The World According to T. S.

"His private randiness became a popular story."—WAG

Conceived in a hospital room between a man with lidless, sightless open eyes and one from whom certain internal organs had been removed, T. S. Garp came close to having no father at all. Technical Sergeant Garp, himself an orphan, had been reduced to idiocy by a war wound when nurse Jenny Fields, who had long wanted a child without the encum­berment of a husband, found him in her care. It would be an "almost virgin birth" (WAG, 12). The elder Garp had been left with little more than his name when, having taken his predecessor Fowler's coveted place as ball turret gunner in a B-17, his skull was pierced by antiaircraft flak somewhere near Rouen. He hardly owned even that, for he con­stantly repeated Garp more in imitation of the first voice he heard after the shrapnel lobotomy than from any memory of who he was. And he began to lose that, too, in his final decline: the G disappearing, and later the p, so that when Jenny Fields entered his room and drew around them the "white shroud" of the bed curtain, undressed, pulled back the sheet, and mounted him, the penultimate r vanished, leaving only a primal vowel. In the little time that remained of his existence, he de­generated into a sexless pre-infancy, his dreams striking Jenny "as the dreams a fish might have" (WAG, 21–22).

The hero of John Irving's The World According to Garp, young T. S., will not feel the need to ask his mother for more information about his father than the fact that he had been a soldier, the only detail he
possessed of his prehistory, until the moment of his sexual initiation, with Cushie at the cannons that overlook the Steering River. The cannon balls were greenish and rusted, "as if they belonged to a vessel long undersea"; the cannons themselves bore inscriptions that testified to the popularity of the spot among the students of the academy where T. S. Garp spent his childhood: "M. Overton, '59, shot his wad here" (WAG, 70). That particular graffito may have been written in remembrance of more than one loss, for in this novel inhabited by texts as well as characters—the protagonist is a writer, and three of his stories are embedded in the narrative—and in which art has, bizarrely, predicted life (Garp’s new novel is an astounding popular success, thanks to the opportunism of his editor John Wolf, who expresses the hope that the renown of The World According to Bensenhaver will be "big enough to make people go back and read the first two novels" [WAG, 329]), ghosts from other regions of Irving’s world sometimes intrude. Readers of Garp who do go back and read Setting Free the Bears (1968), The Water-Method Man (1972), and The 158-Pound Marriage (1974) will recognize Vienna and the bears. They might also recognize in “M. Overton, '59 . . . " a hidden memorial to a certain M. Overturf, who perished while sighting down the cannon barrel of a tank that had long been underwater:

It took him a long time to swim out to the exact place in the Danube where he could see the underwater tank. Treading water . . . he saw the tank’s barrel swing up to where he thought he could almost touch it . . . Then the tank’s top hatch opened, or seemed to, or at least fluttered in the water. Who is down the tank’s hatch? Wouldn’t somebody be interested to know they were there? (WMM, 255)

T. S., seated with Cushie on the slope of the riverbank with the cannons behind them, looked up into the mouth of the nearest one “and was startled to see the head of a smashed doll, one glassy eye on him” (WAG, 70). And it is in the mouth of another that Cushie has to point out to him what it is he forgot to bring: “The cannon was crammed with old condoms” left there by the boys of Steering Academy. Much later in the novel, Garp will remember this as “his first condom shock,” the beginning of a long haunting; all his life he would be “stalked by condoms,” found in the most unlikely places: “in the back seat of the taxi, like the removed eye of a large fish”; once on the stick-shift of his Volvo, left there by someone who had borrowed the car overnight (WAG, 397–98). It is because of something he remembers about his own eyes that T. S. Garp, in the bushes with Cushie between the cannons and the river, is reminded of his father, the airborne gunner. Across the river, choked and dying from silt, two golfers are perilously making
their way through the muck. One is pursuing his ball; the other, more cautious, aware of the danger, turns out to be Cushie's father, Fat Stew. The mud flats around the floundering golfer make an ominous sound, "as if beneath the mud some mouth was gasping to suck him in" (WAG, 73). Cushie decides to handle Garp's erection in a nonreproductive way, saying she doesn't want "a Jap baby"—T. S. is puzzled, but the word does jolt his memory. He watches the golfers retreat from the ball-swallowing river; it "may have been then that Garp remembered Fat Stew saying he had Jap eyes, and a view of his personal history clicked into perspective." When T. S. was five, the Steering family dog bit off most of his ear; examining him, Fat Stew looked less at his ear than his eyes, for, like everyone else in the Steering academic community, he wondered who Garp's father could have been. Peering into these apparent indices of paternity, he pronounced Garp Japanese (WAG, 45). It was "at this moment," recalling the childhood incident, that "Garp resolved to ask his mother" who indeed his father had been (WAG, 73).

Apart from his name, eyes are for T. S. Garp the only remaining trace of his father. Though subject to misinterpretation (the eyes of a soldier—but for which side? Was Garp's father, like the Nazi buried in the tank in the Danube, one of the enemy?), they will continue to bring together, in one instance disastrously, father and son. The prophylactics that Garp says haunt him become at a certain critical moment eyes: the rubber on the stick-shift and the one in the back seat that resembled the extracted eye of a fish reenact the most important scene in the novel, the car accident in which Garp's son's eye is removed by that same pointed shaft. The train of events that leads to that transmission of blindness from father to son—prefigured in the broken doll's single staring eye in the cannon's mouth, as well as in the blinded patient who "had no eyelids, so it appeared he was always watching" (WAG, 21) and whose blasphemous invocation of Father and Son accompanied Garp's conception—begins the moment the novel's scene setting ends and its action begins.

T. S. Garp, now the author of two novels (which clearly allude to two of the three novels John Irving published before Garp: Procrastination, recounted on pages 137–38 of Garp, is a variation on the Viennese zoo story of Setting Free the Bears; Second Wind of the Cuckold finds its title in the last sentence of The 158-Pound Marriage ["If cuckolds catch a second wind, I am eagerly waiting for mine" (158PM, 255)]), is in reality in a writing slump. For more than a year since the publication of his second novel, he has been unable to write. "In fact, it
seemed to Garp now that he was too full of his own lucky life (with Helen and their children)” (WAG, 170). His own experience was too ordinary to write about, and his powers of imagination were too weak for him to write about anything else. Helen seemed the perfect wife; they had grown up together at Steering Academy, where T. S.’s mother was the resident nurse and Helen’s father coached the wrestling team. If Cushie Steering introduced T. S. to sex, it was Helen who first fired his writer’s imagination. Garp had been slaying frogs, spearing them with the other javelin throwers in the upper reaches of the Steering River, when he saw Helen reading a book on the top row of the stadium. “‘Killed enough little animals for today?’ Helen asked him. ‘Hunting something else?’” (WAG, 62). They talked about the idea of becoming a writer; Helen denied an interest, but agreed with Garp’s prediction that she might marry one some day. Her gray sweat suit hid her figure: “Garp wrote later that he first discovered he had an imagination while trying to imagine Helen Holm’s body. . . . It was that afternoon in the empty stadium, with frog gore on the point of his javelin, when Helen Holm provoked his imagination and T. S. Garp decided he was going to be a writer” (WAG, 63). The first story he would bring her to read would mix fatherhood, lovers, and graves (WAG, 65).

They now have two sons; Helen has a tenured position in English, and Garp does the cooking. T. S. is reading the telephone directory, looking for names; it was there that he found the names of the characters in his books, and when his writing was not going well, “he read the phone book for more names; he revised the names of his characters over and over again” (WAG, 173). His older son, returning from school, breaks in on his meditation to ask if he can spend the night at Ralph’s. Garp’s paternal instincts, or anxiety, make him want to refuse. T. S. has little faith in the competence of “Mrs. Ralph,” whose real name “he could never remember.” He lets Duncan go, but later that evening he feels compelled to go check on his son. Wearing only his running shorts, he hurries out of the house after midnight, hoping to rescue him “from the randy Mrs. Ralph” (WAG, 200). Though Duncan, asleep with Ralph in the faint glow of the living room TV, is in no real danger, Garp is. He explains his mission to Ralph’s mother, who, drunk and half undressed, asks him upstairs to get rid of a young man who will not be given a name until later in the novel (he will turn up again after the automobile accident: “‘If I’d known you were the author of those books,’ the kid said, ‘I would never have been so disrespectful.’ His name was Randy and he had become an ardent Garp fan” [WAG, 275]). Garp throws him out but perilously delays his own departure in an attempt to bolster the woman’s confidence, an effort that backfires
when he clumsily addresses her as “Mrs. Ralph” (WAG, 206). Helen’s suspicions are powerfully aroused, and nothing T. S. can say when he returns home does anything to allay them. Duncan recites the plot of a long TV movie he had watched with Ralph; “Garp suspected that it was actually two movies, and Duncan had fallen asleep before one was over and woken up after the other one had begun. He tried to imagine where and when Mrs. Ralph’s activities fitted into Duncan’s movies” (WAG, 214).

