

Lumbering through Illyria: John Irving's "Literary Debate" with Ford Madox Ford and John Hawkes

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On the origins of his third novel, John Irving once remarked: "*The 158-Pound Marriage* is about two couples—a sexual foursome—and it grew very specifically out of Ford Madox Ford's *The Good Soldier* and John Hawkes's *The Blood Oranges*."¹ Irving likewise decorates *The 158-Pound Marriage* with revealing epigraphs from each novel, and both quotations further suggest Irving's interest in examining the politics of open marriage that act on otherwise "good people." Irving's use of the double epigraph also reflects his self-conscious desire to forge an "intellectual debate" with *The Good Soldier* and *The Blood Oranges*, novels that, says Irving, "both irritated me" [Irving's emphasis].² In fact, both novels bear more than a passing resemblance to *The 158-Pound Marriage*, and Irving borrows liberally from his literary precursors, adopting narrative techniques often blatantly similar in tone, plot design, and characterization to *The Good Soldier* and *The Blood Oranges*.

While such tactical maneuvers surely suggest Irving's cultivation of an intertextual relationship with Ford and Hawkes in *The 158-Pound Marriage*, Roland Barthes's definition of intertextuality warns otherwise: "The intertextual in which every text is held, it itself being the text-between of another text, is not to be confused with some origin of the text: to try to find the 'sources,' the 'influences' of a work, is to fall in with the myth of filiation."³ Because Irving clearly cites Ford and Hawkes as sources in *The 158-Pound Marriage*—just as Hawkes cites Ford as an influence in his epigraph to *The Blood Oranges*—Barthes's definition of intertextuality implies that the relationship between the three novels is not an intertextual one. Moreover, as Heide Ziegler argues, "The very term *intertextuality* . . . is meant to convey the idea of overlapping textual systems which defy classification and allow for chains of signifiers to freely constitute themselves as so many fictional worlds."⁴ Thus, the precepts of intertextuality clearly run contrary to Irving's narrative schema in *The 158-Pound*

¹ Greil Marcus, "John Irving: The World of *The World According to Garp*," *Rolling Stone* 13 Dec. 1979: 68–72.

² Gabriel Miller, *John Irving* (New York: Ungar, 1982) 189.

³ Roland Barthes, "From Work to Text," *Image-Music-Text*, ed. and trans. Stephen Heath (New York: Hill and Wang, 1977) 160.

⁴ Heide Ziegler, "Love's Labours Won: The Erotics of Contemporary Parody," *Intertextuality and Contemporary American Fiction*, ed. Patrick O'Donnell and Robert Con Davis (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989) 58.

Marriage, a text that—based on its conceptual and thematic relationships with *The Good Soldier* and *The Blood Oranges*—not only invites classification with these novels, but demands it.

For this reason, then, Linda Hutcheon's theory of parody seems far more relevant to this discussion. "Parody," says Hutcheon, "is repetition . . . that includes difference." Further, says Hutcheon, "When we speak of parody, we do not just mean two texts that interrelate in a certain way. We also imply an intention to parody another work (or set of conventions) and both a recognition of that intent and an ability to find and interpret the backgrounded text in its relation to that parody."⁵ Irving echoes such sentiments when he argues that he intended for his novel to engage Ford and Hawkes in an "intellectual debate," and *The 158-Pound Marriage* is the product of his efforts to imitate and thus reinterpret the novels of his predecessors. An examination of *The 158-Pound Marriage* under the constraints of Hutcheon's definition reveals, however, that Irving fails not only in his attempt to grapple with Ford and Hawkes in debate over the politics of open marriage, but also in his endeavor to replicate successfully the narrative constructs that operate in the two previous novels.

