen Meany asked [John's] grandmother's television set a question: 'DOES THAT MEAN THE PRESIDENT CAN DECLARE A WAR WITHOUT DECLARING IT?'" (89). The television, of course, fails to reply and the unilateral actions of the U.S. government find their parallel in the one-sided

communications of the television medium.

In contrast to television, a "text" which lacks irony, wit, depth and profundity, biblical and literary texts also fill Irving's novel. Owen is able to engage actively in a reflexive interaction with these texts, shaping both the texts and his own life in the process. On the same day, he performs as the Christ child in the Nativity pageant and as the Ghost of Christmas Yet to Come in A Christmas Carol, and suffering from a high fever, he appears to conflate these roles in his "vision" of his future gravestone. Already believing he is God's instrument, Owen comes to believe that his death is predetermined by some divine purpose. Not only is Owen's life changed by his engagement with these texts, he also changes them: "having revised the Nativity, he had moved on, he was reinterpreting Dickens - for even Dan had to admit that Owen had somehow changed A Christmas Carol" (184-185). Given the dramatic format, Owen's private vision is made public and in turn it shapes John's perceptions. John describes how the pageant of '53 has replaced the biblical story for him, and his description of Owen at the end of the performance reveals how his knowledge of later events colours his perception of the past. Just as Owen's "fever" causes him to engage in an intertextual exchange with both plays and see his life laid out for him in a manner suggested by the bible and Dickens' A Christmas Carol, so John's memory conflates biblical images, the pageant, and Owen's heroic, soldierly death:

I will never forget ... Jesus as born victim, born raw, born bandaged, born angry and accusing; and wrapped so tightly that he could not bend his knees at all and had to lie on his parents' laps as stiffly as someone who, mortally wounded, lies upon a stretcher (206).

Through these metafictional exchanges, Irving reveals the creative power of literary and religious texts, which, in stimulating the reader's desire to weave these existing narratives into his personal network of memories, emotions and belief, free him to realise his own destiny by creating a highly original and personal text for engaging with the world.

Literary texts also serve to comment on Christian doctrine, on each other, and on events in the novel. Irving creates a dialectic between different vocabularies by placing quotations from Dickens, Hardy, Fitzgerald and Tolstoy in his narrative. For example, he sets up a dialectic between Jacob Marley's declaration that humanity is a man's business (215), and the attitudes of the "careless people," of The Great Gatsby whose "carelessness is immoral" (289). While Owen's acts and views realise Dickens' notions of Christian responsibility as voiced by Marley, Fitzgerald's assertion that Americans are careless of their responsibilities to each other is borne out in John's discussion of both domestic and foreign policy. Owen lives and dies according to the Dickensian ideal, but the American public - and indeed, the government - are as careless of their responsibility to others as they were in Fitzgerald's Jazz Age. Thus through texts, both his own and those of literary giants, Irving articulates the contrast between ideals of behaviour as set out in our texts - i.e. either Christian or Victorian notions of responsibility and selflessness - and the everyday actions of most people. However, unlike the totalizing and simplifying religious, political, and cultural metanarratives criticized in this novel, A Prayer for Owen Meany does not attempt to resolve the tension between the ideal and the actual by asserting the primacy of one truth over another. Instead, Irving offers another "vocabulary" to suggest the difficulty of reconciling Christian responsibility with human carelessness and indifference. In religion class, the boys

are asked to discuss a quotation from Tolstoy; when faced with "unanswerable questions" Tolstoy writes, "one must live in the needs of the day - that is forget oneself" (276). Tolstoy's phrase, like Owen's communications, requires "consideration" and is "open to interpretation and dispute" (357, 454). Tolstoy is suggesting either that we must be pragmatic and forgo moral accountability like the characters in *Gatsby*, or that we must give of ourselves and serve not only our own needs but others' too. By citing an ambiguous source - a source which requires some effort and interpretation on the part of the reader - to articulate this dilemma, Irving also suggests that if we are to escape the self-serving and simplistic morality of our age, we need to wrestle with the complexities inherent in literary sources, for these works, not newspapers or television, embody the difficult issues which rule our lives.

Irving also uses poetry to raise and comment upon moral and political questions, and the second interpretation of Tolstoy's line (that we must give of ourselves) is echoed in Frost's "The Gift Outright," which John remembers being read at John F. Kennedy's inauguration. After Frost began reading his poem with the line "The land was ours before we were the land's," John recalls that he "began to struggle" and couldn't read the poem properly (299). Frost's difficulty is ironic in light of others' prior claims to the land, and thus Irving raises questions about the perspective and morality of "our old friend Robert Frost" (299). Thus, it seems appropriate that it is Owen, attempting to prompt Frost through the television set, who actually speaks the following lines:

SOMETHING WE WERE WITHHOLDING MADE US WEAK
 UNTIL WE FOUND OUT THAT IT WAS OURSELVES
 WE WERE WITHHOLDING FROM OUR LAND OF LIVING.

AND FORTHWITH FOUND SALVATION IN SURRENDER (299).

Frost suggests that transcending ourselves to engage actively in faith and in helping others is the means to our salvation, and that "withholding of ourselves" either in spirit or in deed, makes us weak (299). However, in the context of J.F.K.'s inauguration and in light of more recent revelations about the Kennedy administration, the reading of Frost's verse at this ceremony suggests a further irony. Owen argues that faith in any text is compelling because it is emotional, and, indeed, Owen is so profoundly moved by the inauguration (and his own conflation of Frost and Kennedy) that he vows to give up sarcasm and "CYNICAL, SMART-ASS, ADOLESCENT BULLSHIT!" (299). However, in this context, Frost's phrase "salvation in surrender" is also ironic, for while Kennedy's charismatic political presence was seductive, it was also deceptive and potentially dangerous, as revelations of his infidelity and Cold War hostility later reveal (319). Therefore, Irving suggests that "withholding" or philosophical detachment in the face of compelling public texts like the Camelot/Kennedy mythology provides a necessary counter-balance to unquestioning idealism.

Any work which shows us the relation of the past to the present has a moral function, Rorty claims. And Irving sets up a dialectic between the past and the present to suggest that remembering is a moral act. The past haunts the present in this novel, and in it Irving draws a portrait of America in which the sins of the fathers are visited upon the sons, and American corruption and hypocrisy is compounded over time. As the repeated references to Isaiah 5:20 ("Woe unto them that call evil good and good evil") suggest, there is a price to be paid for hypocrisy and corruption, and America is paying that price in the late twentieth century. John's ancestors fled intolerance and persecution only to suffer it again at the hands of their

fellow Puritans in Boston. Furthermore, parallels to Hawthorne's The Scarlet Letter - the fallen woman, the adulterate priest, the "red" dress, John's lust for his cousin "Hester" - also constitute oblique allusions to corruption and hypocrisy in the early years of the nation. In John's eyes, injustice and corruption are the foundations of the country, and this is borne out in his account of the dubious seizure of Indian land, and the white man's careless and self-righteous stewardship of it.¹ As John says: "I grew up with the opinion regarding how blessed were those who murdered trees for a living" (22). Just as American ideals of freedom, tolerance and honesty have been corrupted, so the ruin of the landscape has created "restless and displaced spirits" which lead John to suggest that "Watahantowet may have been the last resident of Gravesend, New Hampshire who really understood what everything cost" (86).

According to John Wheelwright, it is history that holds us accountable, but Americans can't remember their own recent history and are therefore vulnerable to deception and corruption. John argues that because Ronald Reagan "numbed the United States," and the country failed to remember Vietnam and Watergate, they were fated to repeat history through Nicaragua and the Iran/Contra affair (88). Thus, Irving suggests that failing to remember and realise "what everything cost" is America's sin, and in neither recognising its mistakes, nor rereading the text in which these mistakes are chronicled, it has lost the opportunity to redescribe and improve itself.