How the name of Ralph, which in this instance stands for a name that is always somehow forgotten, fits into two stories that, though separate, are similar enough that one could fall asleep in one and wake up in the next and still feel at home, is a puzzle the reader who, like Randy, has read the author’s previous works (“The boy turned out to have read Garp’s novels while he was in jail” [WAG, 275]) might want to think about. The two stories are *Garp* and the one novel of Irving’s earlier three to which Garp does not allude, *The Water-Method Man*. Mrs. Ralph, who will not be given her real name of Florence Cochran Bowlsby until the epilogue in the last chapter (WAG, 421), plays in Garp’s life a role that can best be described as catastrophic, particularly in the sense Roland Barthes gives it when he writes of the outsider in Pasolini’s *Teorema* that he “does not speak, but . . . inscribes something within each of those who desire him—he performs what the mathematicians call a catastrophe (the disturbance of one system by another): it is true that this mute figure is an angel.”

A certain Ralph Packer plays as central a part in *The Water-Method Man* as Mrs. Ralph does in *Garp*, and for a writer whose writer hero considers and revises his characters’ names as carefully as does T. S. Garp, finding in them at times a stimulus to creation, that John Irving should have assigned the same name to Packer and Bowlsby, especially when for the latter he had to stretch it, may make the effort to see just how these two namesakes are and are not alike worthwhile. Mrs. Ralph wreaks havoc in Garp’s life, for the consequences of Helen’s mistrust will be enormous. But like the angel of which Barthes speaks, she does give T. S. what he desires, “inscribing” in him the experience that he had complained his creative imagination lacked. What results from his delay in coming home, even though his seduction never occurs (WAG, 421), will become the material out of which a third novel will be written (*The World According to Bensenhaver*), one whose extraordinary fortune strangely foretells that of the book in which it appears and whose name it evokes.

The writer-hero in *The Water-Method Man*, Fred “Bogus” Trumper, is not as happily married as T. S. Garp. Whereas Garp remains, at the end of his story, with Helen, Trumper leaves his wife and son in Iowa
City to cross the Atlantic in search of a certain Merrill Overturf, who it turns out was already dead, then returns to New York, where Ralph Packer takes him in and gives him the means to put his life back together. Packer's intervention is as helpful as Mrs. Ralph's is calamitous, but both intervene in the manner of Barthes's angel, coming out of the blue to rescue Irving's protagonists from discontent, marital or creative, giving them the chance to see their world as it really is.

Ralph Packer first appears to Trumper as an apparition from his doctoral thesis. Bogus is writing a translation of an Old Low Norse epic for a degree in comparative literature, at times inserting fictional material of his own when the original text is obscure, additions that no one will be in a position to detect. He is also working in the university's language lab, editing tapes for classes in German.

I felt myself confronted by Akhtelt's father, Old Thak. . . . "You Trumper?" he said. A wise man, I thought, would confess it all now. Admit the translation was a fraud. Hope Old Thak goes back to the grave. (WMM, 39)

The ghost of the father will fade, but another figure, this time from the Apocryphal story whose outlines were visible in Fowles, will take its place, that of the angel whose name was similarly anagrammatized in The French Lieutenant's Woman, and who knew what to do with the entrails of fish. Ralph has come to offer to train Trumper in the art of cinematic soundtracking: matching tape to film, one kind of reel to another, following the cineast's creative trail but adding something of one's own ingenuity—supplying music, offstage noise, narration, "jamming voices, jumbling time" (WMM, 39). It is not necessarily remunerative: "What do you pay?" I asked, and he whomped his arctic mitten down on my tape stack, sending one reel flopping like a stunned fish" (WMM, 40). This power to transform reels into fish ought not to be taken lightly, given the strong undercurrent of their presence in the novel. Trumper is surrounded by them when he is in bed with Tulpen, the woman to whom Ralph introduces him when he starts working with the filmmaker in New York and with whom he continues to live, except for one brief episode, through the end of the novel. "Her bed is framed on three sides by bookcases, waist-high; we are walled in by words. And all along the tops of these cases, in a watery U around us, these gurgling aquariums sit." They are kept lit all night with neon, so that "the aura round the bed takes getting used to. In a half-sleep you actually feel underwater" (WMM, 62).

Though the title of the novel does not refer to this kind of water (but rather to the treatment for a urinary infection that his father, a urologist, could not cure), Trumper's imagination inhabits that element. "Vari-
ations on a water theme” was how he described his two most frequent nightmares. One was about Merrill Overturf trying to open the top hatch of the tank in the Danube, the watery tomb of the unknown enemy soldier; “it always took him too long.” The other was always about his son, Colm, “in some imagined disaster which always involved deep water, the sea or cold mudflats”—of which Garp's Steering River will provide a special, and privileged, example. “As always, it was too terrible to allow him to consciously remember the details” (WMM, 368). Such in fact is the feeling that reading Irving's corpus can induce: as if there were behind all its fish, eyes, fathers, and graves some dream too terrible or too deeply rooted to emerge completely from the unconscious. That that dream has appeared before, with the same peculiar constellation of images, in the Book of Tobit, can be demonstrated; to do so is to run the risk of making explicit that about which the author is silent—though not the text: names, which according to Trumper “are facts” (WMM, 16), can speak in Irving's fiction as they did in Fowles's; and they are, strangely, the same names. Garp's problematic initials remain resolutely devoid of meaning until he becomes “Tillie Sarah” (WAG, 363) on the occasion of his mother's funeral (assuming a female identity in order to infiltrate a memorial service open only to women), so that his name, androgynous in its two versions, is doubly evocative: the heroine, in his apocryphal middle name; the hero, hidden in the gap between T and S. Garp runs alongside Mrs. Ralph in her car when they first meet (WAG, 182: before the events of the night at her house, Garp had caught up with her car as was his custom with all speedsters on his neighborhood's streets), and Trumper meticulously follows the path of Ralph's film reels with his sound-tracking, while Tobias found a traveling companion for his journey in a Raphael. “Like any name, there were vague reasons,” as Trumper says (WMM, 16); among them, it appears, is an anagram that underlines the similarity of Raphael, Ralph, and Mrs. Ralph: fellow-travelers for Tobias, Trumper, and T. S. Garp, intervening in their lives when they lack direction, providing guidance, instruction, or a spur to action. The guidance they provide is not limited to the protagonists: the angel’s advice to seize the fish that leaps out at you and examine it closely, breaking it apart if necessary to find what applications it may have, is itself applicable to the reading of a text like Irving's in which fish tend to leap out at the reader (like the hero himself, who, trying to follow Merrill Overturf's skiing instruction, picks up too much speed and is launched up and over a parking lot, descending toward the gaping open trunk of a Mercedes, “a great whale's maw waiting for the flying fish to fall” [WMM, 99]). It is one way to describe the analysis pursued here; it
is also a way to understand the detail of the flopping fish in the scene where Ralph Packer first appears: the film that Trumper will match his tape to will be the story of his own life, Packer's documentary of a failed marriage (the marriage Trumper left behind in Iowa City), and of a life that lacks direction, plan, or plot (WMM, 93). The plot of the novel turns upon Trumper's beginning to find some direction for his life from the experience of sound-tracking the film. The reel that Ralph's mitten figuratively transforms into a fish becomes under the author's hand the tape that Trumper will add to the film, if the simile holds.

