

"Unpublished"

I

The Problem of Quirkiness

For almost six months now I have been trying, without success, to get an agent for my memoir, Shame (the sequel to my memoir Failure). I've had a few bites, but so far no takers. The ones who've bitten have asked to see the manuscript, and then, for whatever reasons, have decided it's not for them. They mostly say they're not the right person to represent the book, and wish me luck elsewhere. A couple have said, basically, that for them to represent it, they would have had to have fallen in love with it, and they didn't fall in love with it. So it would seem that finding an agent is a little like falling in love: it's a matter of chemistry, and luck, and timing. The imponderables.

Come to think of it, that sounds like a good title for a novel: The Imponderables. There seems to be a trend, in recent years, towards titles featuring cryptic abstract nouns (often ending in "-ist") applied to people, such as The Impressionist (2003), The Algebraist (2006), The Verificationist (2011), and The Imperfectionists (also 2011). I like these quirky titles - especially the last

two -- though they also annoy me, not only because of their trendiness, but also because of the triple success they connote to me (a success that has so far eluded me). They are clever and intriguing titles for books that bucked the odds and managed to get published, and even critically acclaimed. I wish I'd thought of them myself. (I haven't actually read any of these books.)

The Verificationist is by Donald Antrim, a writer who I feel stole my thunder, because he also wrote a book called The Afterlife: A Memoir (2006). He'd already published it by the time I began to write my (unpublished) book The Widower: An Afterlife. Granted, our books are very different. His is about his troubled mother, and their relationship; mine is about my widowhood. Still, I feel he stole my thunder. Or more precisely, I believe that since he is a New Yorker writer (and so among the blessed of the earth, literarily speaking), and well-published already (as New Yorker writers usually are), and also younger than me, he possesses the thunder I never quite had, and probably never will. Which doesn't mean I won't keep trying; it just means I'll keep trying in the face of an increasing sense of my own unpublishability.

Pardon me if I seem to be indulging in self-pity here; I don't mean to. I mean to try and understand my situation

- my status as a writer -- not have people feel sorry for me. I also mean not to confuse being unpublished with being unpublishable (see below). Clearly the latter is worse than the former. And I don't really believe I am unpublishable, though it sometimes feels that way; but reason, and a look at some of the books that actually get published, tell me otherwise.

At first I thought my quirkiness as a writer - in both style and content - was a definite strike against me, as far as getting published goes. But now I'm not so sure. Judging from the aforementioned titles alone, quirkiness is not necessarily disqualifying - though all other things being equal, it probably makes things harder. But I've come to believe that it's more a question of finding someone -- an agent, and then an editor -- who loves your quirkiness. There has to be more than quirkiness, of course; but it would be a mistake, and probably not even possible, for me to try to repress my quirkiness. It's the baby in the bathwater, you could say, and fundamental to my project. (Whatever that is; I'm still trying to figure it out.) Besides, once someone falls in love with your book, quirkiness is no longer a liability; it may even turn into an asset. The quirkiness of the love object could be part of what the lover falls in love with. But without love,

without the presence of a lover, quirkiness definitely seems to be a strike against you in the publishing world.

## II

### Titles and Clichés

My fiancée thinks I have a thing about titles. She says I work from titles, which I guess is true. For instance, I came up with the title of this essay before I began to write it. We both realize how ill-advised and possibly dangerous this proclivity of mine is: it tends to pigeonhole and preconceive the content of my writing from the outset. It is therefore probably a bad idea, creatively speaking. Nevertheless, I continue to focus on titles -- maybe out of mere perversity, or maybe, more damningly, out of a kind of creative ass-backwardness: an unnatural, procrustean tendency to want to fit the content to the title, rather than the other way around. As though it were the title, and not the content, that held the value and meaning of the thing. As though I were - as I well might be - mechanically directing the assignment of meaning beforehand, rather than letting it transpire naturally and organically out of the narrative material itself. It occurs to me that this way of proceeding may very well

bespeak some sort of imaginative inadequacy in my whole approach to the creative endeavor.