In this novel, America is a violent, destructive and irresponsible nation, and even

¹ Frost's failure in "The Gift Outright" to acknowledge indigenous peoples' prior claims to the land suggests that, just as Americans need to reexamine the values inherent in their history, so they need to revisit the American literary canon.

baseball, the national pastime, has an ominous and violent overtone to it. Owen's contact with the lethal ball is called "a shot," and John later describes "the good old crack of the bat" as a "different kind of gunshot" (40). By moving between time periods and projecting the future fate of various players, Irving conflates little league baseball with American involvement in Vietnam. And he employs the metaphor of individual players on a baseball team to suggest the weight of responsibility individuals bear for their nation's actions. The kindly manager, Mr. Chickering, weeps at Tabitha's funeral because they "had killed as a team." Through Mr. Chickering, who "bore more than his share of team responsibility," Irving implies that it is time for the rest of the nation to face its share of "team responsibility" (120).

Facing team responsibility requires a shared set of values and the will and the courage to admit mistakes. In recounting Owen's outrage at rumours of Kennedy's infidelity, John places moral indignation stemming from a shared set of values firmly in the past: "Remember that? Remember then?" (330). In this text, Irving suggests that a shared moral vocabulary in which hypocrisy, infidelity, deception and corruption are vilified has been simplified to the point where the moral questions are superficial and meaningless. While commending Owen's outrage, John remarks that Owen was not "sophisticated enough to separate public and private morality" (328). Through John, Irving suggests that interest in politicians' private morality has replaced concern about larger and more significant public acts. John argues that the public's prurient obsession with politicians' private lives is symptomatic of our sensationalist and simplistic age: "boudoir morality takes less imagination, and can be indulged in without the effort of keeping up with world affairs - or

even bothering to know the whole story behind the sexual adventure" (275).

The laziness and lack of imagination that John perceives at the heart of the nation's faulty moralism is also reflected in the failings of the established church. John says of Merrill's unwillingness to accept the miraculous aspect of Owen's story:

He taught the same old stories with the same old cast of characters: he preached the same old virtues and values: and he theologized on the same old 'miracles' - yet he appeared not to believe any of it. His mind was closed to the possibility of a new story: there was no room in his heart for a character of God's holy choosing, or for a new 'miracle'" (478).

Merrill's unwillingness to believe the miracle reveals the potentially deadly nature of institutional religion. The texts he studies concern long past events and people, and in failing to bring these past texts to life, Merrill fails to sustain a faith fully in the present. His study of texts is a detached intellectual endeavour which Owen maintains is the opposite of faith: "NEVER CONFUSE FAITH OR BELIEF - OF ANY KIND WITH SOMETHING EVEN REMOTELY INTELLECTUAL" (458). Significantly, we are told that Pastor Merrill "had been an English major at Princeton: he'd heard Niebuhr and Tillich lecture at Union Theological" (106). However, his detached intellectual faith seems to owe more to an analytical and academic study of literature than to a dynamic Christianity as defined by Tillich. Tillich defines faith as the "courage to be in spite of nonbeing" and like Irving's Owen Meany, sees it as a dynamic force: "spontaneity in spite of order: as freedom in spite of habit: as creativity in spite of discipline: as individuality in spite of society: as love in spite of hostility: as resurrection in spite of death" (Gaboury 25). For Tillich, faith is an original and

idiosyncratic force at odds with convention, habit and preconceived notions: as such it appears to be always active and in the continuous present. Tillich's view of faith seems cognate with Irving's reading of both faith and imagination, in so far as they are perceived as lively, life-affirming forces essential for both our public and private lives. Through the doubting, intellectual Pastor Merrill and the simplistic, crusading Rector Wiggin, Irving demonstrates the lack of dynamism, courage and originality in the town's religious leaders, and in contrast, he offers the unusual and idiosyncratic Owen Meany as a religious hero for our time.

At Owen's funeral, Pastor Merrill reads: "I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep" and John notes that the mourners in the aptly named, Hurd's church, "lowered [their] heads like sheep" (498). The distinction between the shepherd and sheep, is the difference between Christ and mankind but also between Owen and others. John's students love Tempest Tost, he maintains, because they "feel so much like amateurs themselves" and in matters of faith Irving suggests that we are all at best, amateurs, or at worst, sheep. The difference between conventional, passive faith and Owen's dynamism - his certainty, his creativity and his originality - is the difference between the shepherd and the sheep. Through Owen's heroism, Irving implies that in conceiving or imagining a "new story" in which our lives have meaning, and through serving the "needs of the day" we will not only transcend solipsism, and attain the creative aspect of the divine through our imaginative inventions, but we will also improve our world by serving others.

In "The King of the Novel" Irving argues that that which touches the emotions speaks to the spirit, and he weaves Frederick Buechner's definition of faith into an incident in A

Prayer for Owen Meany to suggest the connection between spirituality and emotion.

Buechner says:

Faith ... is not so much believing this thing or that thing about God as it is hearing a voice that says, "Come unto me." We hear the voice, and then we start to go without really knowing what to believe either about the voice or about ourselves; and yet we go. Faith is standing in the darkness and a hand is there, and we take it (42).

During an evening of drinking and reminiscing about his grandmother with Dan, John enters the secret passageway to see if he can find some of the "simply awful things that she had preserved." While fumbling with the bookcase, he recalls the maid who chose "the secret passageway as the place to hide from Death itself" (456), and notes that "there were a lot of old memories lurking in the cobwebs in the secret passageway" (457). The passageway behind the bookcase suggests memory itself, as it is the text which lies behind all written texts, and it keeps the dead alive through the act of remembering. Dan locks John in the passage, and trapped in the dark, John gropes for the light and frightens himself by imagining one of his grandmother's hidden wigs is a nest of baby rats. He recounts that he had lost his balance and pictured himself dead at the foot of the stairs, when

a small, strong hand (or something like a small, strong hand) guided my own hand to the light switch; a small, strong hand, or something like it, pulled me forward from where I teetered on the top of the stairs. And his voice - it was unmistakably Owen's voice - said: "DON'T BE AFRAID. NOTHING BAD IS GOING TO HAPPEN TO YOU (457)."

For John, Owen is both the source of faith and the voice which separates the horrific

imaginings from the redemptive and transcendent ones. If death lies at the foot of these metaphoric stairs, then faith is a force which prevents us falling down them: and for one who believes, "nothing bad" can happen because even death is not to be feared given the Christian faith in eternal life. Irving's hand in the dark, is not the same one suggested by Buechner, however; John's faith is in Owen, and it stems from his love for his friend. In borrowing Buechner's metaphor from The Magnificent Defeat, a work cited in the Acknowledgements of A Prayer for Owen Meany, Irving seems to be suggesting that an immediate and emotional connection is an essential element of faith. Just as Merrill's faith is restored through his love for Tabitha, so John's is sustained by his love for Owen.

The theological argument that Christianity offers comfort not only through the promise of redemption but also through the promise of love is also evident in A Prayer for Owen Meany. As Buechner notes, "God is love.... man's deepest longing is for this love of God of which every conceivable form of human love is a reflection" (33). For many, Buechner suggests, the love of man is the closest they can come to God, because it is all they can bring themselves to believe in (34), and given his limited imagination, John can only realize faith in God through his love for Owen.

Indeed, throughout the novel such a sentimental dilution of a set of clear precepts, in which a self-transcending belief in a higher ideal is simplified and made self-serving, occurs not only in religion but in politics and culture as well. A Prayer for Owen Meany poses the question: how do we distinguish between "the monsters of superstition ... dupes of the kind of hocus-pocus that the television evangelists call 'miracles'" (474) and Tillich's "courage to be"? The difference, Irving suggests, is dynamism: whereas superstition is passive and

credulous, faith, like imagination, is active and questioning. Buechner argues that the struggle with unanswerable questions is a crucial element of faith, and John says "my belief in God disturbs and unsettles me much more than not believing ever did ... belief poses so many unanswerable questions!" (504). Irving sets this religious struggle against the simplistic tenets and values current in contemporary popular culture, and through the parable of Owen's life, suggests that even if a miraculous and heroic figure were to appear, our age lacks the will to interpret and the imagination to believe in a complex, new, and idiosyncratic vocabulary. Before his death, Owen attributes the nation's failure to address the ignorance and violence at home to its larger failings in foreign policy. He argues that oversimplification and the wrong kind of certainty have created a "GET EVEN MENTALITY" and a "SADISTIC ANGER" in the country (530-531). What Owen finds "TRULY SCARY" is his perception that this certainty and "HOMEY WISDOM" which "IS NOT MORALITY" extend from television evangelists and politicians to the ignorant and credulous populace (531). He contends that "THIS GREAT, BIG, SLOPPY SOCIETY" is, in part, responsible for the war-mongering, racist acts of citizens like Dick Jarvits, the man who ultimately causes Owen's death. Therefore, just as individual citizens have failed their moral responsibility to the nation, so, in turn, the nation has failed them (531).