In *The 158-Pound Marriage*, Irving's narrative focuses on the marital relationship and the corrosive means that husbands and wives have at their disposal to destroy one another. In the novel, Irving employs an unnamed narrator who delivers the entire narrative in the first person, often through the use of flashbacks and extensive character histories. An American professor of history at a New England college, the narrator is the author of a few minor historical novels. His wife, Utch, is an Austrian survivor of Germany's annexation of her country, the so-called *Anschluss*, and World War II, in which she lost both her parents, having been raised instead by a Russian officer in the Soviet zone of Vienna. The novel's other couple sports an international flavor as well: Severin Winter, a professor of German and a wrestling coach at the same college as the narrator, is also a Viennese survivor of the war, and his wife, Edith, the daughter of wealthy New Yorkers, is a fledgling writer. The two couples meet at a dinner party, and soon thereafter, through what appears to be a natural process of socialization, they begin swapping spouses. Their extramarital friendship truly seems to border on the ideal, with the two Americans, both writers, enjoying their new intimate relationship, and the two Europeans sharing a revived nostalgia for their Austrian language and culture.

Irving couches his discussion of the affair with frequent wrestling metaphors—gentle reminders that the couples' new relationship, like a wrestling match, has a time limitation. Irving also extends the wrestling metaphor to include the names of chapters devoted to the participants in the affair, called

⁵ Linda Hutcheon, *A Theory of Parody: The Teachings of Twentieth-Century Art Forms* (London: Methuen, 1985) 22, 37.

"Scouting Reports," as well as to the novel's title, which refers to a wrestling weight class. As the affair develops, so do the tensions and jealousies common to any emotional enterprise of this nature, and soon the participants, especially the narrator and Severin, come into conflict over the politics of their union. Severin often appears overly cautious, warning the others not to take their affair so seriously, while the narrator becomes selfishly distraught over Severin's admonitions. When they realize that they have lost control of their emotions, and the health of their marriage appears to be threatened, the Winters bluntly inform the narrator and Utch that the affair is over.

In the interim, the narrator endures a series of personal revelations, which include learning that his and Utch's affair with the Winters had merely been designed by them to be Edith's revenge for an earlier infidelity of Severin's, and, more importantly, the narrator discovers that the real casualty of their open marriage is Utch, who has fallen desperately in love with Severin—a love that now must remain unreciprocated. As the novel closes, Utch leaves the narrator, who has acted in selfish disregard for her feelings throughout the affair, and travels to Vienna with their children, who have strangely remained in the background of the novel. Irving's narrator is left alone at home to reflect on his self-indulgent behavior during the affair, as well as to ponder the demise of his marriage, soberly concluding, "If cuckolds catch a second wind, I am eagerly waiting for mine."⁶

In *The Blood Oranges*, Hawkes's parody of Ford's *The Good Soldier*, the epigraphical citation from Ford's novel suggests the central theme of unabashed personal freedom that drives Hawkes's own narrative, and, later, Irving's narrative in *The 158-Pound Marriage*: "Is there any terrestrial paradise where, amidst the whispering of the olive-leaves, people can be with whom they like and have what they like and take their ease in shadows and in coolness?"⁷ Moreover, many of the thematic and character conventions propounded by Irving in *The 158-Pound Marriage* owe a great debt to similar narratological principles earlier forged by Hawkes in *The Blood Oranges*. While such conventions are not the source of Irving's "intellectual debate" with Hawkes, they are certainly the foundation of his attempt to parody *The Blood Oranges*. Hawkes's novel, like Irving's, considers a "sexual foursome" and the propensity of such an open marital relationship to implode as the emotional obligations of the affair intensify.

⁶ John Irving, *The 158-Pound Marriage* (New York: Random House, 1974) 255. Subsequent references to this edition will appear in the text after the abbreviation PM. Irving echoes this line in his next novel, *The World According to Garp* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1978), where it appears as the mythical title of Garp's ineffectual second novel, *Second Wind of the Cuckold*. In *Garp*, Irving explicitly alludes to the plot of *The 158-Pound Marriage* when he writes: "*Second Wind of the Cuckold* was about two married couples who have an affair." See p. 160.

⁷ Ford Madox Ford, *The Good Soldier: A Tale of Passion* (1915; New York: Vintage, 1983) 238–39. Subsequent references to this edition will appear in the text after the abbreviation GS.

