Due Process (With A Pinch Of Sugar)

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Apropos Jimmy Inkling, a novel by Brian Marley
Brighton, England: grandiota, 2019

Who doesn't love a courtroom drama? The intense, concentrated effort to establish guilt or innocence, to get to the bottom, to subdue that wily animal known as the truth in a cage of eloquence and incontrovertible evidence. Each case is a charged theatrical performance of high emotion, tearful confession, skillful elocution, and brilliant (or fumbling, as the case may be) legal strategy.

One of my favorites is *Witness for the Prosecution* with Charles Laughton, Marlene Dietrich, Tyrone Power and Elsa Lanchester. This drama is chock-a-bloc with surprising twists and turns and bitter ironies. Human nature is put on display and shown to be capable of pulling off spectacular deceits. Another great cinematic trial is 1982's *The Verdict*, in which seasoned, hard-drinking Paul Newman – down on his luck after being fired from his previous prestigious Boston legal firm for jury tampering – encounters one seemingly unsurpassable obstacle after another and yet hazards a huge risk in taking a highly squishy case to trial. The quest for the truth here is full of throttling difficulties, sexy

entanglements and ponderous disincentives. It's inspiriting to watch Newman's case-hardened, whiskey-guzzling attorney persist against the odds and find redemption along the way.

Apropos Jimmy Inkling is a very different kind of courtroom drama. For starters, the courtroom isn't a courtroom: it's a cafeteria. A man - identified simply as a customer - is buttonholed by a mysterious identity who begins questioning him about a nefarious character named Jimmy Inkling. The customer, patient but confused - and all the more flummoxed upon being told he is a "witness" in a trial - tells his perplexing but resolute interlocuter that "I came in here on the not unreasonable assumption that this was a café. That's what's written on the sign outside, and there's nothing but café paraphernalia in here. The predominant smell is of coffee, not periwigs and dusty legal tomes. Look, on every table there's a laminated menu and a defanged rose in a glass flute. Over there, chalked on a blackboard, a list of lunchtime specials. Paper napkins in a stainless steel dispenser. Sugar in a bowl. This is definitely a café, not a courtroom."

But wait, there's more: turns out the customer is no ordinary customer but a decade ago was a contestant on a TV quiz show called *Mastermind* and whose special area of expertise was "The History of Inkling Inc., 1967-2007." The customer's presence here is not, after all, completely arbitrary. The vigorous, elfish prose animating this dialogue implies eddies and swirls of impending abnormality. A few references sprinkled in to places like Haydock Park and a West End drinking club suggest that we are in England. Information about a vasectomy to be performed – as a favor - on the interrogator's daughter's "unsuitable boyfriend" suggest more than an inkling of unsettling behavior.

Clearly, this is no formal, ordinary legal proceeding. Nor is this an ordinary novel. It proceeds by dialogue alone, à la the Socratic dialogues, but with less polemic and more panache and improbability. A robust blend, shall we say, of Guy Ritchie and Monty Python.

The accused – although no formal charges have been stated – is a larger than life criminal kingpin named Jimmy Inkling, who isn't present at the proceedings. Everything we learn about the man is the stuff of legend. "In the rotten heart of the criminal underworld, hidden from the prying eyes and ears of various law enforcement

agencies, Jimmy Inkling is king. The man to go to if you want something done. The fixer's fixer."

The man I picture (this being England where – according to the testimony of the gravedigger in Hamlet, no one will know if Hamlet is crazy because "everyone there is as crazy as he is"), is Ian McShane as the criminal kingpin Teddy Bass in *Sexy Beast*, specifically the demented, murderous, psychopathic fiend McShane brought fantastically to life in expertly tailored clothes and the twisted erotic pleasures in which he indulged, particularly when he was engaged in his favored pursuits of bullying and manipulation.

There are also inklings of Donald Trump, as Jimmy Inkling, among his other dubious gifts as a criminal kingpin, was once the star guest of a reality TV show.

The trial that runs the full length of this novel is an ongoing portrait of Inkling (he comes to us in inklings, but also signs, tip offs, expositions, intimations and dead giveaways) and as the information accrues Inkling's profile becomes increasingly vivid and maddeningly ambiguous. Which is all the more curious – and haunting and weird – because he's absent from his own trial. He may not even be alive, though no one knows for sure.

Marley's novel isn't about establishing a state of guilt or innocence or solve a murder mystery as to examine and showcase (with abundant humor) our will to verify a single, absolute, unequivocal truth. This is an impossible ideal to fulfill, one which requires - as Nietzsche describes in *Beyond Good and Evil* – "some extravagant and adventurous courage, a metaphysician's ambition to hold a hopeless position," and whose need for resolution "may participate and ultimately prefer even a handful of 'certainty' to a whole carload of beautiful possibilities; there may actually be puritanical fanatics of conscience who prefer even a certain nothing to an uncertain something to lie down on – and die."

This isn't to suggest that we jettison our moral faculties. We need them. Morality doesn't exist in nature. We need ethical values to live comfortably together in our absurdly large and hopelessly complex societies. But to capture a single unconditional perspective – a positivistic teleology intended to fit everyone into the same procrustean bed – is (according to Nietzsche) to throw "pale, cold gray concept nets" "over the motley whirl of the senses."

Or, as Marley states in his novel, "we don't always know

what we don't know."

That's really what's on trial here: consciousness, perception, noesis, epistemology, prepossession, methodological analysis. The will to power, the seduction of words.