You could even say that the title of this essay marks a kind of failure, in at least three (if not more) different senses. It describes (1) how I see myself and my writing these days. (2) It names a book I will never write (but might have written) about (3) a group of writers (fictional writers, or maybe even real ones) who were, or are, not only unpublished, but seemingly unpublishable, for whatever reasons. In fact, the first version of the title of this essay was "The Unpublishable". Even though it was inaccurate, and therefore unusable, I liked it, and didn't want to let it go, because it had shades of Beckett's title The Unnameable. (This derivativeness may also mark a failure of imagination (4). Incidentally, I haven't read that novel either (5). I've tried several times, but I keep on not getting very far. I realize I should have read much more Beckett than I have. I've tried a bunch of times to read each of the novels in that trilogy - Molloy, Malone Dies, and The Unnameable - but have never gotten very far with any of them. Yet I greatly admire Beckett - what I know of him, anyway (having read only one of his works: Godot): his integrity; his uncompromisingness; his artistic purity; his courage; his unillusioned austerity. I look

forward to an imagined future life of reading Beckett, in which I will be totally engrossed in his fiction for an extended period of time; but that day -- like the day of my publication -- has yet to come.)

That last statement, in addition to harboring more traces of self-pity, is also not really true. I have actually published two books, as well as a personal essay, a short story, and a few scholarly articles. Not much, really, when you get right down to it. But I cannot truthfully say that "the day of my publication has yet to come." What I can say is that the day of my publication may now be past. I seem (after sending out 81 query letters for Shame) unable to even buy an agent. (My previous agent dropped me after he was unable to place The Widower: An Afterlife with a publisher, and then decided he would be unable to represent Shame.) So it looks like it's back to the drawing board for me, in terms of agents.

Why is that? Is it because my writing is not commercial, or not perceived as commercial? Or is it because, to vary a recent film title that I love ("He's Just Not That into You"), I'm just not that good a writer? Or is it both?

Here I am reminded of an anecdote my late brother-in-law liked to tell. He was at a resort in the Caribbean,

and they were having a sort of luau (or the Caribbean equivalent). But the food was not that good. My brother-in-law called the waiter over and brought this to his attention. He said, "This food is not that good." The waiter grinned at him and replied, "I know!"

I love that story, and am inclined to apply it to my own situation:

Publisher: "The thing is, Josh, your writing is just not that good."

Me (grinning): "I know!"

But this application is not really true either, for a couple of reasons. First of all, I don't really believe it. I don't believe my writing is not that good. (I'm afraid it may prove to be not that good, but I don't really believe this.) And second, even if I did believe it, for the story to be truly applicable to my own situation, my writing would have to actually make it to a publisher -- which, as of right now, it is very far from doing. Potential readers would have to be waiting in the wings, so to speak, and I would have to be at least preparing, like the roguish waiter, to be laughing all the way to the bank. All of this is far from the truth.

Still, I like the story. I like - or part of me likes -- the idea of a shameless scoundrel being able to put one

over on the public (even if another part of me strongly disapproves of such behavior). I like it even though -- and also maybe because -- I know I would never be capable of doing such a thing myself. In my situation, the opposite is more likely the case: my writing is good, my intentions are sincere, yet nobody's buying. I am not a charming rogue, but rather a naïve, ingenuous patsy. I continue to persist in what may be a doomed endeavor.

Yet I can see a silver lining in all of this, too. For if there is a sort of bitter humor in the idea of the charming rogue with his bolt of wool, headed for the eyes of the unsuspecting public, there is also a kind of disarming appeal in the efforts of the ingénu (me) who persists in his folly. ("If the fool would persist in his folly, he would become wise." - Blake.) The babe in the woods may yet survive -- if only through the kindness of strangers. (Strangers who also happen to be publishers.)

A lot of clichés here, I know. But I don't mind them. I actually sort of like them. Clichés seem to me to signal a casual, relaxed unfussiness about writing that is colloquial, liberating, and maybe even salutary. They are natural to conversation; they are part of the conversational voice. Can we also say that my tolerance and even affection for clichés are part of my literary



quirkiness? I certainly do not reject them; and if they are used consciously and sparingly, I believe they too are part of the writer's tool kit.

Could it be, though, that my free use of clichés is one of the reasons I can't seem to get published anymore? For not only has Shame been rejected by 81 agents (so far); I have also not been able to place even one essay in a literary journal for nine years now - including repeated submissions to the same journal that published that personal essay nine years ago. Is my affection for clichés a further indication that I am just not that good a writer?

### III

#### Embarrassment, and "Pregnant Speculation"

No, I don't think so. I don't think my publishing problem is due to a writing problem per se; I think it's more of a subject problem. I tend to write about failure, and loss, and shame, and other rather off-putting topics - and I do this seriously. It's not that I don't have a sense of humor about these things, or that my writing on the whole lacks humor; I think it's more that my writing is so personal and unfiltered that it's just too embarrassing for people to read. There is "too much information", and a lot

of readers tend to not want to read that shit. Some do, of course; but not that many, and I guess I just haven't yet found the agent or editor who wants to appeal to those readers, or (more likely) feels it would be profitable to do so. Those readers - "my people", as I sometimes think of them -- are too few and far between to justify the sort of venture that mainstream, commercial publishing deals in.