In addition to borrowing Hawkes's thematic conventions, Irving also imitates the character traits of the principal figures in *The Blood Oranges*. For instance, Cyril—the narrator and “sex-singer” of Hawkes's novel—describes himself as a “woman's man”: “See me as bull, or ram, as man, husband, lover, a tall and heavy stranger in white shorts on a violet tennis court. I was there always. I completed the picture. I took my wife, took her friends, took the wives of my friends and a fair roster of other girls and women, from young to old and old to young, whenever the light was right or the music sounded.”⁸ Irving echoes these sentiments in *The 158-Pound Marriage* when Utch tells the narrator, “Though I knew it would be troublesome, I never met anyone who was so attentive to women. . . . You encourage a woman to indulge herself in being a woman” (*PM* 87–88). The two narrators also espouse similar views about open marriage. Says Cyril, “Need I insist that the only enemy of marriage is monogamy? That anything less than sexual multiplicity (body upon body, voice on voice) is naïve? That our sexual selves are merely idylers in a vast wood?” (*BO* 209). Irving's narrator reiterates this notion when he muses upon the value of his own open marriage: “At first the thought of Severin with Utch was exciting. It rekindled an old lust which had not been entirely absent but which had been perhaps too occasional” (*PM* 98).

Similarly, the male counterparts of Cyril and Irving's narrator respond to their respective affairs in an equally cold and cautious manner. Hugh, whose wife Catherine is the object of Cyril's affections, resents Cyril's erotic pursuit of Catherine, and often feels uneasy about his own incipient relationship with Cyril's wife, Fiona. Cyril, sensing Hugh's awkward dilemma, concludes, “But of course the wedding ring worn bizarrely, fiercely, on the third finger of Hugh's right hand told me that I must never allow myself to be unduly critical of Hugh. Even that monstrous hand of his wore its sign of love” (*BO* 92). Irving's narrator perceives a similar uneasiness wafting from Severin. In *The 158-Pound Marriage*, Severin's character, like Hugh, often appears as the novel's warning beacon, cautioning the others that they could lose control of their affair at any time. Says Irving's narrator: “Severin seemed to think it was necessary to say, ‘Sexual equality between two people is a difficult thing, and among four . . . Well, nothing's really equal, but it has to feel pretty equal or it can't go on. I mean, if three of us are having a good time and one of us is having a bad time, then the whole thing is bad, right? And the one person who blows it all shouldn't be made to feel that it's his or her fault, right?’” (*PM* 70–71). Like Hugh, Severin's protestations often extend beyond his concern for the well-being of the couples to consider the emotional fate of the participants' children. In Irving's novel especially, the two couples' four children are frequently relegated to the narrative's background, only appearing occasionally as reminders of how absorbed their parents have become in their new intimate relationship. In *The Blood Oranges*, Hugh, like

⁸ John Hawkes, *The Blood Oranges* (New York: New Directions, 1971) 2. Subsequent references to this edition will appear in the text after the abbreviation *BO*.

Severin, ostensibly appears to be the children's only emotional benefactor, angrily warning Cyril about the dangers of their affair, "My villa . . . my bed . . . my wife . . . with the children in the next room . . . and you in the nude and crawling all over my marriage" (BO 244).

Irving also freely borrows from the personality traits of Hawkes's female characters, although the character of Edith in *The 158-Pound Marriage* is a notably stronger, more self-actuated version of Hawkes's Catherine, who weakly succumbs to Cyril's erotic advances in *The Blood Oranges'* final pages. Fiona, however, is a pure template for Utch in *The 158-Pound Marriage*, for Irving invests many of Fiona's characteristics in Utch. Though Fiona and Utch fall desperately in love with their respective extramarital partners in the two novels, both women also emerge from their failed affairs as survivors. In *The Blood Oranges*, for example, Fiona spirits Hugh and Catherine's three daughters out of Illyria, the novel's tropical setting, and saves them from the devastating circumstances that follow the demise of their parent's open marriage, circumstances that include Hugh's ambiguous suicide and Catherine's nervous breakdown. Says Cyril, "it was Fiona who first thought of the three fatherless children, Fiona who made her immediate and selfless decision to take upon herself the responsibility of the children and carry them off" (BO 210). Utch demonstrates similar strength of character when she leaves Irving's narrator in *The 158-Pound Marriage*, flying with her children to Vienna to save them from the consequences of her troubled personal life.

