

# THE RAVEN FOUNDATION

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## SACRIFICIAL CROWDS: TEACHING LITERATURE AND SCRIPTURE IN PRISON

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"A Gentle answer turns away wrath, but a hard word stirs up anger" (Prov. 15.1). This is the sort of practicable wisdom that informs Jesus' admonitions in the Sermon on the Mount (Mt 5-7). It also aptly summarizes René Girard's analysis of violent reciprocity whose contagious spread can devastate entire communities. His mimetic anthropology includes a theory of human cultural origins which he traces to the discovery of sacrificial rituals as a means of diverting communal violence onto a single scapegoat victim. It was in his study of the European novels (Dostoevsky, Proust, Cervantes, *inter alia*) (Girard 1966) that Girard detected the pattern of mimetic or imitative desires as leading to conflict when their objects cannot be shared by rival contenders for them; but he has traced his foundational insights to biblical revelation, with its radical critique of scapegoating practices from the perspective of their victims (Girard 1987). Consequently, when I teach masterpieces of Western literature through the lens of Girard's ideas in a maximum security prison, biblical references, including entire episodes, regularly suggest themselves for discussion. This correlation of insights is especially abundant and poignantly relevant to the men I teach, where we link classic works of African-American literature with the Western literary tradition that inspires them, and where writings by Richard Wright, Ralph Ellison, James Baldwin, and still many more, unveil the sacrificial dynamics that propel myriad forms of racial oppression. A case in point: the narrative of the woman taken in adultery (Jn 8.1-11) effectively dispels the delusions, moral and legal, that we entertain about guilt and innocence in our harshest punitive practices. I shall examine this episode as a veritable deconstruction of sacrificial and scapegoating processes after remarking upon the context of teaching in prison.

My principle of selection regarding the writers I've just listed is guided by the simple fact that the vast majority of inmates I teach are themselves African-American or Spanish-American, which is the case nationwide. These populations are as underrepresented in the precincts of wealth, influence, and power as they are overrepresented in our prisons. Of course my aim here is to encourage my students' familiarity with the lofty achievements of their own cultural heritage, but it is equally important to connect these achievements with a wider literary tradition that reaches across centuries and across national idioms and boundaries; many of our greatest writers concern

themselves with the exercise of violence and the systemic misconceptions about its origins and dynamics. Girard's mimetic theory provides the analytical frame, the connective tissue that links all these writings because it reaches to the volatile core of our uniquely violent species, the only one among all other animals that, as Samuel Johnson quipped, "does not devour what it kills, and therefore is a friend of vultures" ("Vultures and Men"). Johnson figures among our readings, as well as Swift, who queried with devastating irony that since his country had reduced its Irish population to inhuman conditions, why not breed their young as a profitable source of protein delicacies?

Of course one can teach such authors as Johnson and Swift effortlessly without any biblical references whatsoever, but not without reference to the indelible fact that their moral intelligence, and especially their scandalized discernment of uniquely human violence, is framed and formed by biblical revelation, which is the case for all Western writers, consciously or not, and whether they even believers or not. The very emergence of literature as a free standing and freely expanding institution, apart from any hieratic reference or authorization, is underwritten, as of the Renaissance, by Christianity's ownmost secularizing impetus, its truth-seeking impulses against institutionalized forces of domination, superstition, and arbitrary oppression. As Cesáreo Bandera (1994) has shown, along with many another (Larry Siedentop, among the latest), Western science along with the literature of open inquiry which gives birth to it is guided by a confidence in the sacred/profane divide, a separation of powers that is all but unknown in Greek and Roman antiquity; a trust in the difference between "the things that are Caesar's and the things that are God's." Literary humanism is authorized by Saint Paul's admonition to the world at large: "Whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things" (Phil 4.8).

Voltaire, the virtual standard bearer of European Enlightenment, is another case in point. The central topic of his *Candide* is human violence in all its institutional forms, ecclesiastical, military, and economic. Voltaire's eponymous character travels over almost the entire world to be reunited with his beloved Cunégonde, but the love quest motif is a transparently and comically faint pretext for the opportunity to place the question of evil, "le mal moral et le mal physique," before his readers, with special emphasis on the wanton mayhem that we humans wreak upon one another.

