

---

# Diamond Wheels and Machetes: The Political Praxis of Prosthesis

---

NATHAN FRANK

UNIVERSITY OF COLORADO, BOULDER

Foucault wrote that “knowledge is not made for understanding; it is made for cutting.” If “knowledge is made for cutting,” then a fair follow-up question might be, “what is cutting for?” (Foucault 83). I intend to explore that question through a very specific subset of “cutting,” namely, cutting of the body in the form of amputation. More specifically, the amputations explored here are self-administered amputations of fingers carried out by the wielding of cutting instruments against the self to subvert (or at least redirect) the nominal, conventional, or even hegemonic uses of these cutting tools—as portrayed through recent fiction. Reading John Irving’s *A Prayer for Owen Meany* and Chris Cleave’s *Little Bee*, I argue that these novels suggest that what I am calling “the political praxis of prosthesis” is a decidedly political answer to our question, “what is cutting for?” I argue that the self-amputations depicted in these novels are politically motivated and that they represent the reappropriation of prosthetic devices with a view toward constructing a resistance against certain power structures. To assist in working through these close-readings, I have distilled a three-part theoretical framework as follows:

1. Drawing from Bernard Stiegler’s *Technics and Time, 1: The Fault of Epimetheus* provides the launch pad for conceptualizing prosthetic technologies as extensions of the body, and as devices expressly intended for cutting: the knife is his most basic and recurrent example. I therefore define “prosthetic” as a cutting tool.
2. I borrow Michel de Certeau’s “metallic vocabulary” from the chapter entitled “The Scriptural Economy” in *The Practice of Everyday Life. Here*, Certeau lays out a conception of cutting the body as a form of writing upon the body or, in his neologistic parlance, “intextuations.” I thus interpret the amputations in Irving and Cleave as “intextuations” by “prosthetics.”
3. I take the bait that Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri provocatively dangle in *Empire* as they attempt to update not only the human condition and its “symptoms of passage” from *Owen Meany* to *Little Bee*-era power structures, but also the new “interactive and cybernetic” versions of prosthetics that attempt to cope with the new power of Empire. Therefore, I am enabled to acknowledge that the political praxis of prosthesis cuts in

---

different ways in different times, as well as to consider its evolution and its current relevance.

In John Irving's 1989 novel *A Prayer for Owen Meany* the character Owen amputates the right index finger of narrator John Wheelright to prevent John from being drafted into US military service to fight in Vietnam. The amputation is done—as climax to a chapter significantly entitled “The Finger”—with a diamond wheel, which is used in Owen Meany's family-run monument shop as a granite-cutting tool to shape headstones for the local cemetery. The diamond wheel itself is described as the ultimate cutting tool and, as such, it might be the ultimate prosthesis. I argue that it becomes the ultimate prosthesis through its reappropriation. As an engraver of headstones, it is questionable as to how much life it scrapes out of the belly of the earth; on the contrary, it appears more useful in marking the expired lives that find their ways back into the earth. As a commandeered tool made to write upon blank flesh, however, the diamond wheel performs a great biopolitical function by keeping John out of harm's way and, by extension, keeping “the enemy” out of John-the-would-be-soldier's way.

The political thrust of *Owen Meany* is basic: it is a scathing critique of US foreign policy; in particular, of its Cold War imperialism in Vietnam. While each character assumes a unique stance along the anti-war spectrum, none of them is supportive of the protracted conflict; they are particularly critical of President Johnson and his “Rolling Thunder” campaign from 1965-1968. In any case, none are willing participants. (Owen's insistence on joining the Army has more to do with his spirituality and his belief that he is an “instrument of God,” and he is not *willing* because he is *supportive* of the military policy.) For all the political discussion in this novel, this basic opposition to participation is summarized at the start of the amputation scene:<sup>1</sup>

“DON'T BE AFRAID,” he told me. “DON'T REPORT FOR YOUR PHYSICAL—DON'T DO ANYTHING,” he said. “YOU'VE GOT A LITTLE TIME. I'M TAKING A LEAVE. I'LL BE THERE AS SOON AS I CAN MAKE IT. ALL YOU'VE GOT TO KNOW IS WHAT YOU WANT. DO YOU WANT TO GO TO VIETNAM?”

“No,” I said.

“DO YOU WANT TO SPEND THE REST OF YOUR LIFE IN CANADA—THINKING ABOUT WHAT YOUR COUNTRY *DID* TO YOU?” he asked me.

“Now that you put it that way—no,” I told him.

“FINE. I'LL BE RIGHT THERE—DON'T BE AFRAID. THIS TAKES JUST A LITTLE COURAGE,” said Owen Meany (Irving 447).