It does, if one pays serious attention to the use Irving makes of fish imagery, particularly to the way he weaves it into Trumper's decision to accept Ralph's proposal that the next film they make together (after several on which Trumper begins his apprenticeship) be about Trumper's own life. Irving's hero is in bed with Tulpen, surrounded by the watery U of her aquariums. His eye is caught by

a tiny, translucent, turquoise eel, its inner organs visible and somehow functioning. One organ looked like a little plumber's helper; it plunged down, sucked up, and the eel's mouth opened to belch a tiny bubble. . . . A form of speech? Trumper wondered. Was a bubble a word or a whole sentence? Perhaps a paragraph! (WMM, 90)

Trumper sees the talking eel as a poet speaking soundless words, "reading beautifully to his world." What was he saying? To crack the code, one would have to figure out how the eel's bits of air fit together, whether as words or sentences or something larger. This process of analyzing and translating a purely visual discourse into sounds and spoken words is not unlike what Trumper does in the film lab with the reels of film to which he will add a reel of sound. It is in both cases a question of making the implicit explicit, of supplying words for what is not yet said.

Without doing any more than looking, Trumper is able to contemplate what Tobias had to catch and cut open his fish to find, its internal organs. The fish's heart, liver, and gall spoke to Tobias's own situation, to his relationship with both his father and his future wife; Trumper does not yet know what the fish can say to him, but he is aware of the possibility of a message. For the reader to hear it as well, he should look at the transparent fish as intently as Irving's hero does. The peculiar description of the inner organ of speech might trigger a recollection, for someone who like Mrs. Ralph's randy lover has read all his novels, of a passage in The The 158-Pound Marriage (known to Randy as Second Wind of the Cuckold) that brings together a plumber's helper, fish, fish innards, and obscured vision, all elements (except for the plunger) of the Tobias story:
The World According to T. S.

I have tried to visualize them as young lovers, and, of course, Edith has told me a lot about their romance, but Winter's car eludes me. A 1954 Zorn-Witwer? Edith said the gearshift slid in and out of the dashboard like a plumber's helper. I've never heard of such a thing. (158PM, 136-37)

What happens in cars (and with gearshifts) is of considerable importance in Irving's world, as we will see in Garp; here, the couple are driving one through Greece. From their hotel room Edith could lie in bed in the early morning and listen to the sounds of the fish market below. On the same page where the gearshift is described in the same terms as the communicative inner organ of Trumper's eel, Edith hears without seeing the hacking and slitting of fish knives, and notes that the "suction sound of removing the innards seemed magnified" (158PM, 137). It might also seem magnified for the reader, who has just seen the plumber's helper of the Zorn-Witwer. Edith descends, in her imagination, for a closer look; on the next page the narrator reproduces her first short story: The fishmongers had packed up and gone before her protagonist came down from the hotel room, but the cobblestones were still "wet with fish-blood and slime, phosphorescent with scales, flecked blue with intestines." It ought to be hosed down, someone says, before potential guests of the hotel arrive and suppose that these are the remains of a suicide, or perhaps the residue of "the ritual slaying of a wronged lover caught and ripping apart at the scene of this indiscretion" (158PM, 138). This instance of mistaking fish for lust finds its counterpart in the scene in The Water-Method Man that we have just left: Trumper loses track of the transparent fish and gets out of bed for a closer look into the tank. He is also listening, somewhat distractedly, to Tulpen, and can see her through the aquarium.

A fish darted down her cleavage, algae moved in her lap... Looking at him staring through a fish tank, she snatched the sheet around herself angrily. "Stop looking at my crotch when I'm trying to talk to you!"... He was genuinely surprised; he'd just been looking for the eel. (WMM, 93)

Edith's short story sets up its own counterpart to the hotel guests' mistake: her narrator-protagonist contrasts the wronged lover's imagined "indiscretion" to her own desire for privacy in the story's next sentence, "I was discreet myself and made him drive me into the country." But once on the road, in what one easily imagines to be the same Zorn-Witwer, her lack of modesty gets her in trouble. With the sun glaring down through the "old-fashioned, unslanted, glass windshield, which magnified everything a little" (if one is keeping track of how elements in the framing story [the narrator's recollection of what Edith
told him about her romance with Severin Winter, itself located in the account of a car trip with Severin, Edith, and the narrator's own wife] get translated into Edith's short story—the fish market, the Zorn-Witwer—then one will be aware of the windshield's having something to do with the evisceration of fish, whose "suction sound" underwent a similar magnification), she unbuttoned her blouse and rolled it up in a knot under her small, firm breasts. She and her lover had to slow down for a large truck full of watermelons, in the back of which a teenage boy sat, now enjoying the view (magnified, it seems, by the windshield). When they pulled out to pass, he lifted one of the melons over his head in a threatening gesture, so that for thirty-four kilometers they were stuck behind the truck and the wildly grinning Greek. Just before a widening of the road to four lanes would have allowed them to pass,

the boy fell moaning on his back on the watermelon pile and lay writhing among the green globes until he ejaculated into the air. His stuff struck our rigid windshield like bird-dribble, a thick whap! against the glass on the passenger side. (158PM, 140)

Unlike the wetness on the cobblestones where the fish market had been, this residue is indeed the result of lust. Edith's story not only transposes elements of its own beginning into the principal scene of its plot but it hints at another, earlier origin: the biblical story of how a father's eyes were obscured by a white film of bird-dribble. That hint is not fully realized until one returns to the outer frame of the story, the other trip in the car, the one during which the narrator of the novel remembers Edith and Severin's trip through Greece. He moves to the front seat, next to Severin, who starts to talk to him about a recurring nightmare. In the dream, which "was not entirely fiction," Severin is stuck behind the watermelon truck and prevented from passing by the masturbating boy, who is befouling the windshield as he did before. When the dreamer decides to pull out anyway in spite of the threat

the watermelons the boy held over the passing car would suddenly become Severin's children, and—too late to meekly fall back in the lane behind the truck—Severin Winter would see his children hurled down on him and splattered against the windshield. (158PM, 143)

It is a father's nightmare, and fathers' worried dreams recur in Irving—in Trumper's, one recalls, his son is always in some deep-water disaster whose details he can never quite remember.

Edith's story, and Irving's use of it in the context of Severin's recurring dream, offer an intriguing variation on Tobit's bizarre connection between bird droppings and a father's blindness. It is almost as if
Irving’s text were an attempt to puzzle out the meaning of that odd detail, and its relation to the other elements of the Tobias story—fish, inner organs, corpses, finding a wife. The white bird-dribble in Edith’s story unites father and son, for when their car does manage to get around the truck, she discovers that the driver, “an old man with the same shocking face as the boy’s,” is masturbating as well,

grinning obscenely at me, twisting in the driver’s seat, trying to raise his lap to window level to show me his!

“Like father, like son,” I said. (158PM, 140)

This short story, Edith’s first literary work, links the damp residue of disemboweled fish to the droppings of birds, both associated with uncontrollable desire. The combination of fish with fowl will continue to characterize her work, in the narrator’s eyes. Severin will later lead him upstairs to peer through the keyhole at Edith writing. She seemed poised above the typewriter “with the perfect concentration of a seagull suspended over water—over its food, its whole life source” (158PM, 246)—as if the novelist’s meat were fish. For the novelist Irving, this seems to be true, with the added nuance that the fish on which he feeds is in some measure himself. They return to the kitchen, where “a long, thin knife spangled with fish scales” had shone in the sunlight (until, seeing the narrator staring at it, Severin had picked it up and plunged it into the dishwater [158PM, 244–45]), and where Severin tells him that she has just sold her first novel. “He might as well have slapped me with the cutting board, stunned me like a fish and slit me open.”