All this comes to a head in Chapter 19, for instance, where a half-naked, mutilated slave sums up his horrific mistreatment by his Dutch colonial owner with the remark: "That's the price of

your eating sugar in Europe." It is worth recalling that in the 18th and 19th centuries sugar and cotton were the largest and most lucrative exports from the new world to the old, and that chattel slavery was the hub of these commercial wheels. But Voltaire does not stop with unveiling this "abomination," a term, as it happens, of biblical provenance. The slave, whom Candide naively, candidly, addresses as "mon ami," which is also Voltaire's way of drawing his readers closer to our victim, follows up this decisively compact indictment of unavowed but widespread complicity in evil with his account of being catechized by missionaries in the descent of all humans from Adam:

Dogs, monkeys, and parrots are much less miserable than we are. The Dutch fetishes, who converted me, tell me every Sunday [tous les dimanches] that we are all [tous] children of Adam, black and white alike. I am no genealogist; but if these preachers speak the truth, we must all be cousins. Now, you will surely agree that relations could not be treated more horribly."

Voltaire certainly does not believe in the creation story but he does believe absolutely and passionately in the common humanity that that story emphatically intends to reveal. This militant humanism is not news to Voltaire's world or to ours, but Scriptural authority gives it a relentless sense of moral urgency (McKenna 2014a). The creation story is not, except to biblical literalists, a true story, but what I call a truth story; like that of the Good Samaritan, which Jesus invents out of hand, it is host to a truth that biblical hearers and readers, along with everybody else, are logically compelled to assent to forever after.

For all his anticlericalism, Voltaire's critique of colonizing barbarity finds its validation in Scripture against the practices of its ministers: the voice of truth here is the voice of the victim, as authorized, in every sense, by its biblical source. This goes to the heart of Girard's reading of Scriptural revelation, which he sees as a radical deconstruction of myth: Romulus slays his brother Remus and founds a city with his god's approval; Cain slays his brother out of envy of his god's approval, whose voice takes the side of the victim, "the blood of Abel crying out from the ground" (Gn 4.10)--while proscribing vengeance against the murderer. This ban goes against the grain of archaic religion, where the ties that bind clan or community are bound up with prescriptions about whom to help and whom to hate (Dumouchel). In our age of democratic societies, we fail to realize how much human communities are formed even today over against others who are putatively not of their ilk, cast, breed or kind. Or, as in the US, race, which remains, as Gunnar Myrdal noted over 60

years ago, the "American dilemma," to which our prison population, the largest in the world, attests.

The construction of cultural and political identity as dialectical and in a sense derivative is openly and triumphantly proclaimed at the conclusion of the *Oresteia* trilogy, where the vengeful Furies are transformed into the Kindly ones, the *Eumenides*, but only for those within the city precincts. Orestes is absolved of his crime by the god, but only by redirecting violence without:

I pray that discord, greedy for evil, may never clamor in this city, and may the dust not drink the black blood of its people and through passion cause ruinous murder for vengeance to the destruction of the state. But may they return joy for joy in the spirit of common love, may they hate with one mind: for this is the cure of many an evil in the world. (*Eumenides* 977-87)

These words aptly summarize the pathology of belonging by which communities establish the identity of their members over against a common enemy, real or imagined. More often than not, it is imagined, and we owe to imaginative literature, to poetic fiction, the earliest and most enduring testimony to this restrictive pattern of social construction. If Scripture provides a hermeneutic key to literary interpretation, it is also the case that literature illustrates, dramatizes key notions of biblical revelation.

Dostoevsky certainly thought so: he used to visit the newsstand every day in search of plots for his novels, which he headed with epigraphs from the Bible. He was resolute in his belief that literature at its best continues a Biblical revelation that is host to essential insights into human behavior and that is being lived out in our relations with one another in our own time.

Dostoevsky, we know, had a strong influence upon Richard Wright, who rewrote *Crime and Punishment* as the tale of Bigger Thomas, the felonious protagonist of his *Native Son*. And Wright was a mentor for Ralph Ellison, whose *Invisible Man* resonates significantly, especially in its Prologue and Epilogue, with Dostoevsky's *Notes from the Underground*. The famous first chapter of his novel, often anthologized as "Battle Royal," recasts Euripides' *Bacchae* to explore the kind of initiation rites that cemented Jim Crow into Southern culture (McKenna 2014b). The point to be made here, the truthy one, is not about cause and effect influence, but how our best writers, drawing upon their own experience and borrowing from others in fiction, discover patterns of interaction that are common to all human societies. What writers inspire among one another are continuous with biblical inspiration. If they are African-American writers, they have every good reason to challenge

the myths and stereotypes that sanction oppression, past and present.