Thus John Wheelright states and confirms not only his unwillingness to go

---

to Vietnam to participate in US imperialism, but also his unwillingness to be intextuated, as Michel de Certeau would say, by his country: what the US might have “done” to him would have amounted to a disciplinary mark upon his flesh, inscribing him as a body absent from military service. Instead, John reserves the right to write into his own blank flesh the body of a resister by removing a finger. That this amputation is accomplished with a diamond wheel intended for cutting gravestones, and that this cutting machine was wielded by an “instrument of God” in the shape of Owen Meany, actually means that *two* prostheses—one physical, one mental—are put into the service of political praxis by John Wheelright; it also resolves the thorny question of whether John *self*-mutilated, or whether Owen, as operator of the cutting machine, mutilated John. On this point, there are two ways to insist on John’s *self*-mutilation. First, it is made explicit that this is John’s decision. Just as Owen asks John to restate himself in regard to his unwillingness to go to Vietnam, so he emphasizes John’s agency in the decision he must make about removing a finger:

“NATURALLY THIS IS YOUR DECISION,” he told me.  
“Naturally,” I said (448).

And later:

“IT’S YOUR DECISION,” he told me.  
I got myself from the sink to the saw table; the diamond wheel was so bright, I couldn’t look at it. I put my finger on the block of wood. Owen started the saw (449).

Thus John Wheelright states and confirms *his* intention—and not Owen Meany’s—to move forward with the amputation, albeit with nervous action more so than an explicit verbal consent. Still, it is fair to ask whether a self-mutilation can be performed by someone other than the self, to which it may be replied that John Wheelright uses the “instrument” that is Owen Meany, who recurrently dreams his own heroism and refers to himself throughout the novel as an “instrument of God.” This is the second way of insisting on self-mutilation: Owen is a tool used by John and, by dint of his dreams, convictions and intellect, he constitutes a mental prosthesis. In this case, two prostheses are employed in the cutting, an argument that underscores Bernard Stiegler’s and de Certeau’s insistence that prostheses are tools of mediation that comprise the layers of interaction between mortals and mechanics (Stiegler 240; de Certeau 141). Here, there are two levels of mediation instead of the more intuitive single layer, as Owen mediates between John and the diamond wheel.

There is reciprocal evidence for conceiving of Owen as prosthesis for John in that John serves as prosthesis for Owen. Owing to Owen’s preternaturally

---

diminutive stature (he is not even five feet tall), the two friends develop “the shot”: Owen runs toward John, who catches and catapults him toward a basketball hoop for a slam dunk. The trick is that the move be done in less than three seconds which, through years of practice, becomes second nature. But it also becomes destiny, since it is this move that enables Owen to fulfill his heroic obligation as an instrument of God by disposing of a live grenade through the upper windowsill of a bathroom full of Vietnamese children. “The shot,” which is also the title of the novel’s final chapter, results in Owen Meany’s dismemberment and death because, in the grenade blast, he loses his arms and bleeds to death. Thus “the shot” is also Owen Meany’s self-amputation via John Wheelright as intermediary, an extension of—and dismemberment tool of—his own body.

At this stage it is useful to return to the issue of John’s finger to see that amputating is much more than a matter of simply using a cutting tool in unconventional fashion or of providing a means by which John escapes military service. More than that, he disables his finger and, therefore, himself as a potential killing machine. In discussing what will or will not pass for what the military considers “fit for service,” Owen explains to John that military policy does not specify any *particular* missing finger as key to being disabled, but that he believes—after verifying that John is right-handed—that it ought to be John’s right index finger:

“THE ARMY REGULATION DOESN’T STATE THAT BEING RIGHT-HANDED OR LEFT-HANDED MATTERS—BUT YOU’RE RIGHT-HANDED, AREN’T YOU?” he asked me.

“Yes,” I said.

“THEN I THINK IT OUGHT TO BE THE RIGHT INDEX FINGER—JUST TO BE SAFE,” he said. “I MEAN, OFFICIALLY, WE’RE TALKING ABOUT YOUR TRIGGER FINGER” (448).

Here, praxis becomes about as political and multifaceted as it can get: the removal of John’s finger resonates pragmatically in that he is physically unable to squeeze the trigger of a gun in order to kill for the military; the military then stipulates that he cannot be of service. Yet symbolic resonance is also strong: John intextuates himself emblematically as a resister, and there is a powerful rhetorical effect in the scene when, years later, after his anger toward America has carried him to Toronto, he narrates his story from an armchair in which he imagines that he is viewed—that the text of his body is read—as “fussy and curmudgeonly—a cranky, short-haired type in his corduroys and tweeds, eccentric only in his political tempers and in his nasty habit of tamping the bowl of his pipe with the stump of his amputated index finger” (452). The stub is not only a disabled killing device, but also a badge of honor for someone unwilling to participate in imperialist activity.