The fish Trumper had been looking at has disappeared. What Tulpen is trying to tell him, while his attention is diverted by his search for that transparent talking eel, lost somewhere in the liquid U of the aquariums that frame her bed, is not only that Ralph Packer would like to make a film about Trumper’s failed marriage and present life, and not only that she thinks it would be a good idea, but that she is willing to give him the opportunity to be a father again, to have a child that could take the place of the son he lost when he left his wife in Iowa City. Three events happen at the same time: the discovery and loss of the transparent fish (which will in fact never return to view, having been eaten by some other fish in the tank), the decision to work with Ralph on the sound track of the film about himself (for he will agree, reluctantly, to do it), and the offer of a new fatherhood. Trumper is not so sure about the last one. It presupposes, of course, a commitment to Tulpen he has not yet made; but paternity brings other problems as well, of which perhaps the most significant is that to become a father is to have to stare death in the face.
Children [give] you a sudden sense of your own mortality. . . . I don’t think it [is] just responsibility; it’s just that children give you a sense of time. It was as if I’d never realized how time moved before. (WMM, 157)

The way Trumper’s son makes him look at death, almost as if he had to teach him what it was, brings again into focus the association of birds with fish, particularly in the development this combination, which will expand to include fatherhood and mortality, is to undergo in the novel. “That November I held Colm’s hand and watched the lowering V in the sky,” a tired flock of wild ducks flying over Iowa City. They descended toward the duck pond, all but one; he hesitated, then dropped and struck the pond like a stone. His head was beneath the water, only his tail protruded.

“Is he dead?” Colm asked.
“No, no,” I said. “He’s just fishing. . . .”
Colm was unconvinced. “He’s dead. . . . Some ducks just die. . . . Animals and birds and people,” he said. “They just get old and die.” And he looked at me with worldly sympathy, obviously feeling sad to be stunning his father with such a hard truth. (WMM, 159–61)

The V of the ducks’ formation, which reminds us of the U of Tulpen’s aquariums, through whose transparency Trumper was wrongly accused of staring at her crotch, returns a few pages later in the view between Lydia Kindle’s legs, a “brief V of flowers, baby-pink and baby-blue” (WMM, 178). Trumper, upset by his inability to confront his father with a demand for funds, had spent the night in the graduate library, where he considered a suicidal leap into the parking lot. Young Miss Kindle, a student, rescued him the next morning, inviting him into her “sea-green and arklike Edsel” for a drive in the country. It begins well but ends with Lydia locking him out of the car and driving away in acute embarrassment. Nude, he chases after her unshod across rough ground, thinking to cut her off by racing across a frozen pond, whose surface gives way and causes him to crash into an underwater fence. He doesn’t catch up with her car, but he does almost run into a pair of hunters in a pickup, one of whom is busy cleaning a duck on the hood. They take him into town and offer the consolation of one of their half-plucked, eviscerated birds. Ralph Packer, who was providentially bicycling by, brings him the rest of the way home, where an uncomprehending wife awaits. Colm gets momentary possession of the duck.

Trumper’s weak attempt to describe his outing as a hunting expedition is unconvincing, despite the feathers on his mustache (from the duck-cleaning in the truck) and the bird in his hand. Like the white mess on Severin and Edith’s windshield, it is really the result of lust.
The duck is passed, momentarily, from father to son ("Colm toddled down the hall and sat next to this oddly feathered surprise. *May he remember me as the father with fancy presents of all kinds* [WMM, 190].), and later from son to father: this wild duck episode is the event that impels Trumper to flee. He pays his mounting debts with a check from his father—his wife had written to demand what Trumper was afraid to request—and the last account he settles is the paternal one: he searches for the decaying duck in the trash, wraps it in plastic, places it in a sturdy box, and mails it to his father, with the accompanying note "Dear Sir: Please count your change" (WMM, 211).

This exchange presages others, toward the other end of Trumper's long journey to self-knowledge, a journey that begins here with this flight from family ties; that takes him to Vienna in search of Merrill Overturf, who succumbed to the lure of the submerged tomb in the Danube; then to Ralph Packer, who teaches him the use of reels and introduces him to Tulpen; and finally to the kind of contentment with which the novel concludes, both Trumper and his wife rematched with other, more suitable mates, Trumper still able to stand at the water's edge and tell his son the story of the great white whale, a borrowed tale that becomes the ultimate substitution for a father:

"Is Moby Dick still alive?" Colm asked.

Trumper thought, Well, why not? I can't provide the kid with God or a reliable father, and if there's something worth believing in, it ought to be as big as a whale. (WMM, 345)

But before all that happened, while Trumper was still en route, the duck that went from father to son and then, by parcel post, from son to father, seems to have turned into a fish: when Colm first came to visit his father in New York, he was fascinated by the inhabitants of Tulpen's aquariums; but the fish he chose to take home died, thanks to his father's insisting on driving him back to his mother instead of allowing Colm to fly by himself. Trumper's obsessive father's concern, which Garp will share, seems to have gotten in the way:

By now he had the fishbowl unwrapped. . . . But the fish was floating on the top of the water.

"Oh, it's lovely," Biggie said.

"It's dead," said Colm, but he didn't seem very surprised. . . . "I wish I could have taken the plane back," he complained. "It doesn't take so long on the plane, and maybe the fish wouldn't have died." (WMM, 205-6)

Colm's lack of surprise here recalls his matter-of-fact attitude toward the downed duck, who was not fishing, as his father insisted, but dead. Trumper will try again to get a fish safely to his son, and this time
succeed—and the manner of his success says a great deal about the nature, and perhaps the origin, of the images whose recurrence in Irving’s fiction has been at issue here.

Trumper’s story is that of a son who slowly, reluctantly assumes the roles of husband and father. Though he was able to escape his marriage in Iowa City, paternity catches up with him in his relationship with Tulpen, who at first asks him if he would like a child by her and then goes ahead and has it on her own. It is a boy, and she names it Merrill, after Trumper’s friend in Vienna who drowned while investigating the underwater tank. As the duck that gets given twice reminds us, Trumper is both father and son, a double identity that *The Water-Method Man* translates, faithful to its Apocryphal allusion, as a union of the salient attributes of the father and the son in that story: the bird that blinded Tobit and the fish Tobias caught. Consider, for example, the final fish in the novel, Trumper’s version of Melville’s whale:

“Then Ishmael noticed there was something *funny* about this whale.”

“*It* was white!” Colm said.

“*Right,*” said Trumper. “And it had things stuck onto it everywhere

    “Harpoons!”

    “*Barnacles and seaweed and birds!*” said Trumper.

    “*Birds?*” said Colm.

    “Never mind.” (*WMM*, 340-41)

What is Trumper thinking of? Perhaps his dissertation, which he finishes at this time, tying together the loose ends of his life. In it the hero’s father, Old Thak, who was briefly roused from his grave when Ralph Packer first appeared, is slain in a naval battle, “too riddled with arrows to even fall down.” “Let me lie in the sea,” he asks. “I am so full of wood that I shall float.” So they lower him over the side, and he trails behind, bobbing in the sea like a buoy with darts. But by the time his son arrives, he is dead, and has sunk beneath the surface like a “curious sea anchor . . . the feather ends of some arrows still above water” (*WMM*, 344). What Akthelt sees of his father, then, is floating feathers, as much bird as fish. Siegfried Javotnik, in *Setting Free the Bears*, has a fond memory of a feathered father, too: Zahn Glanz, driving his taxi through the streets of Vienna on 11 March 1938, in an eagle-suit made from chicken plumage, “of a feather” with certain “dung-dropping” pigeons (*SFB*, 136), frightening the populace, some of whom took him for a seraph (*SFB*, 134,135), but hoping to arouse them to resist the imminent Nazi takeover—the eagle was the Austrian national emblem. What is remarkable is that Glanz was not Javotnik’s biological father, but he remembers him as if he almost were. “Because even if it wasn’t
carried in the genes, something of Zahn Glanz certainly got into me” (SFB, 156). One could also think of Dean Bodger, along with wrestling coach Ernie Holm the closest thing T. S. Garp had to a father in his early years at Steering Academy, catching the falling pigeon and thinking it was Garp, his chest bedecked with feathers, sent reeling by the impact of the bird. Later, his memory would become clouded and he would be convinced that it was Garp whom he had caught and not the pigeon—as if the bird’s blindness (dazzled by the searchlights, it broke its neck against the fire escape [WAG, 36]) had been transmitted to his mind’s eye, the one that sees memories (later in the novel, Garp’s elder son will see his memories best with his blinded eye [WAG, 284]). “No doubt, in his advancing years, the moment of catching the bird had meant as much to the good-hearted Bodger as if he had caught Garp” (WAG, 38). The corpse of the bird unfortunately found its way into the glove compartment of his car, where it sprang to view the day the embarrassed dean had to produce his automobile registration for a rookie campus cop.