But isn't it also true that good writing "will out" eventually, regardless of all the forces arrayed against it? That agents and publishers can recognize good writing - the sort of writing that will reach and appeal to general readers -- on the merits? And that if agents keep rejecting me, it must be because my writing is either not that good, or not generally appealing (or both)?

But really, what a horrible thing - to be "generally appealing"! Who would want to be such an insipid thing? Yet what would I not give for my writing to be just that! No, that was really just a joke; there are actually many things I would not give: my soul, my style, my content. I would not give up any of those things to be "generally appealing" - yet part of me would still like to be that despite not giving up any of those other things. I want to have my cake and eat it too.

Good luck with that, Charlie.

But no, there's too much wrong with that whole line of reasoning. Good writing and writing with popular appeal are not the same thing at all. Literary and publishing history are too full of examples of, on the one hand, literary classics that struggled and repeatedly failed to find a publisher; and, on the other hand, books of little or no literary value that were, and continue to be, wild successes. There are also many books that fall between those two hands: popular successes with some literary value (Stephen King, say), and literary books with at least some popular appeal (for example, Nicholson Baker), and various gradations of both of these categories, going in both directions - and other directions I haven't even thought of yet.

Of course, this all could be just empty speculation. And who wants to read that shit, either?

Wait a minute, Chester. There is surely a difference between empty speculation and other sorts of speculation -- what I would call "pregnant speculation". Pregnant speculation is the province of the essay. It's part of what essays do - part of what we read them for. The essay may even be the best place for pregnant speculation. The essay, being the roomiest genre, and unhindered by the requirements of a formal plot and storyline, characters,

dialogue, scenes, etc., has room in its sinuous and hospitable passageways for the vagaries of speculation, as long as it is pregnant.

What does it mean for speculation to be "pregnant"? It means it must eventually - and sooner rather than later - give birth to something. To an idea. At least one idea. And not just any idea, but a living idea. An idea that takes on flesh and blood, that breathes and excretes and reproduces (how embarrassing!) - that reproduces, in the reader, the same, or similar, or connate, or fruitfully contrasting ideas.

But this seems too abstract, and an essay must also not be too abstract. Remember, it is a sort of living thing - a living thing in the writer that gives birth to another living thing in the reader.

I indicated just above that this talk of living things that excrete and reproduce was embarrassing me. Reproductive matters - the messiness of copulation and childbirth and babies and nursing and spit-up and all the rest - have always embarrassed me, and that embarrassment tends to communicate itself to the reader, in both explicit and tacit ways. And I know that readers don't like to be made to feel embarrassed -- especially not for the writer

they are reading; which is perhaps another reason why I remain unpublished.

The thing is, though, embarrassment interests me. It's one of those off-putting topics - like failure, and loss, and shame - that interest me. And more than that: I think embarrassment is an underserved topic in American writing -- neglected, perhaps, because (like those other topics) it makes people uncomfortable. Embarrassment itself embarrasses people. It's therefore a double-whammy of a topic, reproducing itself in others.

Embarazada means "pregnant" in Spanish. To the Iberian eye, apparently, pregnancy is embarrassing to the bearer. And to my eye, embarrassment is a pregnant subject, full of as-yet-unrealized possibilities. Embarrassment, like those other topics, is ripe for the picking. Everybody gets embarrassed -- and you'd think, if only for that reason, that it would be more written about. But apparently not. I wonder why that is. I think it's not that we don't acknowledge our own embarrassment -- we do, often with laughter - but rather that we don't, unless we are Christopher Ricks, feel comfortable taking a more serious, prolonged look at embarrassment. (Christopher Ricks is a literary scholar and critic who wrote a famous - in academic circles, anyway - study titled Keats and

Embarrassment. Another book that I haven't read (6). It seems to be the books I haven't read that most stick with me. My failure to read Ricks' book - and I really should have, since I wrote a dissertation on Romantic poetry - both embarrasses and shames me.)