The influence of Bible for Black writers goes without saying, being the proof text of Emancipation and of the excruciating endurance during Jim Crow; and not just as to the theme of enslavement but, just as importantly for their formal achievements, as to the figures and rhythms of their prose, descending from Gospel spirituals, jazz, and blues. Ellison's formal education was in music, and he writes percipitly about the artistic and thematic importance of blues for Wright (1953). James Baldwin's essays are shot through with biblical imagery which he inherits from his preacher father but also from the streets of Harlem where he grew up. Esthetics and epistemics, beauty and truth, are endemic to literary masterpieces everywhere we find them. Courses in the "Bible as Literature" are taught throughout American colleges; what Girard's ideas put on offer is the symmetrical notion of literature as bible, not as sacred text but as revelation. For what it's worth, this has been my experience of teaching and scholarly publishing on the Western literary canon, a word denoting standard or measure, notionally borrowed from the Judaic and Christian delimiting establishment of their sacred texts. Revelation is officially closed in these complementary religious traditions, but unofficially it is ongoing, masterfully updating Scripture.

The Bible shares with myth the intuition of violent cultural foundations, and breaks decisively with it in adopting as its own the perspective of the victim, the defenseless outcast, as it does when it advocates for the widow, the orphan, even the stranger, in preference to ritual purities and pieties; as it does most spectacularly in the Passion narrative, which reads like all other sacrificial accounts as an effort to expel violence from the community, except that it represents such efforts from the perspective of the innocent victim of mob violence, of a man "hated without cause." This is what is fully unveiled in the words of Caiphas, for whom the religious question of guilt or innocence gives way to strictly political concerns: "You do not realize that it is better for you that one man die for the people than that the whole nation perish" (Jn 11.49; 18.24). This sacrificial logic mortally offends our Enlightenment sense of justice and right rule, which we tend to take for granted as a centuries-long conquest of the intellect, though it is more likely issuing from "the intelligence of the victim" that James Alison (1999) has emphasized in his explorations of Scripture. Pilate assents to Caiphas's logic reluctantly, and against his wife's better judgment, in the face of crowd pressures. Mimetic theory brings renewed emphasis to the role of crowds in the Gospel narratives (Wink), which is strong enough to pull even the little crowd of Jesus' disciples into its

sway, as we know from the accounts of Peter's denial, which I shall review here shortly with an eye to the crowd mimesis it unveils.

This view of social reality from the perspective of the victim is one that Western culture has made its own and that fuels the emancipatory and egalitarian energies of the Enlightenment, not least when it is exercised against religious persecution of every kind, and, however belatedly, against racial oppression and discrimination of every kind. The voice of Martin Luther King is one with Gandhi and Thoreau and Socrates, as he was explicitly aware, but it is also one, in a different tone, via a different rhetorical strategy, with Mark Twain, whose Huck Finn cannot bring himself to obey his culture's imperatives when faced with what he sees nonetheless as his religious duty to return his friend Jim to his slave owners after he has escaped with the boy on a raft. We hear this voice from Antigone, who cannot abide by a decree, duly and devoutly established by Creon to restore communal harmony in the manner we've seen prescribed above for Athenians; for the decree relegates her brother to inhuman status by denying him burial. Simone Weil (18-24) rightly sees Antigone as a prototype, a forerunner of Jesus.

The modern novel itself is a Western literary innovation which typically narrates the struggle of an individual against the mores and institutions governing behavior around him or her, and often arrayed against the protagonist's emerging sensibilities (*Oliver Twist* comes to mind<sup>1</sup>). The novel comes into its own as the coming-of-age narrative (*Bildungsroman*) in the bourgeois era, which in principle claims freedom and equality for individuals, male or female: self-realization is for everyone. But this narrative realism is the stepchild of the peculiar realism that Eric Auerbach traces to the blunt, roughshod form of Biblical story telling, with its episodic gaps and discontinuities, which is such that, as Cesáreo Bandera (2014) writes, "the invisible dimension of historical reality filters in, a sense of depth and background is conveyed, a profound concern for essential truth beyond the empirical details is communicated at all levels" (19). Auerbach's *Mimesis*

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<sup>1</sup> "My dear young lady," rejoined the surgeon, mournfully shaking his head; "crime, like death, is not confined to the old and withered alone. The youngest and fairest are too often its chosen victims."