If a certain faithfulness to an allusion to the Book of Tobit seems able to account for how father figures in Irving’s fiction are associated with various fowls, then it can perhaps be seen as an ever-greater sign of fidelity that the other striking feature of father Tobit (other than the way he was blinded), his willingness to bury corpses no one else would touch, finds its reenactments in Irving’s fiction as well. T. S. Garp, attending Fat Stew’s (Cushie’s father’s) funeral incognito, is approached by the hearse driver: “We’re short some muscle for the casket.” No one else, it seems, is young enough for the job. There were only two other pallbearers; Garp would have to lift one side of the coffin all by himself.

A frail mutter reached Garp from the mourners at Fat Stew’s funeral, aghast at the apparently unmovable casket. But Garp believed in himself. It was just death in there; of course it would be heavy—the weight of his mother . . . the weight of Ernie Holm, and little Walt (who was the heaviest of all). (WAG, 373)

At the last minute Dean Bodger steps forward and volunteers to be the necessary fourth. “And the catcher of pigeons, the bandy-legged sheriff of the Steering School, lifted his share of the coffin with Garp and the others”—father and son, in a way, united in a rehearsal of Apocryphal charity.

Trumper’s charity is tested in a nearly identical way, while he journeys to his son with a fish—the second, and successful, attempt. He is traveling alone on a bus when it is discovered that a man in the rear of the bus has died, possibly from a heart attack. “Everyone seemed
afraid to touch the dead man, so [Trumper] volunteered to lug him off
the bus. . . . Perhaps all the others were afraid of catching something,
but [he] was more appalled at the fact that the man was unknown to
everyone around him” (WMM, 322). Garp has a similar reaction to the
shortage of pallbearers for Fat Stew’s coffin: “How awful to be this
unloved! he thought, looking at the gray ship that was Stewart Percy’s
casket” (WAG, 372). And in his writing, too, Garp is aware of a duty
to the deceased, of a need to do something for them after they have
died—not exactly to resurrect them, but to rescue them from oblivion.
Starting a novel feels

“like trying to make the dead come alive,” he said. “No, no, that’s not
right—it’s more like trying to keep everyone alive, forever. Even the ones
who must die in the end. They’re the most important to keep alive.”
(WAG, 409)

This insight came to Garp when he was younger, halfway through
the writing of his first published work of fiction, “The Pension Grillparzer,” a story about a recurring dream, one that seems to have a life
of its own, like a well-written text.

It is only the vividness of memory that keeps the dead alive forever; a
writer’s job is to imagine everything so personally that the fiction is as
vivid as our personal memories. . . . Now he knew what the grand-
mother’s dream meant. (WAG, 119)

Johanna was shocked when the Hungarian dream-teller told her her
own private dream, “as if it were news” (WAG, 108). A husband and
wife spending the night in a rented castle were suddenly awakened by
the sound of horses; the wife went to a window and saw soldiers watering
their mounts from a fountain that had been dry in the daylight. They
were in armor as if from the time of Charlemagne, who had built the
castle. The woman went back to bed and listened in the darkness,
hearing not only the horses, the clanking of armor, and the soldiers’
conferring in a forgotten language, but also the sound of water that
seemed to flow throughout the castle, replenishing the fountain. The
next morning there was no trace of the horses, no hoofprints, no droppings, and the fountain was dry—they must have dreamed it, but how
could they both have done so? The wife, alone, twice later dreamed
that she saw them again. They were fewer; the weather was colder, and
they breathed with difficulty. Her husband would later die of a res-
piratory ailment.

The mystery of the story of the dream, that the husband and wife
should have had the same dream, is also the mystery of its telling; for
grandmother Johanna’s own husband had died of a respiratory infection,
and she had dreamed the same dream, before anyone else in the story was born. The closer one looks at "The Pension Grillparzer," the more this particular mystery multiplies: already the dream has been shared three times—between the original husband and wife, between the grandmother and the gypsy, and presumably, between Johanna and her husband. It will be passed on after Johanna's death to her daughter, the narrator's mother. And the relation of the grandmother to Charlemagne's soldiers is rather like a shared dream: by a strange kind of thought transfer, in seeing and hearing them she was perceiving in an extrasensory way something that had an existence of its own outside her imagination, something as real and as much an intruder to her psyche as someone else's dream. "Of course I wanted to help them! But we weren't alive at the same time" (WAG, 109-10). But the writer Garp's ability to make the subject reach out and touch its frame does not stop there. Johanna and the rest of the narrator's family are renting rooms in a hotel when they are told the story of the dream, and that night there are strange noises in the hall—some animal is roaming the corridors, and apparently using the WC, for one can hear the water flowing. It is a unicycle-riding bear, and it all has a logical explanation. What only Garp's, and ultimately Irving's, interest in self-referential fiction can explain, though, is the haunting correspondence between the horses outside the rented castle and the bear in the hall: strange noises in the middle of the night of an animal and aquatic nature, the rented hotel room and the rented accommodation in the castle, the reality behind the appearances (there really is a bear, there really were armored soldiers in the courtyard, once).

"Now he knew what the grandmother's dream meant": that fiction should be as vivid as a personal memory—that the reader should see the text as Johanna heard the dream-teller's tale, surprised and disturbed that the teller should have known what he had no right to know, as if he had stolen it from the reader's own experience. Such a reader's reaction is a profound sense of déjà vu. And such ought to be our own response here, for this story of a shared dream seems to speak to the situation we find ourselves in now, seeing that the recurring dream in Irving's fiction, surfacing at times explicitly as recurring dreams in Trumper's and Severin Winter's experiences, itself recurs elsewhere, in Tobit and in Fowles.

While Randy, the lover T. S. Garp threw out of Mrs. Ralph's house, was in jail reading Garp's novels (WAG, 275), the hero of Irving's recent bestseller has been suffering the consequences of his delay in leaving that woman's house. We left him there to pursue the name of Ralph in The Water-Method Man and to track down the recurring dream
fragments of fish, eyes, fathers, graves, and befouling birds in that novel as well as in the others that preceded *Garp (The 158-Pound Marriage* and *Setting Free the Bears*). Though he gazed at her nakedness (wet from recent sex, she looked as if she had "been underwater for a long time" [*WAG*, 201]), he did little more. He had been unfaithful before—there had been a babysitter or two, and a mutual arrangement with another couple, recounted in chapter eight, and in the fictive *Second Wind of the Cuckold (The 158-Pound Marriage)*. But these manifestations of lust, as Garp would call them, led to no real change in his relationship to Helen. The episode with Mrs. Ralph is different, as the title of the chapter that immediately follows, "It Happens to Helen," implies.

It happens with Michael Milton, a graduate student in a course Helen is teaching in narrative technique. Garp found her one night at 2 A.M. awake in the living room reading one of Michael Milton’s papers with a look on her face he couldn’t quite place, but which he recognized as guilt. The student had made Helen an open proposition, and she had at least listened to him; but something kept her from going any further—she was not accustomed to feeling guilty about anything she did.

She felt close to achieving this guilt-free state of mind, but she did not quite have it; not yet.