Irving’s amputation scene in *Owen Meany* is serious and gruesome, and much

---

is at stake in it; still, it is far removed from the theaters of war, and it is laced with poignant humor. The amputation scene in Chris Cleave's 2008 *Little Bee* is more disturbing. It takes place on a Nigerian beach, where Sarah Summers and her husband, Andrew O'Rourke, encounter the "hunters" of Little Bee, and her sister, Kindness. Sarah and Andrew are successful English journalists vacationing in Nigeria to patch up their marriage; Little Bee and Kindness have fled their village after it was burned by the hunters, also known as "the oil company's men" (Cleave 107). The three parties are brought fatefully together on the beach where the hunters threaten to kill Little Bee and Kindness (they have seen too much), unless Andrew cuts off his middle finger with a machete, since that is the one that "[w]hite men [have] been giving [them] all [their lives]" (113). Andrew makes a feeble attempt, but ultimately cannot bring himself to do it. Sarah does it suddenly, without ceremony or even notice—she snatches the hunters' machete where her husband leaves it in the sand, after his failed attempt, and she "was no longer scared." This passage is in the first person voice of Sarah Summers:

I looked straight at Little Bee. She saw what the killer did not see. She saw the white woman put her own left hand down on the hard sand, and she saw her pick up the machete, and she saw her chop off her middle finger with one simple chop, like a girl topping a carrot, neatly, on a quiet Surrey Saturday, between gymkhana and lunch. She saw her drop the machete and rock back on her heels, holding her hand (115).

The resistance here obviously differs greatly from the resistance in *Owen Meany*. It is somewhat a complete inversion: it occurs "on site" (for lack of a better term) and with a more immediate sense of emergency; the amputee does not wear her stump proudly, as a sign of her resistance, but hides it, almost shamefully, and learns to go about her life in Kingston-upon-Thames with *the other hand* (the novel's title in the United Kingdom).

However, the parallels are also important. Primarily, Sarah Summers' action is a life-saving one that defies a power structure that she cannot in good conscience support. She is, like John Wheelright, unwilling to participate. In this sense, her amputation scrapes *bios* out of the belly of the earth, and it makes a political statement. So, however reluctant she might have been to remove her finger, having done so speaks to both symbolism and pragmatism.

Also, just like not having a trigger finger disallows John Wheelright to serve the US military, Sarah combines the symbolic and the pragmatic to create a rhetoric. She disables her ability to serve the multinational oil companies that would have her "give the middle finger" to the exploited nation-states held at the periphery of the international hierarchy. Here, "the middle finger" is, on one level, much

---

more rhetorical than John Wheelright's trigger finger, because its destructive power is delivered by a message, not a bullet. At bottom, however, they are symbolic *and* pragmatic in nearly identical ways. Neither character wants to literally shoot southeast Asians or to personally address Nigerians with a "fuck you," nor do their personal convictions support such politics. Yet without a trigger finger or a middle finger, both retain the literal and physical ability to perform those acts. John could use his left hand or any other finger on his right hand to shoot a gun, just as Sarah could raise her right hand's middle finger. In fact, both characters exhibit anxiety regarding precisely this problem. John obsesses over his responsibilities to a morally exhausted USA while living in Canada, while Sarah continues driving her car in England, filling it weekly with "petrol." The point, then, is obviously *not* that the characters actions are *wholly* pragmatic, though it is an interesting and somewhat distressing problem.

Yet to conclude that their amputations are wholly symbolic, without pragmatism, is to miss another point, which is that their self-mutilations—directly and indirectly—*do* save the lives of others, and by deflecting diamond wheels and machetes from their intended objects, reappropriating them for use on themselves, they also—to whatever degree—deflect the guns of the US military and the village-burning fires of multinational oil companies. They are obviously willing to bear the stamp of that decision. Their bodies have become texts that may be read as resistance, and that are heard rhetorically echoing symbolism and pragmatism.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup>Owen Meany is introduced as having a "wrecked voice" (13) and as such, Irving quotes him in capital letters from start to finish.

### Works Cited

- Cleave, Chris. *Little Bee*. London: Simon & Schuster, 2008. Print.
- De Certeau, Michel. *The Practice of Everyday Life*. Berkeley: U of California P, 1988. Print.
- Foucault, Michel. "Nietzsche, Genealogy, History." *The Foucault Reader*. Ed. Paul Rabinow. New York: Pantheon, 1984. 76-100. Print.
- Hardt, Michael and Antonio Negri. *Empire*. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2000. Print.
- Irving, John. *A Prayer for Owen Meany*. New York: Ballantine, 1989. Print.
- Stiegler, Bernard. *Technics and Time, 1: The Fault of Epimetheus*. Stanford: Stanford UP, 1994. Print.