But why do I persist in writing about these things - embarrassment, and shame, and failure, and loss -- if nobody wants to read that shit? Why do I embarrass myself, and others, by my perverse perseverance in these matters? An old friend of mine, now living in Jerusalem - where he has become rich and famous as a venture capitalist -- who heard through a mutual friend of ours about Failure, and Shame, and The Widower, posed just this question. "Why does he persist in these depressing topics?" my friend remarked to our mutual friend. "Why doesn't he write about life, and joy, and happiness?"

Actually, I have often wondered the same thing myself; and the best answer I have come up with so far involves yet another cliché. It's not so much that I have chosen these topics as that they ... have chosen me. They present themselves to me as subjects of writing, and I do not turn them away. I do not seek them out, exactly; but when they appear on my doorstep, so to speak, I do not turn them away. In fact, I invite them in; I give them food and

drink and shelter, and bid them bide a wee. My writing is a sort of dwelling where these sad subjects can stay for a while. I am a host to my poor relations.

"You keep strange company," the agents and editors and publishers might say - have said, if not in so many words. Yes, I suppose I do. Then again, we do not choose our relations, either; we are born into them. And so it seems to be with me. Naked and embarrassed came I into the world, and naked and embarrassed I shall depart. The Lord giveth and the Lord taketh away; praise the Lord. My embarrassment is an elemental thing; how could I not write about it?

#### IV

##### The Problem of Self-Indulgence

But what if I end up never being published again? What then? Will I be even more of a failure? And what, for that matter, is the status - ontological, cultural and social -- of an unpublished writer? Is he totally invalidated as a writer? Or merely unknown? And if unknown, does he have a purpose? Does he have reason to live?

Whoa there, cowboy; moving mighty fast, aren't you? I know. I must be careful not to confuse categories; I must

try to see things clearly. No self-pity; no face-on-the-barroom-floor; no self-indulgence.

No, wait -- maybe I don't really mean that last part. Self-indulgence is not only something I do pretty well - it's something I get considerable pleasure out of doing. Why deny myself that pleasure? To do so would be extremely -- un-self-indulgent. And it's productive, too, self-indulgence; it bears fruit - can bear fruit, anyway. The fruit of writing.

But what if one of the reasons I'm not published is because my writing is too self-indulgent, and revolves around things nobody really cares about? What if, what if? And what if all of this is just decidedly unpregnant speculation? Abort! Abort!

Not so fast. It all depends on the fruit, doesn't it? If others are interested, touched or otherwise engaged by what you produce, who cares if it's self-indulgent? And it may even prove to be not self indulgent, if others care. Maybe what makes something what we call "self-indulgent" is really more a matter of its sterility - its exclusion of others. Or just its fundamental unconcern with them.

Where, though, are the "others" in my writing? The agents, editors and publishers I mentioned are not people, but abstractions. The old friend who took issue with my



subject matter was not portrayed as a person either, but only as a challenging counter-voice. In fact, there are no real "others" in this essay. It is all so self-involved, self-indulgent and self-replicating: a hall of mirrors: me-me-me-me. And all of this embarrasses me.

So then what if it turns out that I'm writing only for (and about) myself? Does that automatically invalidate my writing? No, maybe not invalidate it - but it may trivialize it. Which amounts to the same thing, doesn't it? What is the status of a writer who, though this may not be his intention, ends up writing for himself, because he is unpublished/unpublishable? Do we call this writer an "amateur"? "Dilettante"? Or just a failure? But why must I assign him a status? Why must I call him anything at all? It is no doubt my own insecurity that leads me down this pointless path.

Perhaps, though, I am taking up the thing by the wrong handle - by the handle, to paraphrase the pre-Socratic philosopher Thales, by which it cannot be borne. And what is the handle by which it can be borne, this matter of writing without an audience, without readers? I think it is the handle of hope, and faith - the hope and faith of pregnancy, of pregnant speculation. The hope that these speculations might someday prove pregnant, and maybe even

fruitful, for others. The hope that I may someday find a publisher, and readers - people who will vibrate to the same frequency as me. ("Not without hope we suffer and we mourn" - Wordsworth.) That day may well be a posthumous one. I would prefer for it to be pre-humous - but that is not up to me, and there is even a certain (self-indulgent) gratification in the speculation that my writing may be proven, someday, by someone, to have not been all in vain. Better a posthumous vindication than no vindication at all.

V

#### My Future Readers

And just who is that "someone"? Who will give my writing (if not me) reason to live? Who might they be? Who, if not my future readers?