Irving suggests that our current political indifference stems from both a lack of faith and the effects of popular culture and Owen asserts that after the 1960s, we will have two generations of "PEOPLE WHO DONT GIVE A SHIT" to look forward to (323). This prediction seems to be borne out in John's "overriding perception of the last twenty years" that we are "a civilization careening toward a succession of anticlimaxes - toward an infinity

of unsatisfying and disagreeable endings" (480). The only way to combat this indifference and dissatisfaction is to take control through realizing an idiosyncratic personal vocabulary and acting in accordance with it. Owen tells John that: "IF YOU WANT TO DO THINGS YOUR OWN WAY, YOU'RE GOING TO HAVE TO MAKE A DECISION - YOU'RE GOING TO HAVE TO FIND A LITTLE COURAGE" (444). Lacking faith in any organizing principle in the universe, and in his own government, John argues that he is indecisive because "he doesn't believe that anything he might decide to do would matter" and asks "What good does courage do - when what happens next is up for grabs?" (446)." According to John's view, heroism belongs only in a universe governed by logic and order - either a religious universe or a writer's created narrative - but Irving's portrait of the world in Owen Meany reveals that heroism is even more necessary in a contingent world. If the world lacks purpose and order, then it is a heroic act, as Rorty suggests, to redescribe it in a way that realizes one's responsibility to oneself and others.

Ultimately, Irving suggests that two extreme schools of practice in contemporary Christian worship - the intellectual dissection of texts and the oversimplification and sensationalism of the evangelical movement - fail to speak to individual spiritual needs or collective responsibility. Conventional Christian worship resists "new stories" or interpretations which bring it fully and actively into the present and is therefore principally an intellectual exercise in which lessons and values from the past are analyzed and discussed for the congregation's edification. The televised evangelical ministry's hell-fire sermons and staged miracles are examples of simplistic chicanery which speaks to the public's most basic yearnings for meaning and hope. The manipulative side of contemporary religion is part of a

larger trend toward oversimplification and detachment, which leaves the population passive and indifferent to its future.

However, Irving contends that while passion and conviction are laudable, they must be combined with ironic questioning to be truly moral. Buechner points out that a life lived in faith is without irony: "in order to laugh, it is necessary to step back from life a little, whereas [Christ] almost never steps back" (94). This unquestioning earnestness, Irving implies, is also dangerous because "even when these traits are not at all self-regarding - [they] often obviate real self-criticism. They collapse the spiritual self-distance that enables irony" (Wood 29). Irving seems to suggest that we need ironism in Rorty's sense, in that we need "spiritual self-distance" so that we can come to redescribe our final vocabularies and make new selves for ourselves. In an age of moral simplicity and certainty, a meaningful act is the redescription of one's final vocabulary to make the best self one can and to reduce one's opportunities for cruelty to others. Such acts best serve the heroic religious impulse embodied by Owen and unrealizable by most of us who are like Dan Needham's amateur actors struggling to learn our lines and understand the plot.

For Irving, then, our society is ironic only in so far as many people believe the world is contingent and their acts lack meaning and purpose. We have not adopted Rorty's "liberal ironism" because the majority fails to redescribe its vocabulary in light of other vocabularies it encounters. Popular culture plays a large role in our current passivity and indifference which stems from a failure of the imagination and condemns us to live either too fully in the past by adhering to preexisting texts or in a present devoid of meaning. Despite Irving's pessimistic view of contemporary culture, the novel's optimistic conclusion affirms both

dynamic faith and idiosyncratic personal visions when, for Owen Meany, the world turns out to be as he imagined it.

CHAPTER FIVE

"Carrying Christ Within: Synthesising Christian and Secular Texts in A Son of the Circus"

When exploring the Jesuit school in Bombay, the protagonist of A Son of the Circus, Farrokh Daruwalla, notes a topic for an upcoming meeting posted on the bulletin board: "The Christian Today in the World of Non-Christian Religions" (SOC 348). This could serve as an apt sub-title for Irving's most recent novel, which suggests the contemporary place of Christian morality and faith in a world that has recently been described as a "paradox of global integration of the economy and culture and ever more bitter and violent fragmentation of identities ... [while] consumption patterns and lifestyles converge among human groups [and] they insist ever more violently on the marginal differences that divide them" (Ignatieff C2). Throughout A Son of the Circus, Irving presents the vocabularies of a series of outsiders struggling to belong and demonstrates the conflicts which develop between distinctive religious, racial and social groups living in close proximity. In a world of violence, fragmentation and intolerance, Irving explores the redemptive spiritual and moral value of the divine by synthesising various and distinctive vocabularies into a new text which suggests, like Rorty's liberal utopia, that imaginative identification with marginal peoples develops solidarity and reduces cruelty. Rorty has argued that the promise of a utopian future lies in the continuous redescription of our final vocabularies. In this novel, Irving also suggests that our hope for the future lies in such imaginative redescription. Farrokh

Daruwalla, his liberal ironist protagonist, transcends material existence and finds belonging through redescription, and in turn, Irving encourages his readers to redescribe their own final vocabularies, to develop a feeling of solidarity with others and to reduce their own potential for cruelty. In so doing, he suggests how freedom, redemption, goodness, tolerance, and hope can be realized in a modern, mobile and multicultural world.

While Dr. Daruwalla, described as an "attractive everyman," moves within different communities and different countries, he is not defined by any one of them: what he feels is a "perpetual foreignness" in all environments (192, 628).¹ Farrokh Daruwalla, for example, is both a respected doctor in his community and a victim of racist attacks on the city streets, a Parsi of Indian birth and a Canadian, a selfless orthopaedic surgeon and a hack commercial screenwriter; in each incarnation, he has a different status, and this status changes constantly. Rorty suggests that people are actually incarnated vocabularies in so far as they embody the language system their experience and situation have brought them to. But Farrokh was raised without an identifiable religious or national "final vocabulary" which he shared with others because he was the son of a "contentious old atheist" who robbed him of "a religion *and* a country" (74). Although Farrokh's father Lowji Daruwalla encouraged his children to leave India, he was disappointed when they chose to live abroad permanently: "Immigrants are immigrants all their lives!" Lowji Daruwalla had declared" (74). True to his father's prediction, Farrokh is unable to feel he belongs in either India or Canada; he doesn't identify

¹Indeed, this book is full of characters who are perceived as outsiders by virtue of their "foreignness" or their singular point of view, for example: Nancy the white American married to an Indian in Bombay; Vinod the dwarf ex-circus clown and taxi driver; Martin Mills, the Christian missionary in an alien culture; John D./ Inspector Dhar the white boy brought up by Indians; and Gordon Macfarlane the gay doctor who contracts HIV.

with or belong to any ethnic, national or religious community. Throughout the novel, Farrokh continuously engages in private redescription as he searches for a sense of himself. He is an 'immigrant all his life' because he continuously moves through others' final vocabularies. He also endeavours to share his vocabulary with a larger public through his works of fiction, and in both respects, one sees something like Rorty's liberal irony at work. Farrokh is an ordinary man who cares for others, a doctor, and a volunteer, and thus fits Rorty's definition of a liberal who believes "cruelty is the worst thing we do:" and in his childlike fascination with the circus, his invention of imaginary worlds, his uncertainty, and his search for identity, he appears to be an ironist as well.