Although in his novel Irving clearly avails himself of Hawkes's characters and their respective personality traits, he avoids some of the principal elements that drive the narrative of *The Blood Oranges*, especially the novel's vague setting and lack of real verisimilitude. Such elements are likely sources of the "irritation" Irving felt about Hawkes's novel, and, moreover, these elements are central to understanding his conflict—or "intellectual debate"—with Hawkes. The setting of *The Blood Oranges* is Illyria, that vague, seasonless, southern land with its natives and porpoises. Hawkes invests Illyria with enough unreality to allow its Western visitors to forget their inhibitions and play the "grape-tasting game." In short, Illyria is the "terrestrial paradise" that Dowell dreams of in *The Good Soldier*. It is also the place where Hawkes can unleash characters representing basic human extremes—Cyril, the erotic "sex-singer," and Hugh, the emblem of human convention and restraint. The nature of this paradise also allows Cyril to "spin" forever his mysterious erotic "tapestries," waiting for Fiona to return to him, while at the same time patiently hoping to coax Catherine out of her insanity. In *The Blood Oranges*, Cyril can afford to be patient, for in Illyria, time has no meaning. For Irving, though, time and a sense of reality are necessities. As Gabriel Miller notes, while replicating the real world is hardly a requirement in his fiction, Irving must create enough verisimilitude in his novels to allow the

modern reader to understand the problems that face his protagonists.⁹ In *The 158-Pound Marriage*, Irving's characters toil with real marital concerns—infidelity, jealousy, and commitment, the same themes tackled by Hawkes in *The Blood Oranges*—while at the same time avoiding Illyria's abstract battleground of human extremes.

Although *The 158-Pound Marriage* frequently resembles *The Blood Oranges* in regard to its characters' principal personality traits, as well as the novel's fundamental plot, with *The Good Soldier*, Irving deliberately borrows several of Ford's primary narrative and thematic techniques, while yet producing an entirely different narrative from *The Good Soldier*. This discrepancy suggests, then, that Irving implicitly limits his parody of Ford to his replication of Ford's narrative technique, rather than to the more extensive borrowings of plot and character type evinced by his parody of Hawkes. Such a discrepancy also suggests that Irving's debate with Ford, unlike his literary debate with Hawkes, is unrelated to the thematic differences between the two novels, and instead is largely a debate over narrative technique.

Many of Ford's themes and literary devices inform the narrative of *The 158-Pound Marriage*, especially Ford's use of an "international theme," the theme that underscores the plots of both novels. Ford infuses *The Good Soldier* with an international quality when he juxtaposes the novel's four principal characters—Edward and Leonora Ashburnham, the aristocratic and cultured Europeans, and John and Florence Dowell, the naïve, nouveau riche Americans. The results of the two couples' international communion are telling indeed, with Dowell, the novel's unaware and often unreliable narrator, enjoying the ineffectual life of the newly rich American gentleman, and his wife Florence fulfilling Ford's vision of the strange combination of bold and obtrusive attributes that symbolize American vanity. Dowell reveals this aspect of Florence's character when he remarks on her strange romantic pursuit of Ashburnham: "She cut out poor dear Edward from sheer vanity; she meddled between him and Leonora from a sheer, imbecile spirit of district visiting. Do you understand that, whilst she was Edward's mistress, she was perpetually trying to reunite him with his wife? She would gabble on to Leonora about forgiveness—treating the subject from the bright, American point of view. And Leonora would treat her like the whore she was" (GS 71). Unlike her audacious American female counterpart, Leonora exemplifies European qualities of fortitude and restraint, bravely weathering Edward's infidelities with Mrs. Basil and La Dolciquita, among others. Likewise, Edward represents the stereotypical, landed English gentleman, a calm and sentimental good soldier.

