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Writing as a Political Act: a Study of *A Prayer For Owen Meany* by John Irving.

Karine Placquet

As Roland Barthes wrote: « l'écriture est un acte de solidarité historique. (.) elle est une fonction : elle est le rapport entre la création et la société »¹. John Irving seems to have backed up this assertion with the novel we are studying today, even though its very title is rather misleading so as to its sociological and political dimension.

*A Prayer For Owen Meany*² can, like almost all novels by John Irving, be read on various levels. It deals with religious and political issues and opposes several dialectics, such as free will vs. determinism, memory vs. forgetting, faith vs. doubt... On one hand, the plot is quite simple and broadly chronological: it presents the life of its very charismatic eponymous character and describes the influence the latter had on the homodiegetic narrator, John Wheelwright. On the other hand, diegesis and narration are set in different periods of time: the events mainly take place in the 1960's during the Vietnam War, whereas John's narration occurs during the Reagan Administration (1980's). The relationship in the novel between those two historical periods raises a series of questions in the reader's mind: what are the reasons for writing a novel on the Vietnam War in 1989? What are the consequences of mixing religious and political references? In other words, why write a political novel without clearly indicating it from the beginning?

As just stated, two periods of time are intermingled, which complicates an otherwise rather straightforward plot. This complexity is accentuated by the fact that *A Prayer for Owen Meany* can be seen as a novel in three acts: first, that of the diegesis and the characters who struggle for their ideals and individual liberty; secondly, that of the narration and John Wheelwright as a bitter adult who has fled his country to live in Canada; and finally that of the writing, where the author, John Irving, seems to consider the act of writing as both an exercise of memory and a means to criticise the political orientations of his country's government.

¹ Roland BARTHES, *Le Degré zéro de l'écriture*. Paris : Seuil, collection « Points », 1972, p. 14.

² John IRVING, *A Prayer For Owen Meany*. New York : Random House, 1989.

I – Act 1 : diegesis and the characters' experience.

In *A Prayer For Owen Meany*, the protagonist encounters quite a number of characters but not all of them are related to the problematic issue of the Vietnam War. Apart from Owen, John and Hester --John's cousin and Owen's girlfriend—are really concerned with the struggle this armed conflict represented for the American youth at that time.

The experience of those characters is extremely political: Owen stands for the highly engaged young man, whereas John and Hester reject the slaughter any war represents. Owen enlists in the army and becomes a "Casualty Assistance Officer", which rather plainly links war to death and injury. In contrast, John tries to find a way to stay away from the war. Finally, Hester, because she dearly loves Owen, strictly opposes his enlistment. Let us note that to reinforce Owen's charisma, two characters are needed to counterbalance his opinions. Nonetheless, going to Vietnam is not an end in itself for Owen, it is just a means to accomplish what he believes to be his destiny:

This was the life that Hester and I thought Owen valued too little. (...) 'IT'S NOT THAT I *WANT* TO GO TO VIETNAM – IT'S WHERE I *HAVE* TO GO. IT'S WHERE I'M A HERO. I'VE GOT TO BE THERE,' he said. 'Tell him how you "know" this, you asshole!' Hester screamed at him.³

This short passage highlights the opposition between Owen on one side, and Hester and John on the other. It also underlines Hester's violence and points out Owen's megalomania, or rather the quite odd vision he has of his fate and the high opinion he has of himself. We can also observe here the excess that characterizes this eponymous hero. Owen is as short as he is charismatic, as demanding as he is altruistic, as patient with his Sunday school mates as he is intolerant with his parents. He embodies at the same time strength and weakness, strictness and self-denial, despotism and altruism. In spite of, or maybe thanks to, all his excesses, Owen is a Christ-like figure. He believes himself to be God's instrument, his faith is unshakable, he is sure to become a hero, or even a martyr. Another indication of this immoderate dimension of Owen: all his words, be they spoken or written, are in capital letters in the novel, which recalls some versions of the Bible where the words of Christ are printed in red.

This complex character is the tool John Irving forges to connect the two major themes of his novel: politics and religion. As a matter of fact, Owen's Christ-like dimension is revealed most clearly when, at the end of the novel, he saves a group of Vietnamese children from the explosion of a bomb. This act is highly religious as Owen rescues the children in a

³ John IRVING, *A Prayer For Owen Meany*, p. 489.