In this novel, Irving, like Rorty, suggests that in our mobile, multicultural world our hope for the future lies in entering each others' vocabularies, "increasing our sensitivity to the particular details of the pain and humiliation of other, unfamiliar sorts of people" and recognizing our common bonds (Rorty xvi). In three separate incidents, Dr. Daruwalla is challenged to identify and define himself. All his responses reveal him to be a member of a specific group. Farrokh is accosted by private school boys on the subway who demand "what are you?" (511). In replying "I'm a doctor," he finds a commonality between them (511). One of the boys responds lamely, "My dad's a doctor" (511), and their hostility is diffused. Later, when working at the hospice, Farrokh is again challenged to define "who" and "what" he is by an irate caller on the telephone. He answers "I'm a volunteer" and is surprised by the comfort he draws from such a definition (606). Ironically, he wonders "if it felt as good to be assimilated as did to be a volunteer?" (606); by entering into a volunteer's experience, he has identified himself with the "vocabulary" of a volunteer, and thus, in a small way, he has been

assimilated. Farrokh is faced with one final question from a little boy standing with his mother on the street corner. The boy asks "where are you from?". and when Farrokh replies "I'm from the circus" the child is delighted (631). For all these questions Farrokh finds the appropriate response, but in each case his answer is somewhat unexpected: whereas both Farrokh and his questioners expect his reply to heighten the differences between them, he finds answers that demonstrate his sameness and lead his questioners to see him as "one of us" (Rorty xvi). These identities provide him with safety, a sense of belonging and community, and as their common experience creates areas of solidarity, Farrokh's chances of humiliation lessen.

Farrokh feels at home in two places: the Duckworth Club and the Indian circus, and they appeal to him for similar reasons. "To the doctor ... the circus was an orderly, well-kept oasis surrounded by a world of disease and chaos" (27). The Duckworth Club with its well-established routines and traditions is a similar "haven": it allows the doctor to "sustain the illusion that he [is] comfortable being in India" (16). For Farrokh, the ordered rituals of these institutions are not their only appeal: his imaginative investment in them provides him with comfort. Revealingly, his most deeply felt connection with the Duckworth Club occurs when he looks at photographs of past members. He is captivated by people he never knew, some of whom died before he was born, and they live again in his imagination: "he was in love with Lady Duckworth, for he'd fallen in love with her photographs *and* with her story when he was a child" (19). Similarly, the circus appeals to Farrokh's imagination: "This was the real history of a real circus, but Dr. Daruwalla had committed these details to that quality of memory which most of us reserve for our childhoods" (26). In both instances, a childlike

innocence is evident in Farrokh's devotion to Lady Duckworth and the circus. Farrokh is most comfortable in a world of his own creation because his constructed "memories" contain a romantic vision of life which is more picturesque, more adventurous, more heroic than the real thing. In this sense, his memories, the means by which he creates an innocent and pure interior life, are his fictions or texts for engaging with the world. However, the main tack of Irving's novel is the presentation of the violence and corruption of the world Farrokh lives in.

In Understanding John Irving, an introduction to Irving's fiction, Edward Reilly remarks that "Whether in Vienna, Toronto, or the United States, Irving's settings underscore the violence and death that he sees at the core of life" (5). One could easily add the fractious and chaotic Bombay to this list. Refrains of random violence and destruction as well as religious, racial, class and sexual intolerance run throughout the novel, and they are symbolized respectively by two animal motifs: elephants and dogs.

The boy, Ganesh, is consigned in infancy to his fate as a crippled beggar when an elephant steps on his foot. Ganesh's fatalistic acceptance of his lot - "you can't fix what elephants do" - is borne out when even non-surgical attempts to improve his life end in failure (609). Similarly, in the circus act "Elephant Dodging", eluding elephants becomes a metaphor for the risks and burdens of life. In the act, a performer, in this case Mr. Bhagwhan, lies between mattresses, and attempts to survive the pressure of elephants walking over top of him. After Mr. Bhagwan's wife dies, he performs this act with fewer and fewer protective mattresses; having lost the will to live, he literally succumbs to the weight of his burden and dies (608). Elephants also come to symbolize deliberate violence when the serial killer Rahul draws mocking pictures of these creatures on his victims' bellies; the police

find that: "the murdered girl's navel had been transformed to a winking eye: the opposing tusk had been flippantly raised, like the tipping of an imaginary hat" (255). The drawings, done in indelible ink, reinforce the fact that the victim's violent death comes at the hand of another human being, and the murderer plots and signs his work like an author arranging and signing his text (413). Ironically, it is Mrs. Dogar's, or Rahul's, pornographic drawings of herself mounted by an elephant which seals her fate: they provide the evidence which convicts her. Her own violent death in prison then becomes inevitable. Patel's prediction that "something will happen" is borne out, and after another violent attack against a woman, Rahul is eventually beaten to death by her guards (578).

Just as elephants become a metaphor for destruction, grief, and random and deliberate violence, so the first floor dogs, who erupt into a frenzy of barking whenever Vinod the dwarf taxi driver attempts to use the apartment building elevator forbidden to people of his status, come to represent intolerance and irrationality (144). Farrokh reflects upon the connection between his neighbour's prayers and the inflammatory religious billboards around the city:

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 compromised by proselytizing, and had been distorted by politics. And if this madness had a sound, Farrokh knew, it would be the sound of irrationally barking dogs (145).

The barking dog metaphor appears again in Farrokh's reflections on the serial killer, and then is instantly juxtaposed with an opposing force:

Farrokh wondered what sort of dogs were barking in the killer's head. Angry dogs, Dr. Daruwalla supposed, for in the murderer's mind there was such a terrifying

irrationality.... But then Farrokh's speculations on this subject were interrupted by the third message. The doctor's answering machine was truly relentless. 'Goodness!' cried the unidentified voice.... (150)

The juxtaposition of the angry dogs and the cry of "goodness" aptly sums up Irving's vision in this work. He does not simply present the world as a violent, chaotic place; he offers the pursuit of goodness as the answer to it. And, as in his earlier works, Irving's answer to chaos and violence lies in the structured world of "texts."

Through various plot lines, Irving suggests how the pursuit of goodness is manifested through literary, legal, and religious texts. Farrokh's search for a "good story" parallels the search for the killer in the mystery plot and Martin Mills' search for his identity and freedom through his faith and good works. As the central character, Farrokh is involved in two parallel endeavours which cover three distinct time periods at twenty-year intervals, and involve three different generations of characters. The most distant past concerns the on-location shooting of a Hollywood movie in Bombay in 1949; the central episodes in the book take place in Goa in 1969; and the "present" takes place in the week between Christmas 1989 and New Year's 1990. The novel begins at the Duckworth Club with the murder of Mr. Lal, a prominent member, which sets the mystery plot in motion. At the same time, it is established that Farrokh is dissatisfied with his writing. He wonders "if other screenwriters who'd written crap nevertheless dreamed, as he did, of writing a 'quality' picture" (96). While these plots overlap - Farrokh first conceives of Inspector Dhar in Goa just as Rahul commits his first murder - at the outset they seem distinct from each other. However, Farrokh's desire to produce a "good work" and to aid in the capture of Rahul are not as

distinct as they at first appear. Through these parallel plots Irving plays on numerous intertextual resonances between Christian and literary texts, and between open and closed language systems. These resonances turn on the dialectical play between acts of invention and acts of compassion, reveal how Christian and secular notions of justice and satisfaction are tied to our desire to invent stories, and suggest that our "good works" - selfless acts or superior works of fiction - are attempts to realise ourselves and our freedom to act through healing and helping others.

To this end, A Son of the Circus is deliberately artful. Since the novel is about literary and religious longing and the place of religious and literary texts in defining ourselves, it is full of metafictional references. Irving's readers are repeatedly reminded that they are reading a constructed fiction. The narrator intrudes into the text by drawing attention to its mechanics, such as the complex pairing or "twinning" of plots, themes, and characters. When Farrokh reflects upon the events of 1949, the narrator announces:

Here come the characters who comprise the movie vermin, the Hollywood scum, the film slime - the aforementioned cowards of mediocrity (83).