It would be Garp who provided her with the necessary feeling. (*WAG*, 228)

Jealous of her attention, Garp was distressed that Helen was reading somebody else’s work. He was himself in a writer’s slump, drained of experience and devoid of ideas. T. S. had earlier courted Helen with "The Pension Grillparzer," sending it to her along with a proposal of marriage (*WAG*, 119–21). And before that, while still at Steering Academy, he had showed her one of his first stories, one whose plot seems remarkably appropriate for a younger writer in Irving’s world. It concerns a father who is so concerned with protecting the dead that he kills his daughter and her lover because he thinks they have come to the cemetery to rob graves; but, rather like Pyramus and Thisbe, they had only come for a lovers’ tryst. It was his need to imagine what Helen’s body was really like under her sweat suit, we might recall, that made him realize he had a writer’s imagination, as he stood there at the top of the school stadium, a javelin in his hand, its tip stained with frog gore, talking with her about becoming a writer. His choice of a life’s career dates from that encounter; Helen had been there from the beginning. It is possible, therefore, to wonder if the unfortunate lovers in the story are meant in some way to represent young T. S. and Helen—it certainly couldn’t be that Helen’s father much resembled the girl’s
The World According to T. S.

father in the story, since Ernie Holm had none but the kindest thoughts for the couple, who had his fatherly blessing from the start (though it is important to remember that the father’s action in the story was due to a terrible case of mistaken identity). But both Ernie Holm and the grave-guarding father share qualities, though not the same qualities, with a third father, Tobias’s: an extraordinary concern with the welfare of corpses and an impairment of sight. Ernie Holm “was nearly blind” (WAG, 55), and when T. S.’s mother first came into the range of his blurred vision, as he still groped for his glasses in the Steering Academy wrestling room, her white nurse’s uniform made him almost think she was his missing wife, who had also been a nurse and had left him fifteen years before. Helen, who had never really seen her mother, did make that mistake, and ran to Jenny Fields believing she had at last found her long lost parent. It was her father’s brief moment of uncertainty that had propelled Helen, who took his fumbling “to be the necessary sign,” into Jenny’s arms, an instant affection that was yet not entirely misplaced, as she became “more of a mother to Helen than Helen had ever had” (WAG, 58–59). Both half-orphaned in a symmetrical way, T. S. and Helen were also, in the memory of that initial mistake in identity, distantly related, a quality that also proved important to the lovers in the Apocryphal tale, as it did for Daniel Martin and Jane. They owed that mistaken kinship to the resemblance Ernie bore to sightless Tobit. As T. S.’s wrestling coach, Helen’s father was a father to Garp in those early days at Steering, training him in an avocation that ranked a close second to writing in Garp’s order of priorities. Together with Dean Bodger, who is one of several father figures in Irving’s world associated with dropping birds, these fragmentary fathers took the place of a real one for Garp, and they each had a fragment of the cluster of qualities originally assigned to Tobit, who was blinded by what dropped from a bird. The father in the first story Garp showed Helen had another, an obsession with defending the right of the dead to a decent, undisturbed burial.

Garp’s jealous response to his wife’s interest in Michael Milton’s literary production goads him into breaking out of his slump to write something of his own for her to read. “Vigilance,” then, is born out of “forced and unnatural circumstances,” and it bears too much of the freight of the situation in which it was written, directed as it was to Helen with Michael Milton in mind—and Mrs. Ralph. It is a record of a jogger’s running battle with motorists who speed through his neighborhood and jeopardize his children’s safety. Two incidents in particular are told, one with a pair of bowlers in colliding Land Rovers, and another with a runty young plumber in a blood-red truck. The first one
occurs at night, and is not really a case that calls for the runner’s speed limit enforcement, since he doesn’t venture forth after dark except to investigate accidents, which this is. The second is much more serious; the narrator picks a fight with the reckless plumber, and the result is unexpected violence. O. Fecteau screeched to a stop when the concerned jogger threw a child’s toy dump truck against his cab; five long metal pipes fell out of the back of his truck, and Garp’s hero picks one up and starts flailing away at the taillights, fearless in the face of the livid driver with a Stillson wrench in his hand. Other things fall out of the truck, a screwdriver and spools of wire; holding the pipe “like a warrior’s javelin” (*WAG*, 235), the narrator nudges them back toward Fecteau. The plumber returns to his truck and drives away, but then returns in fury, driving over lawns, grazing a car, almost running into a house, and finally coming to rest upside down with a broken collarbone. The protagonist feels somehow responsible, as well he might, for having provoked this berserk behavior. But he’ll continue his neighborhood vigilance.

It was this new short story of Garp’s that provided Helen with “the necessary feeling” to go ahead and have an affair with Michael Milton. Somewhere in the story, in her reading of it and in T. S.’s reaction to her less than enthusiastic response, she lost her guilt. Garp proved more concerned with what she thought of it than with her expressions of love:

“No, yes,” he said, impatiently, “I love you, too, but we can *fuck* anytime. What about the story?” And she finally relaxed; she felt he had released her, somehow. (*WAG*, 237)

Garp went to bed first, falling asleep more quickly than he should have. Helen watched him sleep, helped him through a wet dream; he woke up surprised, a look of guilt on his face when he realized where he was. “Garp would think, later, that it was as if Helen had *known* he had been dreaming of Mrs. Ralph. . . . Guiltless at last, Helen felt freed to have her dreams” (*WAG*, 239).

Mrs. Ralph? Was the story that had come between T. S. and Helen really about *her*? Garp had first met Mrs. Ralph in circumstances strikingly similar to the way the hero of “Vigilance” met the reckless plumber, running to catch up with her car because it was speeding through the neighborhood. It happened to be the day that Duncan was to spend the night at Ralph’s. Though she didn’t go berserk as O. Fecteau had done, Mrs. Ralph did break down and cry under the weight of her romantic troubles, Garp did spill blood-red tomato sauce on her dress, and they both became angry and called each other names. The other incident in Garp’s story, the bowlers whose balls were switched
and who became embroiled with the police in an argument over which one had the name Garp’s hero gave when he phoned in the accident (not wanting to get involved in the investigation, he had given as his own the one name he knew belonged to one of the bowlers), evokes the real name of Mrs. Ralph, Florence Cochran Bowlsby (WAG, 421). As a matter of fact, each part of that tripartite name, which for some reason always evaded Garp’s memory (“‘Did you say “Mrs. Ralph”?’ she asks him. ‘Jesus, “Mrs. Ralph”!’ she cries. ‘You don’t even know my name!’” [WAG, 206]), embodies, in whole or in part, the name of someone else: in Coch/ran one can see Randy, Mrs. Ralph’s lover whom Garp first saw naked, “his young cock . . . lean and arched” (WAG, 202); in Florence Oren Rath, the rapist in The World According to Bensenhaver, the novel Garp begins to write in the wake of the terrible accident that is about to happen, now that Helen will take a lover.

Mrs. Ralph, whose “strangely twisted navel” caught T. S. Garp’s eye when he came back for one more look (“He should have looked first at her eyes; then he might have realized she was wide-awake and staring back at him” [WAG, 209]), plays an umbilical role in Irving’s World, occupying the center of the novel (chapters 9–11 out of 19), serving as a nodal point where various strands of action and imagery come together, a kind of threshold between the novel’s intrigue and its inner dream, a dream whose fragments have marked our passage through Irving’s world. She has not just three names, of course, but four; the pseudonym of filial origin that Garp continually gives her opens a passage from Garp onto the one Irving novel that does not appear in the list of Garp’s published works—as if, like Mrs. Ralph’s real name, it had been forgotten. The Water-Method Man’s Ralph Packer plays as central a role in that novel as his namesake does here, and it is perhaps not by accident that both that novel and Florence’s real name are forgotten, present but unspoken, in The World According to Garp. Of the three novels Irving published before Garp, it is the one to which Garp is closest, the one that is also about how difficult it is for a son to become a father.

Mrs. Ralph intervenes in Garp’s life, as Ralph Packer intervened in Trumper’s, like a deranging angel (she will not be the only one; much later, T. S. will get an intimation of his coming death from a feminist with murder on her mind, a “fragile angel” who tries to run him over but crashes her car into a stone wall instead. “Garp knew she was dead because he looked in her eyes” [WAG, 401–2]). The ultimate outcome of her intervention will be The World According to Bensenhaver, the novel that will make Garp controversial enough for a feminist to want to do him in, the novel that will make him as famous as Garp has made
Irving. But the part of that novel that is reproduced in *Garp*, its opening chapter, could serve a more particular purpose, one that justifies Ben-senhaver’s place at the end of a chain of events that begins with Mrs. Ralph’s appearance on the scene, for it in fact shows by example the lesson Raphael taught Tobias.