Christ-like act of self-sacrifice. But Owen's gesture is also undeniably political since the bomb was thrown by Jarvis, an angry young man, whose brother had just been killed in Vietnam.

Compared to the complex and strong protagonist, little place remains for John Wheelwright, who serves as a foil to Owen. To take up René Girard's concept, Owen is the external mediator –*médiateur externe*⁴-- for John, that is the hero John is desperately trying to emulate...but is not in the least able to. From childhood, John and Owen are very good friends. John is brought up only by women and doesn't know who his father is. His mother's husband, Dan, is more of a friend than a father figure. The male referents he has are Dan, Rev. Merrill, whose faith is based on doubt, and his friend Owen. In the midst of all these people, John develops into a rather plain and mediocre character, helped by Owen throughout childhood and teenage years to find his own way.

The Vietnam War breaks out when the boys are young adults and the perspective of having to fight and face the harsh reality of an armed conflict frightens John, who tries to find a way to stay out of it. John is afraid to die and is ready to do anything to avoid going to this far away country. Still, he can't find the solution by himself. Owen is the one to provide an emergency exit: he cuts off one of John's fingers. Since only fully able young men were sent to the front, John is sure not to go. Of course, the amputation –a recurrent motive in the novel—is an extreme and quite violent solution but both characters accept it. The end justifies the means.

The complexity of the situation is embodied by John's reaction: even though he is sure not to go to war, he still leaves the United-States for Canada, becoming therefore a no land's man. Here again, war is linked to injury and the irreparable damages it causes. The stupidity of this conflict is further underlined by the hiatus between the plain facts and the way they are presented in the novel, as I now hope to show.

II – Act 2 : John, the narrator

John, as a character, proves indecisive and lacking charisma. He appears as a bitter adult who has fled the United-States out of protest against its politics but remains unable to cut the umbilical cord tying him to his mother country. Yet, as the narrator he exercises the control...

⁴ René GIRARD, *Mensonge romantique et vérité romanesque* (1961). Paris : Hachette, 1999.

John Wheelwright is a homodiegetic narrator, writing from Canada during the Reagan Administration and telling the story of his best friend whose life ends during the Vietnam War. The particularity of *A Prayer For Owen Meany* lies in the dated entries of the narrator's diary, which punctuate the narration. The two time periods and the two phases of the character-narrator's life are therefore linked. John acts as the central knot tying together the whole novel: through him, John Irving tells a story, debates the politics of his country and introduces the various themes of the novel. He is the link between Owen's story and his own, between the Vietnam War and the Reagan Administration, between a conventional heterodiegetic narrative and a more self-reflexive meditation on the process of writing.

John is by no means an objective narrator and the reader is very early in the novel aware of this. The dated entries of the narrator's diary are the pretext for fierce diatribes against the Iran Contra Affair. This affair was a political scandal occurring in 1989, the time of narration, as a result of earlier events during the Reagan Administration (1980-1988) in which members of the executive branch sold weapons to Iran, an avowed enemy and illegally used the profits to continue funding anti-Sandinista rebels, the Contras, in Nicaragua.⁵

John proves very bitter and at times provocative not only towards the government of his mother country but also towards the American people as a whole:

“ Toronto: May 11th, 1987 – I regret that I had the right change to get *The Globe and Mail* out of the street-corner box; I had three dimes in my pocket, and a sentence in a front-page article proved irresistible. ‘It was unclear how Mr Reagan intended to have his Administration maintain support for the contras while remaining within the law.’ Since when did Mr Reagan care about ‘remaining within the law’? (...) Oh, what a nation of moralists the Americans are! (...) a pity that they do not unleash their moral zest on an administration that runs guns to terrorists.”⁶

The diatribes reveal John's negative opinion on the political directions chosen by the US and stand therefore as a questioning of the politics of his mother country. This point of view is all the more odd since John is no longer an American citizen. He left the US and got Canadian citizenship; he should, as a consequence, not feel so concerned about the fate of the American people. His constant criticism of the US shows that, in spite of having left the country of his birth, John cannot fully reject his roots and recreate a new identity. No matter what he believes, he is and will always remain an American.