⁹ Miller 18–19.

Irving imbues his novel with an international theme as well, although the dynamics of his characters' sexual and personal relationships clearly differ from the characters' relationships in Ford's novel; in *The 158-Pound Marriage*, the couples actually trade spouses, while in *The Good Soldier*, infidelity replaces mate swapping, and only Florence and Edward truly indulge in a sexual affair. When Irving replicates Ford's international theme in his novel, he makes implicit conclusions about the differences between the characters themselves, as well as their respective nationalities. Thus, Irving distinguishes the affair between the two Americans—Edith and the narrator—by the nature of their union. As they are both writers, they spend much of their evenings together discussing their craft, while sharing an affinity for wine, cigarettes, and music, details that endow their otherwise erotic affair with a romantic quality. Irving illustrates the affair between the two Austrians, Utch and Severin, with very different images, and the narrator reveals these differences, as well as his disgust for them, when he arrives at his home after Severin has departed: "our bed lay strewn with her [Utch's] clothing, the mattress half sliding to the floor. And then I would trot about the house—not emptying ashtrays but disposing of the apple cores and spines of pears, cheese rinds, salami skins, grape stems and empty beer bottles. He [Severin] knew how food in the bedroom revolted me!" (*PM* 100). In this instance, Irving's reiteration of Ford's prevailing international theme functions efficiently within *The 158-Pound Marriage*, and furnishes the reader with valuable clues about the tensions that steadily evolve among the characters' quaternion.

Unfortunately, Irving's reproductions of Ford's other narrative techniques from *The Good Soldier* hardly fare as well. Says Ford, "the great truth that must never be forgotten by you, by me, or by the neophyte at the gate, is that the purpose of a technique is to help the writer to please, and that neither writing nor the technique behind it has any other purpose."¹⁰ One of Ford's most pleasing techniques in *The Good Soldier* is certainly his infusion of a form of discrepant awareness into his narrative that allows the reader to realize that Dowell is telling a story that has already concluded. Irving utilizes this same technique in his novel, for his narrator also tells such a story. The organizational schemata employed in the two novels, however, define the principal differences between the two narratives, and thus demonstrate the flaws in Irving's replication of Ford's narrative structure.

In Ford's novel, for example, Dowell tells his story slowly, frequently shifting back and forth between subjects, often vacillating in his feelings about the main characters, particularly Florence, and all the while remaining very cognizant of how his readers perceive his story: "I have, I am aware, told this story in a very rambling way so that it may be difficult for anyone to find his path through what may be a sort of maze. I cannot help it. . . . when one discusses an

¹⁰ *Critical Writings of Ford Madox Ford*, ed. Frank MacShane (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1964) 67.

affair—a long, sad affair—one goes back, one goes forward. One remembers points that one has forgotten and one explains them all the more minutely since one recognizes that one has forgotten to mention them in their proper places and that one may have given, by omitting them, a false impression. I console myself with thinking that this is a real story and that, after all, real stories are probably told best in the way a person telling a story would tell them. They will then seem most real” (GS 183). By using such a realistic narrative technique, Ford forces Dowell to reveal late in the narrative that many of his feelings about the characters have changed since he originally began recording his story. In one instance, he explicitly admits this to the reader during a discussion about Florence’s infidelities—facts that he was not privy to during her lifetime: “I may, in what follows, be a little hard on Florence; but you must remember that I have been writing away at this story now for six months and reflecting longer and longer upon these affairs” (GS 184). This sort of revelation, says Arthur Mizener, gives Ford’s novel its remarkably realistic narrative quality: “The ironic wit of *The Good Soldier’s* style depends, not on a discrepancy between the narrator’s attitude and Ford’s, but on a discrepancy between Dowell’s attitude as a participant in the events and Dowell’s attitude as a narrator of them.”¹¹