One must first see, however, exactly how that chain is put together. Helen loses her guilt, the only obstacle in the way of an affair with Michael Milton, because of T. S.’s being more interested in what she thought of his new story than in what she thought of him. But that a story should get in the way of their love is strange, for he has been writing stories for quite a while, the entire length of their marriage. The wet dream that Helen watches him have suggests more; he went to sleep preoccupied with what he had given Helen to read, and he dreams of Mrs. Ralph. He had not been able to write anything at all until now, citing a lack of experience to draw upon; what little he has now produced draws upon his recent encounter with Ralph’s mother, whose reckless driving gets transformed into O. Fecteau’s and whose last name gives rise to the bowlers’ pastime. Helen’s suspicions had already been aroused when T. S. took so long to come back with Duncan; his surprise upon awakening, and the really guilty look on his face, seemed to confirm what she thought she already knew. As Garp’s wife, she had more ways of knowing what was on his mind than are open to us, but one doesn’t have to keep a vigil by his bedside to see the woman’s presence in the story.

If Garp’s first encounter with Mrs. Ralph finds itself translated into the run-in with O. Fecteau, both of which call for the hero to race to catch up with a speeding vehicle, their second meeting bears a resemblance in several ways to the earlier incident in “Vigilance,” the wreck of the bowlers. Whereas the confrontations with the plumber and the speeding Mrs. Ralph took place in daylight, Garp’s visit to her house and his protagonist’s investigation of the bowlers’ accident occurred after dark. There were really two parts to each nocturnal encounter: the short story’s narrator had first come out to see what had happened to only one of the bowlers, who had managed to wreck his Land Rover all by himself; later his friend came along, driving with no lights, and crashed his vehicle into the first. It would look like “two exhausted rhinos caught fornicating in the suburbs” (*WAG*, 233). Garp’s first glimpse of Mrs. Ralph at her house was of “a thunderous approach down the back staircase of a heavy, falling body” (*WAG*, 201); she landed on the kitchen floor with a still unspilled drink in her hand, as oblivious to what had happened as the first bowler, who, though upside-
down, "seemed only dimly sensitive to this change in his perspective" (WAG, 231). It was only later that Garp was called upon to remove her coupling partner. The bowlers' collision, in which their Land Rovers united "like coupled boxcars," had erotic overtones, even before it happened; the first had wrecked, he said, while trying to get his partner's bowling ball into his bag. "We crossed our balls.' That the fat man was referring to a bizarre sexual experience seemed unlikely" (WAG, 232). But he was sitting in his auto "cheek to cheek with this bowling ball, which he perhaps felt touching him as he might have felt the presence of a lover's severed head" (WAG, 231–32).

The police arrive in the end, in both scenes. Carrying Duncan home from Mrs. Ralph's, Garp was stopped by a squad car that had already picked up her lover Randy. His attempt to account for what he was doing led to yet another confusion over names; not knowing Ralph's last name, he was somewhat at a loss to explain where he had been ("Ralph Ralph?" the policeman with the pad said [WAG, 211]), and when he had to give his own name, he began to feel very tired.

"Yes, T. S.," he said. "Just T. S."

"Hey, Tough Shit!" howled the kid in the car, falling back in the seat, swooning with laughter. (WAG, 212)

The first thing the police did when they came to investigate the double wreck of the Land Rovers was to seek out whoever it was that reported it, as Garp knew they would—a certain Roger, the pseudonym Garp had used on the phone.

"He's Roger," the fat bowler kept saying. "He's Roger through and through."

"I'm not the Roger who called you fuckers," Roger told the police. . . .

After a while they began to call out into our dark suburb for another Roger. (WAG, 233)

More than the balls may be switchable here. Besides the Land Rovers, which were in fact also crossed up, each bowler driving the other's vehicle by mistake, the names involved, over which there is already some confusion, yield to a manipulation that underscores the correspondence already evident between this episode and Garp's night at Mrs. Ralph's. The correlation between bowlers and Bowlsby could be taken as a signal to be ready for more onomastic activity. Only one of the bowlers is named, so Roger is almost all one has to go on—but since everyone is looking for another Roger one might want to propose a close relation, part of the only other proper name available and distinguished from Roger only by the v/g with which the story begins, in the first
letters of the title (a curious recurrence of fives—five-mile runs, fifty-five push-ups, fifty-five sit-ups, five five-feet-long pipes—could be a recurrence of V’s), Rover. Roger and Rover are nearly as interchangeable as the bowlers, their balls, or their automobiles; but then so is, and perhaps more interestingly, the name of those cars, which a slight crossover converts to an allusion to either Mrs. Ralph’s lover or “the randy Mrs. Ralph” (WAG, 200) herself, or perhaps both: Land Rover/Randy Lover. “Vigilance” works like a dream, transmuting, switching, and rearranging lived experience into fiction.

Freed of feeling guilty, Helen decides to accept Michael Milton’s proposal that they have an affair, but only under the condition that everything possible be done to keep it hidden. They will never be seen together; he must get a car, a big one with a bench seat in front so that she can lie down, out of sight of anyone’s eyes. He does, and Helen is secretly transported to his apartment in a used station wagon the color of clotted blood with a “gaping chrome grill like the mouth of a feeding fish—Buick Eight in script across the teeth” (WAG, 244). The car that is a fish is also a casket, “gliding like the coffin of a king out of the parking lot” (WAG, 247).

That at least is how it appeared to Margie Tallworth, the girl Michael left for Helen, as she looked out of the fourth-floor ladies’ room window and spotted Mrs. Garp stretched out in the front seat of the car. It is she who tells Garp, coming to his house with a note, intervening “like an avenging angel” with a sense of duty (WAG, 249). T. S. responds as if he were reenacting a ritual, entering once more into the Apocryphal myth that so often appears in Irving’s world. He plays the dead father, the corpse underwater, pretending with his sons’ connivance that he has drowned in the bathtub when Helen comes home.

“Shall I come up?” she called.
There was still no answer; Garp could hold his breath a long time.
Walt shouted back downstairs to her, “Dad’s underwater!”

... In a minute or so, Garp whispered to Walt, “Tell her I’m still underwater, Walt.” (WAG, 253)

He does. Duncan comes up to the bathroom. Garp was already out of the tub, with a finger to his lips for silence, then a paternal instruction: “‘Now, say it together,’ Garp whispered. ‘On the count of three, ‘He’s still under!’’ ” (WAG, 254).

This is how he tells Helen that he knows about Michael Milton. She runs up the stairs, fully believing in the event, thinking that only Garp could have conceived such a revenge, “drowning himself in front of
their children and leaving her to explain to them why he did it” (*WAG*, 254). From here on, the plot moves inexorably toward a tragic outcome, at the same time as it moves ever closer to the Apocryphal constellation of fathers, sons, blindness, fish, and death. Garp will take Duncan and Walt to the movies in order to be out of the house when Helen calls Milton to tell him it’s finished. In the car the windshield keeps fogging over, and T. S. has trouble seeing the road. In the back seat the children fight for their favorite spot, the gap between the front bucket seat.

Garp downshifted, hard, and the uncovered tip of the stick-shift shaft bit into his hand.

“You see this, Duncan?” Garp asked, angrily. “You see this gearshift? It’s like a spear. You want to fall on that if I have to stop hard?” (*WAG*, 258)

Helen and Garp had never gotten it fixed, each placing the responsibility on the other. Father and sons find a movie and stand in line for it in the rain. Walt points out a strange car, a station wagon the color of clotted blood except for the wood along its sides, shining in the streetlights.

The slats looked like the ribs of the long, lit skeleton of a great fish gliding through moonlight. “Look at that car!” Walt cried.