Just as John is portrayed as a foil to Owen, Canada plays the same role towards the United States. In fact, it stands as the beacon to which John compares his mother country. In

⁵ <http://www.questia.com/read/112865766>

⁶ John IRVING, *A Prayer For Owen Meany*, pp. 322-323.

choosing Canada John sets himself apart from the US, to criticise –most of the time with much subjectivity—America and all its wrongs and to make political statements against the country and moral judgements against its people.

The harshness of his diatribes underlines the fact that he is at the same time perfectly aware of and fighting against a relationship of attraction and repulsion relationship towards the country of his birth. John's journal entries document the most difficult part of being in exile: making the decision to emigrate requires guts, but being able to rebuild one's identity from almost nothing is far more tiring and demanding. In other words, having firm political opinions is one thing but living in strict accordance with them is another.

John's Canadian friends are by no means taken in by his state of mind. The most relevant example of their understanding is probably encapsulated in the words spoken by Canon Mackie, John's Canadian Conscience Objector:

“‘John, John,’ he said to me. ‘You’re a Canadian citizen, but what are you always talking about? You talk about America more than any American I know! And you’re more anti-American than any Canadian I know,’ the canon said. ‘You’re a little... well, *one-note* on the subject, wouldn’t you say?’”⁷

In saying so, Canon Mackie helps John to face the plain facts: his anger and bitterness towards America have led him to reject his country and its people, but they have also kept him from truly becoming a Canadian citizen since he is unable to adopt the behaviour related to it. Pointing at John's narrow-mindedness, the canon gives a hint to a correct reading of the novel: whether John's opinion is grounded is not the question; what really matters is that he is not objective and we, as readers, must understand that and take it into account if we want to come to grips with the true meaning of the novel. In politics, just as in any other field, to be taken seriously, one has to be convincing, not embittered.

III – Act 3: the author, John Irving

And this is precisely the behaviour John Irving adopts to make his point.

In spite of having said “it is never the social or political message that interests me. I begin with an interest in a relation, a situation, a character (...)”⁸ John Irving has written a political novel with *A Prayer For Owen Meany*. As a matter of fact, its two main issues are religion and politics. For the coherence of the novel, they are related through Owen by means

⁷ John IRVING, *A Prayer For Owen Meany*, p. 238.

⁸ interview by Susan HEREL in *Mother Jones*, May/June 1997. Disponible sur <http://motherjones.com>

of his function in the army, where he serves as a “Casualty Assistance Officer”. This job title obviously adds and connects the omnipresence of death to these two realities.

I have already underlined that the reader is led to remain cautious regarding John Wheelright’s words. With Owen, things are subtler. Because he is such a charismatic character, we tend to take his words for granted but the irony John Irving employs in the portrayal of his character is the clue for us to distance ourselves from Owen. Owen is neither a funny character –he seems on the contrary to be serious at all times-- nor one we laugh about; the irony lies in the way he is so firm and uncompromising as regards his beliefs and the others’ behaviour. In his description of his protagonist, John Irving seems to accredit Lucien Goldman’s idea that a novel is at the same time a kind of biography and a social chronicle, in which the author, if he wants his novel to be really effective, needs to surpass these first and most obvious levels through irony and humour.⁹

Since John is not a very reliable narrator, yielding to violence as soon as his mother country is involved, the reader sometimes has a hard time to fully accept his point of view. If the author’s intent is to show that ‘America is a great country, but that its politicians sometimes take very odd, foolish or suicidal decisions’, then John Irving needs to counterbalance his narrator’s ineffectiveness by crediting the discourse of another character. He does so with Owen and his analogy between Marilyn Monroe and the US:

“SHE WAS LIKE OUR WHOLE COUNTRY – NOT QUITE YOUNG ANYMORE, BUT NOT OLD EITHER; A LITTLE BREATHLESS, VERY BEAUTIFUL, MAYBE A LITTLE STUPID, MAYBE A LOT SMARTER THAN SHE SEEMED, AND SHE WAS LOOKING FOR SOMETHING – I THINK SHE WANTED TO BE GOOD. (...) SHE WAS DESIRABLE. SHE WAS FUNNY AND SEXY – AND SHE WAS VULNERABLE, TOO. SHE WAS NEVER QUITE HAPPY, SHE WAS ALWAYS A LITTLE OVERWEIGHT. SHE WAS JUST LIKE OUR WHOLE COUNTRY.”¹⁰

With words that are far less bitter and violent than those of John, Owen underlines some wrongs and suggests that he, in other respects a loyal character, has lost faith in his country. Comparing a country to a movie star is no good omen for the former as it underlines the fact it can’t be taken seriously any longer. It also suggests the dereliction of the American state of this time. Furthermore, the statistics reporting the number of casualties and the escalation of war, as well as the mention of the assassinations of Martin Luther King and John Fitzgerald Kennedy are given by John Irving to reinforce the dystopic situation of the United-

⁹ Lucien GOLDMAN, *Pour une sociologie du roman*. Paris : Gallimard, collection « Tell », 1964, p. 30.