"But, can you--oh! can you really believe that this delicate boy [apprehended as a thief] has been the voluntary associate of the worst outcasts of society?" said Rose. "But even if he has been wicked," pursued Rose, "think how young he is; think that he may never have known a mother's love, or the comfort of a home; that ill-usage and blows, or the want of bread, may have driven him to herd with men who have forced him to guilt. Aunt, dear aunt, for mercy's sake, think of this, before you let them drag this sick child to a prison, which in any case must be the grave of all his chances of amendment." (*Oliver Twist*, ch.30)

focuses on Peter's denial to make his point (35-43) but his attention, as indicated by his subtitle, is devoted to *The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*, to objective mimesis, the way words draw a picture. As a result, he misses the essential point of this episode, which is about subjective, behavioral mimesis, the way we imitate one another.

Matthew's and Mark's accounts are the most emphatic on this issue. When Jesus tells his disciples that they will "fall away," "will be scattered," Peter interjects, "Even though they all fall away, I will not" (Mk 14.29; Mt 26.33) He sees himself as apart from the crowd, even from his fellow disciples in both accounts. The rivalry among the disciples for rank among them as dramatized in other episodes resurfaces here, as those in the inner circle vie for proximity to the sacred center, or for privileged identity within it. And what we read immediately after this denial of denial is "And they all said the same," (Mk 14.21), "And so said all the disciples" (Mt 26.35). Peter models the denial of the others; rivalry is contagious, and that's how Jesus knows he will be betrayed by the one claiming to be closest to him. It is not in spite but because of the claim that Jesus predicts his betrayal. His intelligence of the victim is one with his intelligence of crowd mimesis; his structural intuition, his resistance to these centripetal forces is organized by his fervent conviction that his center is outside of himself, in the will of his Father. This loving relationship immunizes him to the rivalries swirling all around him. On the other hand, Christian liturgy exhibits our mimetic proclivities when it assigns the role of the crowd to the faithful in the pews in Holy Week readings of the Passion.

Unlike Homeric personae, these biblical characters have a history, no destiny or fate guides them, they are free, they can fail and they can change; they're like us, and the prophetic rebuke to "eyes that do not see and ears that do not hear" that Jesus takes up (Lk 8.10; Mk 4.12;) has a way of leading to prison, even death. Don Quijote, we are told in its prologue, is an "orphaned" work, "born in a prison," and his prologue is emphatic on the topic of the reader's freedom. Of course readers who side with the Don's madness are opaque to the meaning of his deathbed conversion, his "desengaño," his disentrainment with imaginary feats of glory modeled on literary heroism, a perennial crowd pleaser.

The Gospels' appeal to freedom is emphatic, notorious: "The truth shall set you free" (Jn 8.32). Free from what? Not so much from political oppression, which is how we imagine freedom today, but rather from internal social pressures, crowd dynamics that skew our vision and distort our

understanding. This happens most often without our being aware of it, as a result of which "we know not what we do"--which is a good reason, on strictly anthropological grounds, to pray to a God, if you pray at all, who is more inclined to mercy than to justice, to forgiveness, as so many of the Psalms testify. In *The Human Condition* Hannah Arendt (212-15) argued that Jesus discovered forgiveness as a means, at the very least, of peoples' being able to get along better by letting go of resentful grudges. But this is not true. Forgiveness bestrides the Hebrew Bible throughout: Jacob and Esau make their peace, where the brother enemies Polyneices and Eteocles, in Sophocles' *Oedipus at Colonus*, feel destined to fratricidal rancor; Joseph forgives the envious brothers who sought his extinction, and not, according to the evidence of the text, on his own initiative, but by the example, the model, of his brother Judah, who asked that he take the place of his youngest brother Benjamin, who is the apple of his father's eye and whose victimization seems imminent. We note the same dynamic in *The Tempest*, where Prospero assembles his former persecutors for reasons we can only guess are vengeful, but upon the suggestion of his disciple Ariel (5.1), forgives them (McKenna 2002). This is why, in Prospero's parting words to the public, which are Shakespeare's as well, we find a paraphrase of the "Our Father." Forgiveness is mandated by Western religious tradition not simply as a moral good, but as a solution to conflict, which we know from our wars and rumors of wars yet to come can often spiral out of control; it is, in sum, a source of freedom, perhaps the only one, from violent reprisals and the resentments that kindle them.<sup>2</sup>