Now I know it's not only self-indulgent, but possibly also deluded, to think that one may have future readers when one doesn't even have present readers. It's also self-serving, vain and conceited. But it is also, I suspect, quite common for unpublished writers to think this way. We unpublished writers must take what we can get - which isn't much; and one of the only things we can get, as writers, is the hope of future readers. Do not take this hope away from us, O future readers. For we get so little

pleasure, we unpublished writers. Allow us our blameless conceits - the principal one of which is you, future reader! If you are reading this, you are my future reader! God bless you! You give me reason to live.

For what is the difference, really, between the future reader and the lover? Or between the future reader and the beloved? If getting an agent/editor/publisher is a kind of act of love, then isn't getting future readers even more so? Isn't reading itself a sort of act of love? If you read in a certain way, I think it is. If you read not for information or knowledge, but for relationship, companionship, insight, fellow-feeling, then reading can indeed be a kind of act of love, in which the future reader is both the lover and the beloved at the same time. If the writer doesn't get the love he wishes for from an agent/editor/publisher, then he can at least hope for it from his notional future readers.

"Notional future readers." Sort of pathetic, I know. Hoped-for future readers. The future readers of the writer's mind - as in, "In your mind, Dude - only in your mind."

But isn't all reading and writing only in your mind, Dude?

No, Dude, it's not - it's on the page - the printed or electronic page. Published writers get present, real readers of printed or electronic pages.

Yeah, Dude, I know that - but that's not really what I'm talking about. What I'm talking about is what goes on in the act of reading and writing. Isn't that all "virtual", too? Isn't that all "notional"? I mean, when Josh Gidding is reading Philip Roth, say, there is no physical Philip Roth, and there is, in a sense, no physical Josh Gidding either, but only an act of the imagination - Philip Roth's and Josh Gidding's imagination.

No, Dude - there is a physical Josh Gidding who is reading - otherwise there would be no consciousness, no cognition, no literary experience, no act of apprehension. The noumenal presumes the physical, Dude. Is apart from the physical, but presumes it. Otherwise, nothing. I am enough of a child of science to know that. A child of dreams too, yes ("But it is just a child of air/That lingers in the garden there" - Stevenson), but also a child of science. The notional is not real; future readers do not exist, except as a figment of your imagination.

But the hope of them does exist, Dude - and hope is real. Yes. ("It is possible, possible, possible/It must be possible." -- Stevens.) One exists in real hope of

things that are not real - yet. But that may be real someday. That have the potential to be real, someday. One exists then in a state of "someday".

All very speculative and philosophical, I know. But pregnantly so, I hope. Just as one can hope for love, one can hope for future readers. That is not necessarily delusional at all - it all depends on how one hopes: patiently, faithfully, self-consciously. Ironically, even. Hope in spite of itself. A hope that is critical and self-aware. A hope that almost cancels itself out - almost, but not quite. The way I hoped, over the 11 years after my wife died, to find someone. (The 11 years that are told in The Widower: An Afterlife.) For 11 years, I hoped for love, and eventually found it, when I met my fiancée. Why shouldn't my writing find future readers, too? Future readers to love my writing, to give themselves over to it, in a way that is both physical (a body; a page of printed paper; a screen of digitized symbols) and notional (an imaginary locus of wishes, desires, ambitions, identifications, imaginings). When we love, we love more than just a body - we love an imagined locus. A place of the mind where the imagined goods reside. Imagines facio, ergo sum. I imagine, therefore I am. And not only that: Imagines facio, ergo es. I imagine, therefore you are.

And also, Imagines facis, ergo sum. You imagine, therefore I am. (Not that I have imagined you into being, O future reader. Your existence does not depend on me. Rather, my existence depends on you.) You give me reason to live.

## VI

### The Locus

Because when we love, we are also somewhere else. With the beloved, of course - but somewhere else as well. Even if we are physically with our beloved, we are somewhere else - both here and there. (Wherever there is.) A place of the imagination. A place of shared wishes, dreams, imaginings. A consummation devoutly to be wished. The Locus. The "locus amoris" - the place of love. (Which also translates as "the place of the lover".) The Locus - being in The Locus - is a sort of sublime version of being in "the zone". It is where we alternatively live. We do not choose it any more than we choose our relations, or who to love. It happens to us. The Locus happens. It is where the lovers dwell, as much as in the here and now. In the there and then. The Locus is where my future readers, my lovers and beloveds, reside. As the bard sings:

Green mansions, high upon a hill -  
Green mansions, quiet and still:  
Big wall all around,  
It's where my baby will be found,  
Waiting for that day to come...

(Van Morrison)