¹⁰ John IRVING, *A Prayer For Owen Meany*, p. 447.

States during the 1960's. Owen criticizes his country but John Irving also endows his protagonist with some critical distance towards himself. Owen seems humorously aware of his own contradictions. He is therefore more convincing when he points out the wrongs of his country. Of course, Owen is characterized by excess and the reader needs therefore to take his words with caution but because he is endowed with a humorous dimension, he is taken more seriously than John and his everlasting bitterness. Here, the author proves far subtler than his narrator and as a consequence his message is better received.

In the same way, the dated entries of John's diary serve several purposes: of course they create an obvious parallel between the Vietnam War and the Iran Contra Affair, thus showing that America has not learnt from its mistakes; they also allow the reader to see the kind of person the narrator has become, thus underlining the damage such a conflict can have even on people who did not directly take part in it.

This complexity is reinforced by the constant movements back and forth between story and narration as well as the interaction of the diegesis –Owen's story-- with John's narration. Owen doesn't write but representing his story through the narration of his friend, John Wheelwright, is a means for John Irving to react against the Vietnam War and the Reagan Administration. The novel is therefore built on multiple embedded levels, which are not only connected but also speak to one another. The whole thing takes the form of a complete, complex and beautiful novel that marks the readers' mind.

Finally, let us note that John Irving has no illusions with regards the real impact of his novel on the course of things. The active role of *A Prayer For Owen Meany* is doubtless played by the eponymous protagonist. As we've said, John is more than anything else a follower. Anything that has to do with engagement and involvement is on Owen's side. John lives to tell but Owen dies. This simple premise underlying the novel's construction may be considered as a questioning of the real utility of the act of writing. Literature is crucial in awakening consciousness but it must not be given more importance than it really has. In the end, the primary goal of any piece of art is to entertain, not to give lessons.

Conclusion

Even though John Irving has tried to mislead his readers with the title of his novel, *A Prayer For Owen Meany* is a political novel. The characters evolve in a marked socio-political background and their coming of age is clearly influenced by the political developments of their time: Owen is able to fulfil the destiny he thinks he has **thanks to** the Vietnam War; John has reasons to be bitter **because of** the Reagan Administration. Above all,

the characters are deeply changed and touched by the political decisions taken by the people governing the country. Politics has therefore a direct impact on John Irving's characters. This rather straightforward *mimesis* of reality is the pretext of a questioning of the world we live in. The reader is entertained but he is led to have a critical mind and to refuse obviousness.

The dual time frame is characteristic of John Irving's manner of writing. *A Prayer For Owen Meany* was written in 1989, that is 20 years after the Vietnam War. Because the author is so keen on being positively critical towards the world surrounding us, such a devastating conflict represents a vital source for showing the bias of many human actions. The fact that the novel was written 20 years after the actual facts can be understood in three ways: first, the Vietnam War was such a trauma for the American people and has left such indelible marks in the American psyche that there needed to be time before people, including John Irving, could actually dramatize or novelize it. 20 years is also the time Americans needed to temper the violence of their criticism, if that is even possible. 20 years, finally, seems to be a long enough period of time to have some distance and grow a bit more objective. If that this is not exactly the case for the homodiegetic narrator in *A Prayer For Owen Meany*, perhaps it better applies to John Irving.

1989 is also one year before the First Gulf War –which took place between Aug. 2nd, 1990 to Feb. 28th, 1991-- broke out. As a consequence, *A Prayer For Owen Meany* is not only an exercise of remembrance, a duty of memory. It can retrospectively be read as an appeal to the governing powers not to make the same mistakes again and again.

Owen and John's teenage years, a time when children become adults and lose their innocence, precisely embody the loss of innocence of America during the 1960's: no matter what, America will never be the same ... and Irving's narrator, John Wheelwright, is probably the best example of this state of facts.