Jesus gets into trouble with the leaders of his people when he tells individuals that their sins are forgiven because that is how he understands the God of Israel, with whom he conceives a filial relationship that is free of anything but loving beneficence and trust. This explains his typical response to the challenges, angry or mistrustful, that are raised against his preaching: rather than retort, he tells a story, or replies to a question with another question, benignly sidestepping many a test or trap that would hook him into violent controversy (Rohr 181).

I don't think that what I am saying here about Scripture is out of line with its standard,

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<sup>2</sup> James Baldwin certainly thought so. In his famous open letter to his nephew of 1962, he wrote: "There is no reason for you to try to become like white men and there is no basis whatever for their impertinent assumption that they must accept you. The really terrible thing, old buddy, is that you must accept them, and I mean that very seriously. You must accept them and accept them with love for these [so called] innocent people have no other hope. They are in effect trapped in a history which they do not understand and until they understand it, they cannot be released from it."

mainstream interpretation. Girard himself has emphatically stated his orthodoxy; "I'm an ordinary Christian," he has stated in an interview (1996, 286). What he brings to this consideration is the notion of Bible as our best social science, insisting on its real knowledge, its cognitive resources regarding human interaction and self-understanding; "Fundamental Anthropology" is how he entitles the central chapters on Scripture in *Things Hidden since the Foundation of the World*. This book remains his *magnum opus*, with the Bible bridging evolutionary theory (Part I) to human psychology (Part III), which he argues we have to conceive "*interdividually*." This neologism is engaged to explode the prevalent myth of autonomous individual agency, the fabled "rational actor" of classic economic theory, in favor of a view which recognizes our mimetic entanglements with one another and our environing culture, such that the good that we would do, we do not, and the evil we would not, we do (Rom 7.19). The net result is to broaden the parameters of revelation to include literary works which align with its insights, its truths. We can conceive of a large number of literary works as revelation from the ground up rather than from the top down. Nor is this conception startlingly new: the way that sacred and secular texts overlap, confirm, interpret, and explain one another replicates the manner in which the Canon of Hebrew and Christian Bibles came into being over centuries of cross-referencing and self-correcting, self-critical acumen. Adversaries of Scriptural authority like to harp on its many contradictions, but that is precisely its greatness, as Israel never ceases questioning its relation to its creator God and to his Law.

This question brings to mind the episode of the woman caught in adultery in John's Gospel, which I include in my teaching for discussion among other writings on crowd behavior (Twain, Ellison, Conrad, Sophocles, Shakespeare; list available on request). The crowd is momentarily present here: "all the people came to him" (8.2) in the temple where Jesus taught, and their authorized leaders, who we know to be in rivalry with Jesus for the approval of the crowd, are dutifully bound to show up.

We have to imagine a social circle, into the center, "in the midst" of which, the Scribes and Pharisees have thrust a woman who had been "caught in adultery." There is emphasis on this verb by its repetition in the mouths of her accusers, as if to embrace in its shadow unnumbered others not caught. And to be fair, it is not reasonable to expect anything else than for designated leaders to resist real or imaginary challenges to their place and function, to succumb to rivalry about this. They cite the law of Moses prescribing the manner of the woman's execution; communal stoning denotes

the requirement of cultural unanimity--and anonymity: all--and no one in particular--must participate in the Law's summary enforcement. In structural terms, we have the "unanimity minus one" that we find in sacrificial rituals, the one here being a transgressor of the law that is quite rationally prescribed to ensure against the social disorder which would result from the wanton disruption of family bonds. Legal and religious jurisdictions are thoroughly co-extensive here, as they are in many places elsewhere and not far from home, not in the least.