This vitriolic voice-over is not simply for comic effect: it self-consciously announces the author's next move, and reminds the reader that this is a work of fiction in which the characters' entrances and exits are carefully controlled. By the same token, it draws attention to the parallels between Farrokh's memory and the novel itself. As Farrokh summons the characters, so does the author/narrator, and as they enter the stage of his consciousness, so they enter the novel. Farrokh imagines these people from his past in so far as he interprets them as he remembers them. He sees them in a simplified form discriminating between

heroes and villains and masters and victims. His memory itself is, in this sense, a work of fiction in that his imagination simplifies, shapes and exaggerates.

Another metafictional resonance is apparent in Irving's comparison of an author's plan for his characters and religious notions of predestination. Peter Ackroyd's discussion of Charles Dickens' views on the novelist's role sheds some light on Irving's presentation of the writer in A Son of the Circus. Dickens, Ackroyd writes:

posits the role of the novelist as reflecting that of God; when he discusses the manner in which the writer ought carefully to lay the ground of his plot, or to bathe the whole narrative in the light of its fully prepared ending, he suggests that 'these are the ways of Providence, of which ways all art is but a little imitation...' In the distribution of rewards and punishments in his fiction, also, Dickens admits to borrowing from the religious sphere.... (491)

Irving, who has written eloquent tributes to Dickens in particular and the 19th century novel in general, explores similar ideas about writing and Providence in A Son of the Circus.

When inspired by the idea for his new screenplay,

For the first time, Farrokh felt that he understood the start of a story - the characters were set in motion by the fates that awaited them. Something of the authority of an ending was already contained in the beginning scene (353).

The writer's craft thus becomes a metaphor for Destiny, and allows Irving to reflect on the nature of self-determination and predestination. On an everyday, "realistic" level, the characters' fates appear to be controlled by Destiny, or Providence: for example, life in the brothel district carries almost certain doom, and for Garg's girls the "chances were pretty

slim" (318). On another level, characters are obviously controlled by the author who manipulates them to serve his own design; when Farrokh is nearly woken by the insight that Rahul is Mrs. Dogar, he is not because "it was still too soon for him to know" (274-275). On a metafictional level, the reflexive nature of Irving's text draws attention to the connections between religious and literary ideas of predestination and free will and suggests that similar concerns underlie both religious and literary texts.

In the same way that an author predetermines a character's fortunes, so forces of predestination seem to exist in the world. In *A Son of the Circus*, hereditary and genetic factors shape peoples' lives, and history repeats itself. Irving's three separate time periods, in which numerous characters live out similar events in different time frames, point to an inevitable, or endless repetition of events. To this end, Irving's design reflects a genetic or natural design at work in the world: thus Farrokh is, like his father, a prominent orthopaedist with creative aspirations, and just as Promila Rai was Lowji Daruwalla's nemesis, so the "new Promila Rai" or Mrs. Dogar plots Farrokh's downfall. Unrelated characters also experience similar fates: the dwarf, Vinod, and Lowji Daruwalla are both blown up in their cars by terrorist bombs. These parallels are apparent not only over time but also over distance: for example, there are echoes of Martin Mill's friend Arif, who killed himself after his affair with Vera caused dishonour to his family, in the police file on the Bombayite who killed himself because, as he wrote, he "had sex with a woman who smelled like meat. Not very pure" (423, 342). Arif dies in New York in the mid-sixties and the nameless man dies in Bombay in the late eighties; they are completely unconnected but share similar fates for similar reasons. These repeating patterns serve to highlight archetypal conflicts, characters

and themes which recur throughout time and across space. In this sense, this large and complex novel is reductive. The work encompasses enormous differences in culture, country, and time period but it reveals the universality of human experience, and thus reduces as it simplifies the world it represents. By the same token, these numerous commonalities suggest points where vastly different personal vocabularies overlap, and where the identification of differences and the primacy of one type of belonging could give way to the multiple reality of belonging, as individuals discover a sense of solidarity with others.

In addition to meditations on religious and artistic forms of predestination, genetic studies featured in the text reveal how science offers a form of predestination. Duncan Frasier, the gay geneticist, declares that "free will" is irrelevant in regard to sexual orientation, which appears to be determined genetically because "we are born with what we desire" (391). And throughout the novel, Irving's characters are predetermined and imprisoned by their pasts; whether genetically, environmentally or socially, they are circumscribed by the hand they have been dealt, a hand that determines not only what they desire but how they articulate and realise those desires. Irving suggests that our freedom to realise ourselves in spite of these forces and our redemption from inherited structures lie in idiosyncratic imaginative transcendence of our material circumstances.

The means of such transcendence are twofold: religion and art. Imaginative investments in the insubstantial - either religious belief or artistic invention or interpretation - appear as parallel means of transcending the cruelty and chaos of the material world. Both also lead their adherents to pursue "good works." The Christian seeks to improve his world

by saving souls and showing others the ways of God, and the writer seeks to produce a "good work," something of quality which will enlighten his fellows.

To this end, Irving sets Farrokh the writer and Mills the missionary against each other in parallel events. In a revealing passage, both men appeal for inspiration, the first, artistic and the second, religious:

Thus, in the dead of night, while almost five million residents of Bombay were fast asleep on the sidewalks of the city, these two men were wide awake and mumbling. One spoke only to himself - 'a story set in motion by the Virgin Mary' -and this allowed him to get started. The other spoke not only to himself but to God; understandably his mumbles were a little louder. He was saying, 'I'll take the turkey,' and his repetitions - he hoped - would prevent him from being consumed by that past which everywhere surrounded him. It was the past that had given him his tenacious will, which he believed was the will of God (377).

Both men seek a means of transcending their material existence through their unorthodox prayers; ironically Farrokh, despite his reference to the holy Virgin, strives only to connect to his own imagination, while Martin's secular chant is addressed directly to God. These ironic reversals, once again, reinforce a connection between the writer's creative imagination and the Christian's belief.

Farrokh's need to imagine and to believe in his imaginative visions was first met by his conversion to Christianity, and his subsequent attempts at writing serve the same function. How Farrokh's religious belief (which stems from his "reading" of an unexplained bite on his toe) is tied to his creative imagination is made clear when Julia finds him slumped

over the glass-topped coffee table. He has fallen asleep while writing, and she is disconcerted to find him sleeping in the "apparent position of praying to this same toe" (378). A further conflation of literary and religious themes occurs when Farrokh and Martin visit the Asiatic library, a temple of sorts to literary tradition, where "dusty books sagged on the carved teak shelves" (463). They disrupt the sacred rituals of its readers when Martin insists on trying to mend broken objects (symbolic of Farrokh's broken faith?) while simultaneously carrying on a conversation about Farrokh's conversion. Martin tells Farrokh that the miracle of his conversion is the belief itself. Mills argues, "your belief is the miracle ... it hardly matters that it was something ... common that triggered it" (465). It seems appropriate that this conversation about faith takes place in a library full of scholars, for Farrokh's Christianity rests solely upon his imaginative explanation of an unexplained event. His 'reading', or interpretation, of the event's significance, is a creative act. Later, Martin's 'reading' of literature is compared to his belief in God: "Martin had not only given the St. Ignatius upper-school boys a Catholic interpretation of The Heart of the Matter; he had also 'interpreted' God's will" (581). For both men, belief is a critical and creative enterprise: Farrokh and Martin interpret events as scholars interpret texts. And just as secular texts shape and reflect our view of the world, so for these unorthodox 'Christians,' the imaginary, spiritual world

explains and directs events in the material world.²

Farrokh's short-lived Christian faith stems from his imaginative conflation of three incidents: a visit to the tomb of Francis-Xavier, where he learned of the zealous pilgrim who had bitten off the saint's toe, a dream that he was the saint's corpse, and an actual "love-bite" which the sleeping doctor received as a result of mistaken identity. Upon awakening, he attributes the bite to a "miracle" and for a short time becomes a Christian. Farrokh's faith is a manifestation of what he sees as his "underdeveloped creativity," for on the same vacation he has decided to try his hand at writing (170). However, the structured and clearly defined 'healing narratives' of his profession make him ill-suited for becoming an author:

Because his medical practice was an exercise of almost pure goodness, he was ill prepared for the real world. Mostly he saw malformations and deformities and injuries to children; he tried to restore their little joints to their intended perfection.

