"Reason always follows the state of the heart"*

* Wm.Law (d.1761), A DEMONSTRATION..., 216,219,227: "The gospel speaks only to the heart, and nothing but the heart can either receive or reject it. For this is an eternal truth, which you cannot too much reflect upon, that reason always follows the state of the heart, and what your heart is, that is your reason."

Wm.Law, now little read, was--apart from the Bible--the greatest literary influence on the father of the Eng. dictionary (Sam.Johnson) & the father of Methodism (Jn.Wesley).

When reflecting on just having seen Atom Egoyan's film **"The Sweet Hereafter"** (1997 Alliance Communications Ego Film Arts; based on a Russell Banks novel), I thought of Laws' "characters," personal symbols of virtues/vices, & of Alex.Whyte's CHARACTERS AND CHARACTERISTICS OF WILLIAM LAW (my copy, 4th ed., Hodder & Stoughton 1907). To get the Banks/Egoyan dramatis personae rightly named, I read (on the Net) the movie script. Here, I'll first-name only the major ones, in order of entrance:

MITCHELL

Stevens, fire-engine-chasing lawyer. Not a fire, but a bus accident (breaking through river-ice)--schoolchildren: 14 dead, one (Nicole) in wheelchair for life, some minor injuries; busdriver Dolores Driscoll in neckbrace. In hope of making it big by a 1/3rd-contingency negligence class-action suit, Mitchell appeals to the survivors' lust for vengeance-retribution & greed for compensation. In a Saul Alinsky-like whipping up of anger ("not grief," which is a separate matter). With bare-faced hypocrisy, he has & appeals to the lowest motives while mouthing altruism, insisting that the guilty (the deep-pockets bus manufacturer [for "leaving out one 10¢ bolt" or something else] or the town [for a defective guard-rail]) be punished "to ensure moral responsibility in this society." "I will prove, and reveal, who it was who did not do their job....I will sue for negligence."

Because of the intricate interweavings of charcters & flashblacks, Mitchell being the shuttle, I decided to do this personae-listing (1) for my own clarity & (2) to facilitate our film-group's discussion.

Novelist & director, commenting on their work, say they are preaching family in a family-corrosive culture, viz. post-WWII America. The film begins & ends with the same blissful scene, a naked family (mother, tiny daughter, father [Mitchell]) asleep in bed. Second scene: Mitchell stuck in a carwash, gets a phonecall from that daughter, now a druggie in her 20s, father-abusive (not father-abused). In later cellphone-calls we learn she's been in a porn flick to raise money (beyond what she's been able to milk her father for), & has contracted AIDS. Her name is

ZOE

--ironically, Greek for spiritual "life" (beyond "bios," physical life). Only upon finding she has AIDS does her father stop treating her cooly, in defense of his wallet: "I love you, Zoe. No matter what happens, I'll take care of you." When confronted by an angry bereaved father who threatens to beat him up, he says "We've all lost our children. Mine is..." & in anguish he tells the story of Zoe.

What happens when a small community is hit by a great tragedy? That question intrigued the novelist, who collected clippings of a schoolbus sinking in South Texas--which he transposed to "Sam Dent, British Columbia."

Making the rounds to recruit the sufferers, Michell comes first to

RISA

Walker & her husband, owners of the local motel. They lost their son, an only child, in the accident--but Mitchell says it was "no accident, someone is to blame." Later, in motel room No.11, Risa commit adultery (on schedule) with widower Billy Ansel, who lost his son & his daughter.

Next, Mitchell arrives at the home of

DOLORES

Driscoll, whose husband recently suffered a severe stroke (but manages to stammer out disapproval of Mitchell's project). In a neckbrace, she says it was an accident: she was trying to avoid hitting "a red-brown blur" she remembers seeing cross in

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front of the bus as she jammed on the brakes & skidded. Mitchell hopes, at the trial, to conceal this admission of guilt.

Next, Mitchell arrives at the home of

HARTLEY

Otto & his wife, who lost their child--an adopted Amerind boy. Hartley says "Dolores said she saw a dog and tried to" but Mitchell cuts him off.

Next, Mitchell arrives at the home of

BILLY

Ansel, widower, who so loved his (now drowned) son & daughter that daily, on the way to work, he drove his pickup behind the bus so he could wave at his kids, who to wave back were always at the rear of the seating. His (regular) adultery with Risa is delicately (no frontal nudity except bare breasts, no heavy breathing) & drearily handled.

Next, Mitchell arrives at the home of

SAM

Burnell, his wife, & their daughter Nicole (in wheelchair, from the "accident"). Out of his guilt from incest with Nicole, Sam has built her a dream room. (The incest, literally in the hay, is presented only as a tight embrace--mercifully, no details.) Which brings us to...

NICOLE

--highschooler, whom we see in clips throughout the film, reading to two children (whom she's babysitting) Browning's "The Pied Piper of Hamelin: A Child's Story," which I reread, & which closes with the moral "let us keep our promise" (which the citizens of Hamelin [& of Sam Dent, B.C.] did not do, & so lost their children).

CRITIQUE: Now we face a divide between the novelist/director romantic affirmation of community vs. truth (parallel with the RC hierarchy's elevation of secretive church-protection over child-protection). Billy Ansel, in the pickup behind the bus, says the bus was doing 51mph--but Nicole says she saw the speedometer at 72! She betrays both the truth & Dolores, to keep the lid on the town's (& her) dirty secrets. Contrast **Jesus**, who says to "sing" it (L.12.3 NRSV: "what you have whispered behind closed doors will be proclaimed from the housetops"). Because of her lie, the lawyer lost his case & her parents lost their opportunity to obtain further monies for her medical expenses.

Banks says Egoyan "digs away at the layers of family in order to get its true history told." Banks: "it's really a parable of the lost children.... our culture [in the last ½ of the 20th c.] has lost its children." (Again, Mitchell: "We've all lost our children, Mr.Ansel.....They're dead to us. They kill each other in the streets. They wander comatose in shopping malls. They're paralyzed in front of television. Something terrible has happened that has taken our children away. It's too late. They're gone.") But Banks & Egoyan are in contradiction: they want us to know the town's dirty secrets, but they don't want them coming out in court, so they praise Nicole for lying, "the key to reuniting the town, whose cohesion is being destroyed as its secrets threaten to emerge"; bravely, she "halts the process of disintegration and regains her dignity," so the town can come to dwell in (Browning's poem) "the sweet hereafter," "at peace with its fate." Egoyan: "being led somewhere magical--a place which can on the one hand annihilate, but also elevate and bring cohesion and purpose."

But Nicole's betrayal of Dolores is anti-community. "What's going to happen to Dolores?...Will the police do anything to her?" No, she lost her job, & may "move away." "We're all citizens of a different town now....a town of people living in the sweet hereafter....Whether others defend us, protect us, love us or hate us--they do it to meet their own needs, not ours. This is what I learned. This is what I found out." Some community!

Internet comments: How cope with communal tragedy & "the interwoven paths of innocence and evil"? "Loss and healing." Egoyan: "My films have always been about people who are [like Mitchell] outside a community," whose lives they reveal.