The narrator intervenes to observe that Jesus' challengers "said this to test him, that they might have some charge to bring against him" (6). Which clearly means that they care less about the Law, or the woman, or her crime, than about Jesus' threat to their authority. This is about Jesus, not the woman, in whose central, sacrificial place they'd prefer to affix this popular know-it-all Nazarene. I don't think John is indulging in conspiracy theory here, which would scapegoat the Scribes and Pharisees, as modern readers often do. This is a classic case, analyzed many times by Girard, in which the object of rivalry, here the Law's dispensation, is displaced by fascination with the rival; strife cannot be contained, it can only escalate when contention becomes the content. This is what happens for instance in the angry exchange between Oedipus and Teresias as to who is the cause of the city's misfortune, and again between Oedipus and Creon; at a certain point it's about them, not about the evils they are called upon to allay. We see it on the playground among children every day and adult supervision is needed to distract from further strife.

At this point, we read that Jesus does not answer, but instead "bent down," as if to pick up a stone, which would be the first stone. But instead he doodles in the sand with his finger, a strictly meaningless gesture. This is a highly charged situation: a woman's life is at stake, as well as his own if he gives the wrong answer; story telling won't do. It is reasonable to suppose that Jesus is trying to figure out how to defuse the situation otherwise; this pause for reflection heightens attention and favors reflection to come, when he stoops to doodle again. Reflection is a theme of the episode. He comes up with "If any one of you is without sin, let him be the first to throw a stone at her" (7).As Girard has observed, the first stone is the hardest to throw; to initiate lethal violence is more difficult by another order of magnitude than to imitate it thereafter. That's all Jesus has to "say about her," and it isn't about "her," but about her accusers and executioners. When he bends down again to doodle in the sand, the ball is decisively in the other court: now it is the crowd's turn to ponder, reflect, as to whom to finger for violation of the Law.

The numerical symmetry here is rigorous, thematic, with the crowd of "all the people" dispersing "one by one, beginning with the eldest." These last have been around more, seen more and done more, which, if not against the commandment against adultery, most probably includes violating the tenth and final one against envy, such as one might entertain about one's neighbor's wife. Whence the emphasis on the woman's being "caught," the implication by the end of the story being of multiple complicity in the desires for which she was apprehended *in flagrante*. The circle of accusers is broken like the molecules of a bubble at the slightest puncture--but from within.

The structural effects here are remarkable, telling, and not least for the symmetry with Peter's denial. In John 8, Jesus' enemies seek to entrap him. In the denial narratives, all his friends claim to take his side. The denial is the flip side, the obverse of the stoning. I doubt that this symmetry is intentional; rather it simply exhibits the Gospels' attention to crowd dynamics, which are everywhere the same--that's revelation for you. Kierkegaard is right to say that "the crowd is always wrong," "is untruth" (1846), because in a crowd there is by definition no single, individual, responsible, moral agency, which Jesus constantly summons his hearers to recognize as the only authentic, authorized response to God's law, as does Psalm 51 among others.

In the stoning episode, Jesus does not, as we expect of our latter day heroes, indeed as Peter sees himself, break into the circle to rescue the dame; he breaks the circle by restoring to its members an individual conscience. That's like--a miracle. This is why we are left "alone," "with no one to condemn" her, with only Jesus and the woman, who is admonished to "sin no more" (10-11). Unanimity minus one is no longer grounds for execution of the law; sacrificial closure is undone from within. The law of forgiveness trumps the law of ordained punishment because it responds more realistically, more truthfully, to the mimetic disposition--or dysposition--of humans. The violent application of the law is revealed as the sacrificial practice that it truly is. The point of the story is not the abrogation of the law, but its fulfillment in the story's implied call to the "one by one" response for its accomplishment, which no ritual, no matter how crowded and violent, could achieve. According to James Alison (2009), this is why Jesus tells his hearers to pray away from the crowd, in a quiet space such as a closet or pantry, alone with the Lord and his law.

The anthropological truth of this episode resonates strongly with my students in prison because of the structural analogies to their own situation. They typically come from bad neighborhoods with bad schools and no jobs except the bad ones in the drug trade. They do not

hesitate to write about the bad models they have encountered throughout this experience, and the bad example they have set, and regret. One of them states in an essay that "mimetic theory is a no brainer." The most widespread social science expression describing this experience is "pipeline": from school to jail to jail to prison to prison, since recidivism is fairly baked into the system, as lesser offenders are more deeply criminalized in prison. It's called "criminogenesis" by the committee of social scientists and jurists convened to study *The Growth of Incarceration in the United States* (Travis). This has resulted in what we now identify as our Prison Industrial Complex (PIC), whose huge population is "warehoused" (the other commonplace expression regarding it), and to no demonstrable benefit to anyone, at outlandish expense, and with devastating harm to families and entire communities of a kind guaranteed to repopulate the system. All round it is, as we learn from Joseph Rodney Dole, an inmate who has perspicuously mined data on its every dimension, *A Costly American Hatred*.