The real world had no purpose as clear as that (172).

His medical desire for perfection hampers his appreciation of literature: "It had never occurred to the doctor that a stumbling block between himself and most serious literature was that he disliked unhappy endings" (171). This desire for a "clear purpose" and for "happy

²That Mills's Christianity may be just another "dusty book" out of place in contemporary Bombay is underscored by the Jesuit's comic clumsiness: in his attempts to mend a broken chair and fan in the old library he wounds himself, and in this scene as in others, he spurts blood copiously. Irving exploits the comic possibilities of the religious zealot spilling his blood because of his desire to serve others, and he plays with the Christian symbolism of blood as the life-force. "As the bearer of life and identified with life, blood would be considered a divine reality. When it is sprinkled on an object or person it can purify and consecrate" (Hogan 61). But throughout the novel we are introduced to characters in the early and later stages of AIDS, a disease carried in and transmitted by the blood. The religious symbolism of the sacrament and the blood of Christ as representative of eternal life is darkly ironic when set against the world of Bombay, where, increasingly, blood is becoming the vehicle of death.

endings" leads Farrokh both to Christianity and to favour American and European films of the "hard-boiled-detective genre," which are "all-white, tough-guy trash" in which the endings are clearly resolved and justice is served (169). On his Goan holiday, Farrokh ends up becoming a Christian and inventing Inspector Dhar, the character his adopted son John Daruwalla will play in a series of violent, contentious yet successful films.

In the novel's present, twenty years after the Goan holiday, Farrokh's faith in both Christianity and his character "Inspector Dhar" has lapsed, and he feels the desire to invent something new and more worthwhile. However, he is unable to balance the pain and suffering of the real world with his desire for happy endings. He is stuck between two extremes: the vicious and simplistic world of Inspector Dhar or the idealistic fantasy of Limo Roulette. When forced to confront the disparity between his vision and the real life fates of the children on whom his screenplay is based, Farrokh loses interest in writing. Ultimately, Dr. Daruwalla is destined to fail as an artist, and Limo Roulette lies unfinished and unproduced in a desk drawer. His efforts are barely noticeable within the tradition of literary genius. The description of the doctor in the Asiatic library is as true of him at the end of his writing career as it is of him as the writer of the commercially successful Dhar films:

The larger-than-life statues of literary geniuses had barely noticed the screenwriter's quiet ascending and descending of the magnificent staircase (462).

Irving's conflation of imagination and faith, with literary and religious texts is most fully realised in a comparison between Martin Mills's vision of Christ in the parking lot and Farrokh's final vision of Ganesh descending from the skywalk. Faith sustains Martin Mills and helps him overcome the horrors of his childhood. After Martin's decision to leave his

order. Farrokh makes him close his eyes and "see" his vision of Christ in the parking lot (506). Of this vision Martin had said:

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 (506).

Farrokh wants Martin to concede that it is possible to be a good Christian and have faith without being a Catholic priest. Just as Martin acknowledges that he can still "see Christ" even though he has abandoned his desire to become a priest, so Farrokh's final vision of Ganesh proves to him that it is possible to be comforted and sustained by his imagination without going to the extreme of being a writer.

In the epilogue, Farrokh wonders fleetingly if he is an avatar, "a deity, descended to earth in an incarnate form or some manifest shape," but the narrator concludes "The doctor was no more the incarnation of a god than he was a writer; he was, like most men, principally a dreamer" (625-626). Farrokh had first envisioned a triumphant Ganesh descending on the trapeze from the skywalk as the ending of his film Limo Roulette. Yet in real life, the boy is released from his disability not by skywalking but by death. The boy's demise destroys "a small but important part of Farrokh," and after Ganesh's death, Farrokh loses confidence in his imaginative fancies (608). At the end of the novel, he again imagines the descent of Ganesh and a parallel to the Christ story emerges. At Christmas time in Toronto, just as he did at Christmas two years earlier in Bombay, the Indian-Canadian Daruwalla has his own vision of an avatar descending to earth. Like Martin, he closes his eyes and sees, but what he

sees is his own version of a redeemer, a conflation of his various experiences and vocabularies, an Indian-Christ figure:

the elephant-footed boy in his singlet with the blue-green sequins - as the little beggar was never dressed in real life. Farrokh saw Ganesh descending in the spotlight, twirling down - the cripple's teeth clamped tightly on the dental trapeze.... To Dr. Daruwalla, this existed; it was as real as the India the doctor thought he'd left behind. Now he saw that he was destined to see Bombay again. Farrokh knew there was no escaping Maharashtra, which was no circus (632).

Farrokh's vision, which he knows "had never happened and never would," is nevertheless redemptive (632). As Martin Mills is sustained by Christ, so Farrokh is sustained by this image, which reconfigures reality. Seeing the dead crippled boy as alive and triumphant is comforting to Farrokh, and will enable him to return to the hell of India "again and again" (632). Like Martin, he realizes he has not been abandoned. Farrokh's desire to be creative is finally realized, not in his writing but in the simple purity of an imagination which allows him to create goodness and order out of chaos and destruction. He has failed as a writer, but in his own way he realizes Paul's Epistle to the Corinthians which he reads while visiting the Jesuit school. He "carries about in the body the dying of the Lord Jesus, that the life of Jesus may also be manifested," as he turns the dead Ganesh into a Christ-like image of hope and triumph (350).

Farrokh's desire to imagine and create stems from his need to belong and to make meaning in a contingent universe. And through the identical twins separated at birth, Martin Mills and John D. (Inspector Dhar), Irving creates a dialectic between two vocabularies: the

difference between living according to belief in a closed story which draws its power and meaning from an external referent, and living according to belief in a decentred universe in which all stories are part of an open language system. Rorty has argued that since an external referent which could serve as a criterion of choice between vocabularies does not exist, only another vocabulary can serve as a criticism of a final vocabulary (80). Such an observation can help clarify Irving's novel. Martin Mills incarnates Catholic faith, while the ambiguous John Daruwalla represents belief in a contingent universe. Mills, a Christian missionary believing in free will, attempts to control his destiny, and he strives to obtain salvation through good works. John D., or Inspector Dhar, is a fatalist who responds passively to whatever life offers. As an actor, John D. inhabits the vocabularies of the parts he plays and seems to have no final vocabulary of his own. He sees everything as contingent and interprets the random nature of the universe as negating meaningful acts. When asked if he would like to meet his twin, Dhar responds:

Well you're the writer, [he] remarked with almost perfect ambiguity. Dr. Daruwalla wondered. Does he mean that the matter of whether or not they meet is in my hands? Or does he mean that only a writer would waste his time fantasizing that the twins should meet? (583)

Martin Mills is the opposite of his brother: talkative to the point of garrulity, he is extremely opinionated and defines and evaluates everything according to his Christian beliefs. As Martin surrenders himself to God, so Dhar surrenders his destiny to his creator Farrokh the screenwriter.

The comparison of the twins suggests that, in a contingent universe, the writer takes

on a God-like role because he shapes destiny, controls meaning, and provides a means of transcending the material world. In contrast to John D., Mills believes that "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 others" (302). Through this dialectic between the actor and the would-be-priest, Irving plays with ideas of "free will" and "acting." Mills believes he has free will even though the "impulse and help" come from God, and he exercises it through good works: the actor John D. derives both his "impulse and help" from the writer of his given text and is only free to interpret what has already been predestined by the writer of the scene. Mills, like Owen Meany, develops an active, questioning and selfless faith, while John D. seems to be powerless and unresponsive to the needs of those around him. Through the contrast of the brothers, Irving suggests that, while extreme, Mills' faith is active and heroic, while John D.'s passivity is not. In other words, the novel argues for a new vocabulary to emerge from this dialectic between committed Christianity and detached ironism: this new vocabulary would acknowledge the writer's power to make meaning in our contingent world, but would also recognize our "religious" need to transcend ourselves and to realize our public responsibility. In other words, this new vocabulary - like Rorty's liberal utopia - would recognize that our all needs are best met through the creation of multiple, idiosyncratic personal texts.