In *The 158-Pound Marriage*, though, Irving’s narrator delivers his story in a more linear fashion, pausing only occasionally to offer brief asides or to expound upon one of the other character’s personal histories. Further, Irving denies his readers the sort of discrepant awareness that Ford’s readers enjoy, choosing instead to reveal the most dramatic moments in his story as mere surprises, rather than allowing his narrator to disclose carefully such revelations as Dowell does. Says Ford, “the one quality that gave interest to Art was the quality of surprise.”¹² In *The Good Soldier*, the quality of surprise is impressive largely because Ford allows his readers to enjoy the discoveries that they make along with Dowell, the narrator, rather than with himself, the author. In Irving’s novel, however, the author’s interference in the narrator’s story is very apparent indeed.

For instance, in *The 158-Pound Marriage*, the narrator’s belief system, like Dowell’s, hinges on a single notion, that, if shattered, would devastate his sense of reality. Likewise, Dowell’s reality is forever altered when he learns that Florence’s heart condition was merely a manufactured ailment, and that she had been unfaithful to him for the duration of their marriage—knowledge that Florence, Edward, and Leonora shared for years. Irving’s narrator endures a similar shock when he discovers that his and Utch’s relationship with the Winters had been fostered by them simply to sate Edith’s ego after Severin’s earlier infidelities, and further, that he was the only member of their open marriage who was unaware of this fact. While both novels clearly share this plot construct, in *The Good Soldier*, Ford allows Dowell to reveal explicitly such

¹¹ Arthur Mizener, *The Saddest Story: A Biography of Ford Madox Ford* (New York: World, 1971) 265.

¹² *Critical Writings of Ford Madox Ford* 78.

realities to the reader only after he has reached a suitable distance from the events to adjust to them himself.

Irving's narrator, however, enjoys no such grace period, and like Irving's readers, he is equally surprised to learn the truth about the affair's origins. In this instance, the technique that worked so efficiently in Ford's novel falters in *The 158-Pound Marriage*, and does so only because the reader can glimpse Irving standing behind his narrator, manipulating his narrator's every thought and action. If in fact Irving is engaging in debate with Ford over narrative technique—as the aforementioned differences in narrative construction truly seem to suggest—then Irving's reason for advancing such a literary argument is surely illustrated by an early passage in his novel. Here, Irving's narrator, the historical novelist, discusses the type of narrative form necessary to record history, and says: "For history you need a camera with two lenses—the telephoto and the kind of close-up with a fine, penetrating focus. You can forget the wide-angle lens; there is no angle wide enough" (*PM* 15). In recording his own narrative, Irving has indeed chosen similar equipment, opting for the close-up lens to document the tension, jealousy, and pain that typify the marital relationships in his current field of vision, and selecting the telephoto lens to record the details of his subjects' distant pasts. But like his narrator, Irving has neglected to use the wide-angle lens—a lens that might have afforded him the same sort of rich depth and scope that Ford attained in *The Good Soldier*.

Although such narrative oversights on Irving's part suggest that his parody of Ford and Hawkes is merely an ineffectual exercise, reconsidering Hutcheon's definition of parody reveals an entirely new problem altogether. If parody, in Hutcheon's words, is "repetition that includes difference"—and Irving has in fact attempted to reiterate many of the thematic and narrative constructs from his literary antecedents—then the real failure of *The 158-Pound Marriage* as a parody lies simply in the fact that it demonstrates nothing new about *The Good Soldier* and *The Blood Oranges*. Irving offers his readers no fresh nuances or revelations about the subjects and narrative forms previously broached by his primary texts. Instead, he merely borrows their ideas about character and plot design and fashions them onto an otherwise interesting new novel. For this reason, then, while Irving's parody of Ford and Hawkes is certainly not a truly pejorative exercise, it nevertheless remains an unremarkable one.¹³

¹³ For different interpretations of Irving's inculcation of the narrative constructs of Ford and Hawkes into his novel, see Carol C. Harter and James R. Thompson's *John Irving* (Boston: Twayne, 1986) 56–73. See also Miller's *John Irving* 64–87.