“Wow, it’s a hearse,” Duncan said. (*WAG*, 259)

Michael Milton was on his way to Helen’s house, even though Garp had told her not to allow him to come. “No last fucks for the road, Helen. Just tell him good-bye. On the phone” (*WAG*, 255). But the car that was a fish for its glowing skeleton and its chrome grill teeth, and a coffin and a hearse for its shape, came up the driveway and stopped just in front of the garage. Helen ran to the driver’s side to keep Michael from getting out. He kissed her, and she saw all over again in her memory the “bedroom of his apartment: the poster-sized print above his bed—Paul Klee’s *Sinbad the Sailor*” (*WAG*, 260). They had been making love, then, beneath a painting of a youth spearing a fish, blood dripping from its gaping teeth. Garp once courted her in a similar pose, a javelin in his hand stained with the gore of the frogs he had speared in the upper reaches of the Steering River, clicking it on the cement as he climbed the stadium steps to where she sat reading so that he wouldn’t startle her; that was the afternoon he decided to be a writer (*WAG*, 62–63). It was the same weapon with which he would later court her again, the “warrior’s javelin” of a plumber’s metal pipe (*WAG*, 235) his hero wielded in the story he wrote to win her back from “someone else’s words” (*WAG*, 228), Michael Milton’s papers. The
miraculous fish in *The Water-Method Man*, Trumper’s transparent talking eel with its visible plumber’s helper inside, together with the Zorn-Witwer’s plumber’s helper of a stick-shift in *The 158-Pound Marriage*, make it likely that it was no accident that the enraged driver in “Vigilance” was a plumber. Garp’s hero attacks his prey as Garp slew his frogs and Sinbad his sea monsters, with a lance, and deals with it as Tobias dealt with the fish, causing the plumber’s truck to spill its contents, a metal viscera of tools, tubes, and spools of wire.

Michael persuades Helen to get in the car. They sit and talk in the darkness, as the windows fog up and the rain begins to encase the car in ice. At the movie theater Garp suddenly decides to call home to tell Helen he would rather talk to Michael Milton himself; but Helen, with Michael in the old car “groaning and snapping under its thickening tomb of ice” (*WAG*, 263), does not hear the phone. Garp’s Volvo was also “shrouded in ice,” the windshield totally opaque; but in his haste to get back home, he doesn’t take the time to clean it. He compounds his blindness by coasting up his driveway in the dark as he always had done, with his engine dead and his headlights off. The children crowd each other for the favorite spot between the bucket seats. “How can you see now?” Duncan asks his father. ”He doesn’t have to see,” said Walt.

“I know this by heart,” Garp assured them.

“It’s like being underwater!” cried Duncan. . . .

"It's like a dream!” said Walt. (*WAG*, 266)

The dream is fatal to Walt and the underwater experience gravely injurious to Duncan, for the father’s blindness—his frosted windshield as palely opaque as Tobit’s white-filmed eyes (Tobit 1:10), as stained with Apocryphal allusion as Severin Winter’s is with spermatic bird-dribble (*158PM*, 143)—is passed on to his older son through that impaling javelin-shaped stick-shift.

The violence of that tragedy is a shattering experience for everyone. Michael Milton loses an important organ, too, and with it his future chances for paternity. T. S., Helen, and Duncan retreat to Garp’s mother’s house to recover from their injuries. There T. S., his jaw wired shut, begins to sound like his father, the wounded airman, unable to say the *G* of his name (*WAG*, 281); he and Helen, listening late at night to someone in the vast house drawing a bath, sounds of water echoing like the fountain in the grandmother’s dream, remember Walt in the bathtub, completely submerged, listening with his ears underwater—as if that was where his body lay in their memories, buried in water (*WAG*, 281–82).
Duncan will remember Walt through his missing eye; he can still see memories with it, and dreams (WAG, 284). T. S. will take a lot of time to come to grips with his memory of the accident; but when he does, he will begin to write *The World According to Bensenhaver*, a novel that will attain the popular success his previous novels never had. Part of this can be attributed to the explicit nature of its sex and violence; from what we know of it—its opening chapter, printed as the fifteenth chapter of *Garp*—it is evident that it is explicit in another way as well, in its graphic retelling of the central event of the Apocryphal story (central because all other events in the tale are either remedied or made possible by its outcome), Tobias’s encounter with the fish. The first chapter of *Bensenhaver* is in fact the story of someone who finds herself threatened by a monster (like Tobias, who thought the fish would kill him: “and a fish jumped out of the river and would have swallowed the boy” [Tobit 6:2]) but who turns the situation around, killing her adversary by disemboweling him with just the kind of knife that Tobias might have used when he eviscerated his fish, had he come as well equipped for his task as she was for hers. It was the same knife with which Oren Rath first menaced her, “the long, thin-bladed fisherman’s knife with the slick cutting edge and the special, saw-toothed edge that they call a disgorger-scaler” (WAG, 286), a knife whose power to turn what it cuts into a fish is demonstrated in that opening scene in Hope Standish’s kitchen, when Oren touches it to her son’s cheek, leaving a thin line of blood traced there: “It was as if the child had suddenly developed a gill” (WAG, 286).

So when Hope saves herself from death, though not from rape, by reaching for the knife on the floor of Oren’s truck, and then stabbing and slicing her assailant, she is acting in accord with an allusion traceable throughout the entirety of the Irving corpus. The very intensity of the violence of her story brings it all the closer to looking like a repetition of the Apocryphal event. To a reader who knows what has already taken place in *Garp* and in Irving’s three earlier novels, what happens here has a startling familiarity; to an unsuspecting passing motorist, it is startlingly strange. Seeing Hope kneeling by the roadside after her evisceration of Oren Rath, “[t]he driver had a vision of an angel on a trip back from hell” (WAG, 310); and when he stopped to look, and saw Oren’s cut-open corpse, he thought he could recognize an internal organ: “Christ, look, I think that’s his liver. Isn’t that what a liver looks like?” (WAG, 313). But what is weird to this witness is precisely what is almost uncannily familiar to us. It is as if Hope had acted angelically, with a seraphic knowledge that was also imparted to
Tobias, who also revealed the liver of his assailant with a fish-cutting knife (“Cut the fish up,” his angel said, “and take its heart and liver and gall” [Tobit 6:4]).

*Oren* itself is extracted from inside *Florence*, so that Garp may be practicing a similar operation on his experience, opening it up to view and breaking it apart, assigning part of Mrs. Ralph a.k.a. Florence Cochran Bowlsby to two bowlers, another part to the plumber who like her was stopped for speeding, and another piece to the oddly named rapist (“They all have weird names,” the deputy told Bensenhaver [*WAG*, 300]). What Trumper wondered when he tried to read the bubbly speech of the transparent talking eel with the visible inner organ (*WMM*, 90) is also a question here: Is a bubble a word or a sentence or a paragraph? Is the piece of speech we’re looking at the smallest unit of language in the system to which it belongs, or does it represent a collection of elements, one that can be opened up and broken down into parts with different uses, like the gall and the heart and liver of Tobias’s fish?

That Oren Rath and his brothers “used just four or five words for almost everything,” according to Bensenhaver (*WAG*, 300), was a mark of their ignorance. But all that is reported of Garp’s father’s speech is something quite similar (due, of course, to the war wound that sliced his brain), a “Garp” that served every purpose, from hello to joy, surprise, doubt, and discomfort, and that ultimately became the material for three other words as it progressively lost its letters. His next-to-last word was to be, in fact, the same as Oren Rath’s: “Aaa” (Garp: *WAG*, 22); “Aaahh!” (Rath: *WAG*, 306). T. S. inherits precious little from his father—his eyes, as he learned from Stewart Percy, and his problematic name—so that this linguistic thrift may be significant, too, despite its pathological origin. His father’s doubly economical discourse—both the polysemous, multipurpose “Garp” and its fragmentation into ever smaller pieces—does find a counterpart in the writer Garp’s way of breaking down experience and words, of reusing the same material in such a way that the reader is haunted, as Irving’s reader is also haunted, by a phenomenon of recurrence that grows more widespread and varied the closer one looks. And Irving’s writing in particular is vaguely unsettling in the way it erases the accustomed boundaries separating both words and novels, showing that the former are sometimes composed of ever smaller units of meaning and the latter are really parts of a larger discourse. *The World According to Garp* refers both to itself and to Irving’s earlier fiction in such a way that it rewards the reader who goes back and reads these lesser-known works with a larger story, one
in which the cast of continuing characters expands to include names and objects, fish, eyes, fathers, and graves.

1. John Irving, The World According to Garp, p. 131. Irving's other novels are indicated by the following acronyms: SFB = Setting Free the Bears; WMM = The Water-Method Man; 158PM = The 158-Pound Marriage.


3. "Battle-Scene from the Comic Opera 'The Seafarer,'" 1923.