The dialectic between Christian and post-modernist ideas of freedom, self-determination and responsibility exemplified by the twins is part of Irving's larger meditation on closed and open language systems and justice and satisfaction. The detective story, part of Irving's larger narrative in the murder mystery plot and also the form of Farrokh's successful

yet contentious film series, is a closed narrative which promises explanation of a mystery, justice and satisfaction. As such, it can be seen as a reflection of the juridical Christian narrative in which "the debt of punishment is resolved by the act of satisfaction which has a penal character.... [and] is directed to the restoration of the proper personal relationship between God and his sinful people" (Hogan 79). In the Christian narrative, once justice has been served, the story comes to a satisfactory conclusion and God returns "to man the supernatural gifts forfeited by Adam" (Hogan 85). Similarly, in the classic British mystery, an ordered and edenic place is disrupted by an unnatural event, usually murder, and the killer must be caught and punished before the community can be restored to its former peace and harmony. Thus, the standard mystery story is also a closed narrative in which a sin is committed, a community disrupted, the truth eventually revealed, and finally, the perpetrator punished and the community returned to its former 'state of grace.' Irving's mystery plot borrows from the classic British tradition, and the edenic Ladies garden of the Duckworth Club is disrupted and tainted by the murder of Mr. Lal and the pursuit and eventual capture of his killer. Appropriately, the progressive damage to the bougainvillea marks the progress of the killer and symbolizes the presence of 'evil' in this formerly ordered and peaceful oasis; and only the eventual capture of Rahul returns the garden to its former beauty and tranquillity. While Farrokh's Inspector Dhar films belong to the American tradition of detective fiction featuring a hard-boiled private eye, they too are juridical closed stories in which Dhar's "eventual triumph over evil" is inevitable (38). However, within the larger narrative, the capture and punishment of Rahul fails to deliver the sense of satisfaction and completion promised by juridical religious and literary narratives, and even the Dhar films.

despite their popularity, fail to satisfy the multicultural Indian community which does not share common ideas of justice and satisfaction. Farrokh intends his films as satires on the genre and imagines they "might have been terribly funny to Canadians," but they manage to offend Indians of all faiths, whether Muslim, Hindu, Sikh or Parsi (122).

In A Son of the Circus, Irving indicates that in a secular world which doesn't recognize the concept of divine justice, in what critics like Rorty would call a world of multiple vocabularies, all endings are destined to be "unsatisfactory." Unlike Christian and detective narratives in which goodness triumphs over evil, the world has no such clear plan or purpose. For Irving's characters, this lack of purposes causes anxiety and distress: for example, Nancy, Rahul's first victim, "having chosen goodness over evil ... anticipated resolution" (262). She and her husband believe their childlessness is a punishment for keeping Dieter's drug money: "They'd done something wrong. They were paying for it.... And so the Patels accepted childlessness" (270). However, Nancy's acceptance of her fate comes only after "a lingering and merciless defeat (276)," and she remains extremely unhappy. In this sense she lives, "as a Christian in a world of non-Christian religions" in so far as she sees the world according to a Christian text of sin and punishment but lacks a sustaining and redeeming faith (348).

When Rahul is caught, Vijay Patel states that in "real life" the resolution of a mystery and capture of a criminal are bound to be "unsatisfying" because any punishment the criminal suffers cannot compensate for the damage he has done (579). For Farrokh, a liberal ironist who feels compelled to challenge his vocabulary, this uncertainty about the outcome of the investigation indicates a need to move on and find a better "text" or place: and, as if the fault

lies with its particular social or legal vocabulary. Farrokh asks Patel if he will stay in India. Here, it becomes apparent that while Farrokh has continuously revised his final vocabulary up to this point, he has not been a liberal ironist in the fullest sense: he recognizes contingency but is searching for a final, "final vocabulary," a closed text which promises satisfaction, redemption, and a sense of belonging. But unlike the immigrant Farrokh, Patel is able to accept the unresolved and unsatisfying nature of his world, and he does not feel compelled to leave or redescribe it (579). Earlier, Vinod responded to Farrokh's suggestion that Vinod's and Deepa's attempts to save street children were doomed to failure by saying "Not every girl is being able to fly ... They are not all falling in the net" (576). From his encounters with Patel and Vinod, Farrokh draws the conclusion that "the subject of the lesson was the acceptance of something unsatisfying" (579). An incident earlier in the novel helps explicate Irving's views on satisfaction, redescription, completion and closure and reveals how they are connected to writing and text making: while arguing with Julia, Farrokh overhears a snippet of a radio interview with an Indian writer "who was incensed that there was no 'follow-through' in India. 'Everything is left incomplete!' The writer was complaining. 'We get to the bottom of nothing!'. (375). Thus, through the incensed writer, Irving suggests that in our secular age we still long for the completion and satisfaction promised by closed narratives such as the Christian narrative of satisfaction and redemption. However, as Rorty argues, we can only achieve redemption through redescription, and redescription, of necessity, remains incomplete:

Even if we drop the philosophical idea of seeing ourselves steadily and whole against a permanent backdrop of 'literal' unchangeable fact, and substitute the ideal of seeing

ourselves in our own terms, of redemption through saying to the past. Thus I willed it, it will remain true that this willing will always be a project rather than a result, a project which life does not last long enough to complete (40).

Like Rorty, Irving suggests that, in a world of open language systems and multiple perspectives, completion, satisfaction and closure can no longer be realized. Furthermore, he suggests that without the comfort of a totalizing vision, we can no longer appropriate and transform the nonhuman and nonlinguistic and can, therefore, only recognize contingency and pain: thus "the subject of the lesson" is the "acceptance of something unsatisfying" (579).

Paradoxically, Irving's prescription for survival in this secular and contingent world is strikingly similar to the advice one might expect from one of his stoic and pragmatic Puritan Yankee characters such as Dr. Larch or Harriet Wheelwright. Faced with a world devoid of meaning, Irving takes refuge in past values and suggests that an acceptance of the inevitable pain and disappointment of life (or what used to be called strength of character) coupled with a desire to improve both one's own lot and that of others (similar to the New World pioneering spirit) remains the key to living a fulfilling and meaningful life either in Bombay or Forest Hill. What redeems this work from seeming to reduce the complexity and range of universal experience to the banal is Irving's further suggestion that we can best realize this nineteenth-century Christian morality in the secular and multicultural late-twentieth century (and thus reassure ourselves by adopting and adapting old narratives which promise completion and satisfaction) by inventing our own texts. Recognising the contingency of language and belief systems means that we cannot transcend "the effects of causes which do not include human mental states," and therefore we are bound to accept suffering (Rorty 40):

however, in recognizing others' realities and adopting a personal vocabulary we can create our best selves through imaginative redescription and also reduce our likelihood of being cruel to others. For example, in Farrokh's eventual acceptance of Ganesh's death, and his imaginative redescription of the boy reborn in a heroic and redemptive image, he transcends material suffering, redescribes himself, and creates a vision of the world which will enable him to return to India and continue his work with crippled children.

Nancy, on the other hand, finds her only respite from unhappiness when standing on the balcony of Farrokh's apartment and looking out to sea. In one of the most lyrical passages in Irving's work, Nancy "goes home" in her imagination by asking Farrokh and John D. to name the countries "west and a little north" so that she can picture the journey home (525-526). Nancy has no wish to return to America; for her, this journey "home" is a transcendent journey toward peace. The long list of countries between India and America tied together in Nancy's imaginative journey "home" articulates the enormous diversity and range of human vocabularies, and the linking of them in geographical order suggests that, however diverse, these nations and vocabularies are connected. The list of countries (or incarnated vocabularies) leading Nancy "home" echoes Rorty's projection of an endless proliferation of stories leading us closer to a utopia of freedom and solidarity. Appropriately - in this novel about private redescription and public compassion - Farrokh gives the apartment to the Patels when he leaves Bombay, so that Nancy can use the balcony to "go home" whenever she feels the need.