No one intended this; and in all my research I find no voices defending it. Yet we have created a monster; we have sown the dragon's teeth. The Cadmus myth is very telling about how violence replicates itself, since, as Girard has remarked, "violence is never lost on violence"(2010, 18). Except that there is no monster to slay or to have slain. Girard has shown that mythic monsters are a blind, a misrecognition ("méconnaissance") of crowd mimesis in its wanton, terrifying destructiveness. The PIC is so grotesque that its inmates, especially its majority of African Americans, tend to view it as a conspiracy; all they have to do is look around.

Conspiracy theory is a good foil, as I have found in my classes, for mimetic theory: it fastens on the idea of a concerted and systemic ill will that is to blame for misfortune or misadventure (Fleming and Jane). Mimetic theory is its diametric antithesis: it argues, on the basis of massive evidence, psychological, sociological, political, historical, literary, and Scriptural, that the will is ill, being contaminated by mimetic desire; that our motives and doings are mimetically modeled, literally *ill conceived*, being prey to involvements, to actions and especially reactions, in which we participate non-consciously, unreflectively, in the heat of the moment or the hardening heart of resentments secreted by thwarted desire.

Conspiracy theory is in fact a confederate of sacrificial practices: kill the beast; find and eliminate or isolate evil doers, ill wishers. Like common sense or reason in Descartes, the endowment of good will is what we always presume about ourselves, so misfortune is to be traced

to a malevolent source outside of us, other than ourselves, the enemy of the good, of God. Christian tradition has given this compact, self-conscious ill will a local habitation (hell) and a name (Satan). For Girard, Satan is the mimetic principle in the way it scatters, divides people against one another, so that they only unite around a scapegoat victim, whose advocate, the "paraclete" in Greek, is the Holy Spirit, the attorney for the defense of victims (2001). As to hell, its location can be anywhere, as Girard writes of Dostoevsky's underground man (1965): "Everyone thinks he alone is condemned to hell, and that is what makes it hell" (57). The only absolutely good will we can imagine would be God's, who "alone is good," Jesus says. Which is a reason to pray, as he instructed, that God's will be done, since ours is untrustworthy, suspect; it is rarely our own, but another's or social others'.

According to Robert Ferguson, professor of law and literature at Columbia University, we have only to visit our prison system to witness hell on earth. His *Inferno: An Anatomy of American Punishment* describes a thoroughly toxic atmosphere infecting all of its inhabitants, correctional staff included: "One of the telling characteristics of prison punishment is an enforced intimacy without meaningful communication between open enemies. There is a closeness within a pervading coldness that breeds hatred and further complicates the mixed signs in suffering" (89). The eloquent essays in Doran Larson's imposing edition of writings by prisoners (*Fourth City*) confirms this verdict: prison teaches "how to be a criminal" (28), or "creates a meaner criminal" (248). It is "a gladiator school" (43), whose confines "multiply chances for conflict" (59), whose "rites of passage" consist of "doing to others what they have done to you" (96-97). One inmate describes it as "an upside down kingdom" (44), which is as much as to say it is the antithesis of the Kingdom proclaimed by Jesus, the obverse of the Golden Rule; it matches Dante's vision in myriad particulars. It is a place where "only dark hatred can survive" (280), a place of "chaos, malice, hate, spite, jealousy and madness" (103). In sum: "a satanic trap" (234), where the adjective conveys the full significance of Girard's Satan, which ensnares people in its violence at every turn, from within the population and between it and the guardians of the law. Over the gates of Dante's hell are inscribed the words "Abandon hope all who enter," which is largely borne out by the denizens of Prison City, the fourth largest in the US.