The language in this book mercifully avoids any form or shade of legalese. The language is lively, colorful, ebullient and fun. It's full of wit and imagination, myriad asides and an encyclopedic revelry in arcana, the kind James Joyce reveled in in *Ulysses*. Did you know, for example, that C.S. Lewis was a tegestologist? A tegestologist is someone who collects beer mats or coasters. Or that the hardest substance in the world is wurtzite boron nitride? Or that "Liver fluke, worms, footrot, trypanosomiasis, east coast fever, brucellosis and foot and mouth disease are significant problems for the South Sudanese cattle herder"? This is all pertinent to the trial, Jimmy Inkling being a man of considerable means, proportions, fables, components, colors, circulars, exhilarations, exhumations and probes.

And I reiterate: he isn't there. He's wired up to a life support machine at another location.

The trial is conducted by gods who have both god names and (for the sake of convenience) human names. The god whose name is spelled with three squiggles (~~~) (they're actually tildes, as in waltzing tilde)) is also called, appropriately, Mr. Squiggle. He does the bulk of the questioning and appears to be the chief prosecutor.

These gods aren't quite what you might imagine, assuming the form of clouds and swans to rape women or riding chariots pulled by fire-breathing steeds. Their powers aren't quite that extensive or colorful, but they are unique. The third witness, Mr Taylor, whose god name is (roughly) Δ≈ΔΔΔº≤ (I don't have all the symbols required) has, as a key task in his armory of powers, the ability "to slow the Rate of Depletion in Inkjet Printer Cartridges." I might just burn some incense and try invoking this god with some prayer because my inkjet cartridges are always running dry, a phenomenon I find quite suspicious because I rarely use my printer anymore. I think the ink just dries up. And, as anyone knows, these cartridges aren't cheap.

"Also," Δ≈ΔΔΔº≤ continues, "Scansion as applied to Wills, Government Documents, Contractual Small Print for Electrical Appliances, Academese and, hardest of all to deal with, the baroque

gibberish known as Artspeak (i.e. curatorial and critical writings on the visual arts)." "To my considerable relief,"

> …poetry and the poets themselves were hived off to another god. Hers is a thankless task, poets being notoriously difficult to deal with, maddened by words, perpetually drunk on them, and given to extravagant and unpredictable behaviour. Like toddlers, really, but with adult vices. Endangerment of self and others is often an issue. Byron set the template for such things. But that's not the worst of it. Their verse: ugh. Almost without exception: ugh. Such mangling and mauling of language. The words weep as poets bend them grotesquely out of shape and crack their tiny bones.

It should also be stated emphatically, unequivocally and a shade nihilistically, that the proceedings of this trial are futile. A fourth witness, Paul Honeyman, is presented as Jimmy Inkling's "unofficial biographer." Remarking on the veridicality of informants, he avers that it's impossible to know for sure. He broadens the case philosophically and submits his judgment regarding the ontological nature of truth itself as an ultimately futile and chimerical pursuit.

> But the simple fact is that truth is elusive and often, despite our best efforts, nowhere to be found. That's why most biographies – even those written by a number of my esteemed colleagues, some of whom are also dear friends – are fact-like semi-fictions that try, with bulldozer rhetoric and masses of superfluous detail (i.e. padding) to convince the reader that they portray their subject accurately in the context of our shared reality. As for autobiographies, they are, almost without exception, fiction masquerading as fact. Fun reads, nothing more. Everyone in the publishing industry knows this. Most readers do, too.

Among the arsenal of gems in Jimmy Inkling's criminal mastermind toolkit is a labyrinth of mirrors referred to as his "funfair labyrinth at Canary Wharf." This is a passage somewhat redolent of Raymond Roussel's strange inventions in *Locus Solus*. "It occupies,"

Taylor describes, “an entire floor of his suite of offices. Or perhaps two floors, it’s hard to tell.”

> Accessible only by a private lift from his inner sanctum, it’s a thing of snakelike undulations, forking paths, dead ends and sudden drops. The lights go out briefly every few minutes and in pitch darkness the walls glide into new, unpredictable configurations. There are no doors other than at the beginning and end, though the end may also be the beginning and vice versa. The walls are lined throughout with distorting mirrors salvaged from funfairs and theme parks the length and breadth of Europe. And not just the walls; there are mirrors on the ceiling and the backs of the doors. Even the floor is mirrored. Once the door has closed behind you there’s no way of telling what’s where or even which way is up. Take two steps and you’ll be lost forever, though your chances of living to see another day are small. Even to peer into the labyrinth from the doorway is a dangerously disorientating experience.

I had an experience not unlike this earlier today, at the Thornton Place underground parking lot. I thought I’d never get out.

Inkling uses his demonic labyrinth “to punish members of staff who have, in his menacingly bland phrase, ‘failed to give satisfaction’; and anyone else who incurs his wrath, deliberately or otherwise.”

When Inkling judges “that the punishment is equal or equivalent to the offence…the victims are either led or stretchered to safety by the Retrieval Squad – blind employees, hired in compliance with the Equality Act 2010 – and placed in the recovery room,

> …a womblike space of replicated orbicular muscle, loose, soft and blood warm, with filtered light and comforting womblike sounds, from which some of the labyrinth’s victims flatly refuse to leave and have to be dragged out by a burly obstetrician using adult-size forceps. Should a forceps delivery by unachievable, there’s a caesarean zip.

As these two passages suggest, what we have here isn't so much a courtroom drama, or (in the immortal words of Strother Martin as the Captain in *Cool Hand Luke*), "what we have here is a failure to communicate." Legal niceties aren't as apropos here as the wriggle of words in the semantic arena, which is far more fun than the stern, wood-paneled confines of a courtroom. A cafeteria is more apropos to the phenomena convened in this book, Inkling aside, and a brilliant subpoena for those pariahs of the modern world called readers.