In this text, Irving seems to suggest that both personal freedom and public solidarity stem from our ability to see beyond difference and identify common experiences, and that

this identification comes only from our imaginative engagement with others' texts. In weaving our own texts from the wealth and range of all the vocabularies we experience, we may, in a sense, 'carry Christ within' by writing the selflessness, compassion, and responsibility of the Christian tradition into our own texts. In the violent and divided world of A Son of the Circus, the hope for order, meaning and peace lies in building idiosyncratic narratives and regarding "the realization of utopias, and the envisaging of still further utopias, as an endless process - an endless, proliferating realization of Freedom, rather than a convergence toward an already existing Truth" (Rorty xvi).

CONCLUSION

Any study of John Irving's writing reveals a number of paradoxes. While his novels appear to embody a post-modern "liberal ironist" perspective, Irving's criticism sets up pre-modernist texts as the ideal models of the form; in addition, his works present the world as a fractious, fragmented, and lethal place, but he imposes ordered and redemptive endings on these novels. An obvious tension exists because of the contradictions implicit in what Irving says he aspires to do, which is to write novels according to the models of the 19th century masters of the form; what his novels actually are, post-modernist works which recognize the contingency of language systems and synthesize a wide variety of modes and views; and how he views the world as formless, violent and chaotic even while he structures his narratives and concludes them optimistically and sentimentally so that they seem to promise redemption for both characters and readers. Furthermore, he presents mass media, most notably television and film, as popular, sensational and superficial forms which fail to stimulate and inform our imaginations, yet he is a product of the culture he criticizes: he reduces, simplifies and generalises about the complex religious, cultural, political and literary texts which he reworks into his metafictional motifs. Lastly, while characters in his novels acknowledge the obvious limitations of our imaginative constructs, Irving's own narratives observe no such restrictions as they dispense justice, resurrect the dead (through the memories of those left behind) and heal old wounds. Irving has a disintegrative sensibility, but in spite of this and of his recognition that the powers of redescription are limited, he offers artistic structures as a

means of combatting and transcending the forces of chaos and chance which govern our lives. In a purposeless world, Irving coins a sort of neo-Romantic humanism as he offers us our imaginations as the means to realise our desires. Thus, he acknowledges an emotional or spiritual longing which transcends intellectual conceits: the desire for telos, order, redemption and harmony.

To take any of Irving's positions too seriously, and to make too much of these tensions or paradoxes, is to miss the essence of his vision. While Irving has a Romantic sensibility, he is ultimately an ironist. He presents the imagination, the faculty we use to shape our view of the world, to us as a counterpoint to chaos; however, his presentation of imaginative redescription is self-conscious and self-reflexive. In this light, one can read Irving's own inconsistencies as further evidence of the mutable, flexible and multiple nature of belief.

It may be that what makes Irving's works truly popular is something more than his often sentimental celebration of the range of social, romantic, familial and artistic relationships. His world view, a strange conflation of 19th and 20th century ideas, values, and modes, speaks to popular concerns and anxieties of our time. The "mysticism" in Irving's works may be nothing more than the suggestion that order, purpose, hope and redemption are still realizable in our contingent age, a suggestion which appeals to those who pick up on his ironic questioning of privileged language systems, but who long for a force to fill the moral and spiritual void left behind by religion. In turn, by integrating contemporary moral, social, and philosophical concerns into his texts, Irving also makes unfamiliar ideas not only known but knowable, compelling and attractive to the average reader. For such readers, Irving's suggestion that the imagination itself offers us the power to redeem both ourselves and others

is enormously appealing: they are moved by these texts' optimistic promise and by their own nostalgia for certainty. In "The King of the Novel," Irving quotes Chesterton's approving remark that Dickens "made astonishingly vivid what an audience feared, what it dreamed of, what it wanted" (231). Like Dickens, Irving seems able to express both his own and his audience's hunger, an ability which helps to explain his popularity and which may well account for his enduring legacy.

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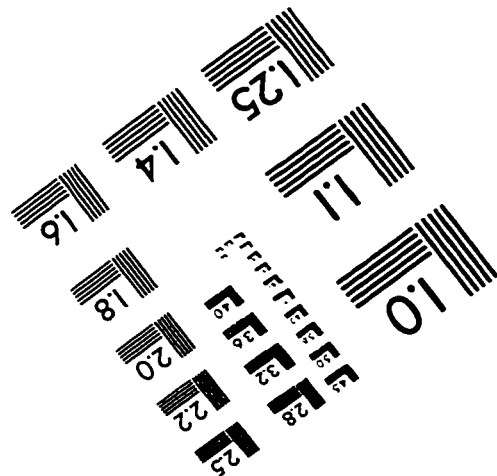
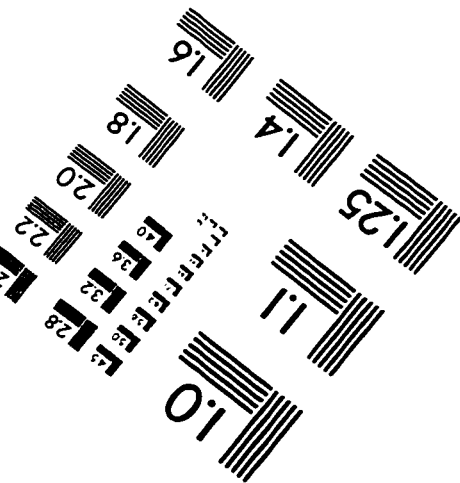
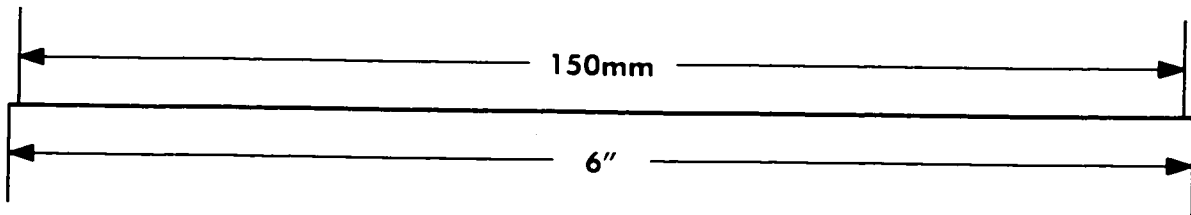
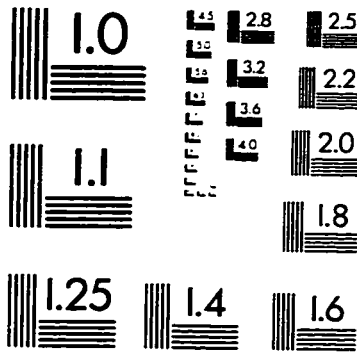
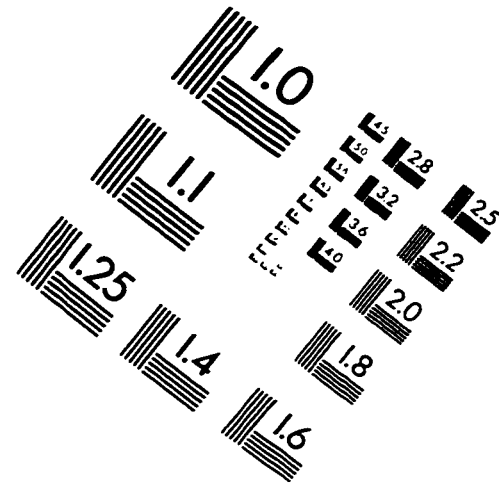
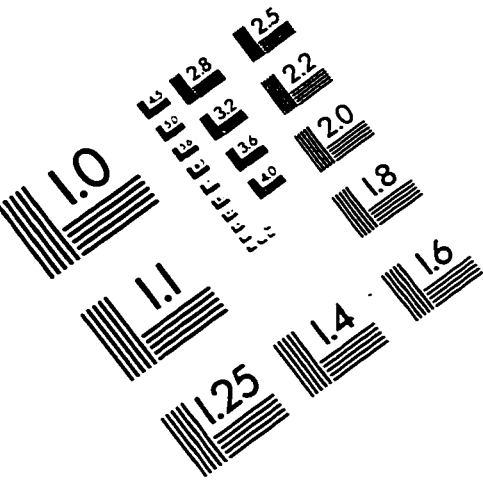
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