Ferguson burrows diligently through case law and public policy, through our cultural and religious history as well as major authors (Dante, Kafka, Dostoevsky, Melville among them), to

explain how this system built up out of an essentially sacrificial "us/them" mentality (112), "a broadly consensual thinking that thrives on the exclusion of others" (182). When this is leveraged in turn by a politics of fear purveying "a war on crime," "a war on drugs," the scapegoat mechanism is in place: "the desire to guard against so many ills comes to rest on the most logical symbol of the criminal who is ready to take from you in one way or another" (182). It is not the arrest of criminals that gives this process its sacrificial cast, but the kind of punishment that places them, quite like the woman caught in adultery, beyond the pale of our social arrangements, indeed beyond the ken of a common humanity. Their only rights, in addition to (indecent) food, clothing, and housing, are to secondary education and religious ministry.

Another sacrificial marker is the population that is singled out for expulsion, for attention here has gravitated disproportionately, as if for purposes of clarity, ease of handling, to a downtrodden and putatively hostile population that is color coded, racially framed (Feagin): the black male, circumscribed as "this stranger in our midst," has been the face of crime for a century, as Kalil Gibran Muhammed demonstrates amply in *The Condemnation of Blackness* (2): "The racial project of making blacks the 'thing against which normality, whiteness, and functionality have been defined,' was foundational to the making of modern urban America" (7). He is describing the role of the scapegoat in the sacrificial process by which membership is consolidated over against select victims, by which identity is secured through a pathology of belonging that is propelled by routinized expulsions. Michelle Alexander calls our PIC *The New Jim Crow* because it is lynching by another name, and it has all the marks of the episode of the woman caught in adultery, where righteousness, lawfulness, legitimate social participation, and concomitant notions of moral clarity, are propped up by systemic processes of incrimination.

Our prisons are host to those ranked, be they only among "the worst off" in a zero/sum culture of success, among "the category of the fallen":

Americans like to think of themselves as belonging to a society of opportunity in which exceptionalism gives identity. Success, no matter how achieved, is admired, and it has a corollary. Failure is your fault and close to a social sin. If you are also in Jail through that failure, you have proved yourself to be unsocial as well as antisocial in a consensual culture. (Ferguson 141)

Consensual culture is also a crowd culture, which is why Mark Twain, for one, was so satirically

suspicious of it. There is a hermeneutic of suspicion bestriding Scripture whose target is the wayward, idolatrous throng, whose god is violence itself (Wink). Ferguson sums up my instructional project handily: "Punishment is the end game of legal determination, what is famously known today as 'closure.' It is, however the axis of concern in most literary treatments of the subject" (199). Here he takes up *Billy Budd*, which is a thoroughly sacrificial drama in Melville's eyes (McKenna 2000), but he might have cited Hamlet: "Use every man after his desert, and who should 'scape whipping?" (2.2). Or Lear: "...see how yond justice rails upon yond simple thief. Hark, in thine ear: change places, and handy-dandy, which is the justice and which is the thief?" (4.6.). Or John 8.

Ferguson's analysis calls for a "new definition of the self," which is mimetic theory's aim as well. In our individualistic culture, we isolate the criminal around his crime in a way that shields us from any responsibility for the conditions that lead to it; it absolves our conscience in a way that we need to see as pharisaical, a denial of complicity which our biblical and literary traditions alike warn us away from. In this sense, as one inmate of *Fourth City* observes as if confirming Ferguson's critique, the PIC "mirrors society's ills" (63).

A glaring clue to this misprision is the effort undertaken to cover it up; we have relabeled prisons as "correctional centers," even as "correctional facilities," though there is little or nothing undertaken to remedy previous bad behavior; some places identify their inmates as "residents." "Euphemism," writes Adam Gopnik, "is a moral problem, not a cognitive one.... A grotesque euphemism is offensive exactly because we recognize perfectly well the mismatch between word and referent" (38). I'd say "moral *and* cognitive," an issue for genuine seekers of the good and the true, which in human affairs are inseparable. Gopnik's referent here is torture, notoriously reissued as "enhanced interrogation," but his point is valid for all such semantic cover ups, all efforts to disguise to ourselves what we are doing, to distract from the evils we are party to, whereby, as the biblical saying goes, we "are condemned out of our own mouths" (Mt 12.37; Lk 19.22).

Awareness of this misprision is massive and growing, as are attention to efforts in Restorative Justice rather than the retributive kind we dispense so heedlessly. But that is the matter of another essay, concerning other literary works and other demonstrations of biblical anthropology that undo our sacrificial habits of mind.

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