

John Hegley offers his Reflections...

On The Name Of The Lord

The last book I read was *Reflections On The Name Of The Rose*, Umberto Eco's commentary on his novel *The Name Of The Rose*. A friend advised me to avoid this little volume because he thought it might be a disappearing-up-the-rectum performance on the part of the author. I did find an element of such convolution, but generally Mr Eco's comments on his own work were illuminating. (Also, as with the novel, there are bits I skipped because I didn't know what he was on about.)

It has been suggested that I might talk about my own work as a comic/poet and, inspired by Mr Umberto, I have decided to reflect upon a specific piece of writing: *In The Name Of The Lord*.

Firstly some words about the form. The acrostic is one of the few structures within which I like to work. I tend not to impose rhyme and metrical patterns upon myself as I prefer to let them find themselves, but I do like a limerick. The acrostic is challenging, the acrostic is fun, it is a puzzle, and it's a good form for live performance because you can get the audience to suggest ideas.

They've come up with a few very good ones: U - 'uman, for instance (which detracted from my own S - scapologist, although I'd like to think I admitted this at the time), and a lot of bad ones.

On now to content. Technically, in the first two lines repetition is at work seeking a comic effect, and also, in a different way, in the third, because by the time you get to this poem, either in my show or the book, spectacles have already had a jolly good mention or two.

A few words about glasses. People do ask me why I give them so much time and space. The frivolous answer is they're a subject close to my face and a more serious one is that I want to paint pictures of everyday things that make them look like icons.

Spectacles lend themselves to this very readily, because they are bound up with our vision - they clarify an otherwise-confusing world, they are our friends. Contact lenses are the false idols.



In The Name Of The Lord

*J*ust like his Dad
*E*ver so just (like his Dad)
*S*pecless (he never wore glasses)
*U*nable to swim
*S*ometimes I wonder if he was praying for the betraying kiss
of Judas so as not to miss out on his Easter egg

*C*ut bread into very thin slices
*H*ippy aeroplane impressionist
*R*eally easy to spot in a crowd on a Good Friday
*I*I wonder if he had a dog
*S*capologist
*T*ook him three days but he did it

The wearer of these pretends that no god/glasses are necessary and that he or she can see clearly without heavenly help. They are eye cons.

It was through my spectacles that I read *The Name Of The Rose*. After a performance at the Arts Festival in Sligo, a man came up to me assisted by a walking stick and asked if I was familiar with the book. He was surprised by my negative response because he had felt sure that my piece about the angst of losing my glasses had been stimulated by a similar episode in the novel.

I asked him what sort of novel it was and he said it was a detective story set in a medieval-monastery and after recommending it to me he made as to leave. I was intrigued that he made no other

comment on the performance and asked him what he did for a living. He cryptically told me that he was not a bus conductor and went.

After reading the book, which had been a lifeline to another world in a time of deep depression, I thought that perhaps he had been a monk in plain clothing. Now back to the poem.

I think most people understand that the 'unable to swim' line is a reference to walking on water, but more people might be unsure of the significance of cutting bread up thinly. Possibly because they are unaware of the relevant bible story (an unfortunate gap in their mythology) and possibly because they are a bit on the dim side. It's hard to tell how many 'don't get it' because those

who don't laugh may understand it and not find it funny.

As a consumer I enjoy that aspect of poetry/comedy where I have to do a bit of work to get a result, and the inclusion of these very elementary puzzles is something to do with giving unto others as I would be given unto. (Conversely I expect to be done unto as I would do.) I would like to create more puzzle poetries.

The 'hippy aeroplane impressionist' line I find too callous in tone and I want something more pleasant. I quite like 'helped people'. U used to stand for untidy - long matted hair, long dirty nails through his hands. This was ditched for the same reasons of nastiness.

'Really easy to spot' etc, is ok. It's unfortunate rather than unpleasant. You see, I don't really want to put horrible things into the world, as it obviously makes it a more horrible place (you bastards). I am surprised at people who find the piece anti-Christian, as it ends up embracing the story of the resurrection.

I had a Catholic upbringing myself and wondered how a largely Catholic audience might respond to the piece. I found out at the Sligo Arts Festival. In both performances the laughter at this point was considerably greater than here in England and I found this most encouraging considering that most members of the audience would have still been 'of the faith'. They were able to laugh at what they held sacred.

I would like to think that the Lord would be able to laugh at this pretty innocuous and affectionate bit of mockery himself, if he's still alive. Funnily enough, a key debate in *The Name Of The Rose* is whether or not there is biblical evidence that the Lord ever laughed, and in the novel the book that so many die in quest of is a secret, forbidden, poetic, revelatory and terrifyingly advanced treatise on...and if you haven't read the text and want to, maybe you should leave this last word until you have... I'll jumble up the letters so you don't catch it inadvertently... the word is YMODEC.