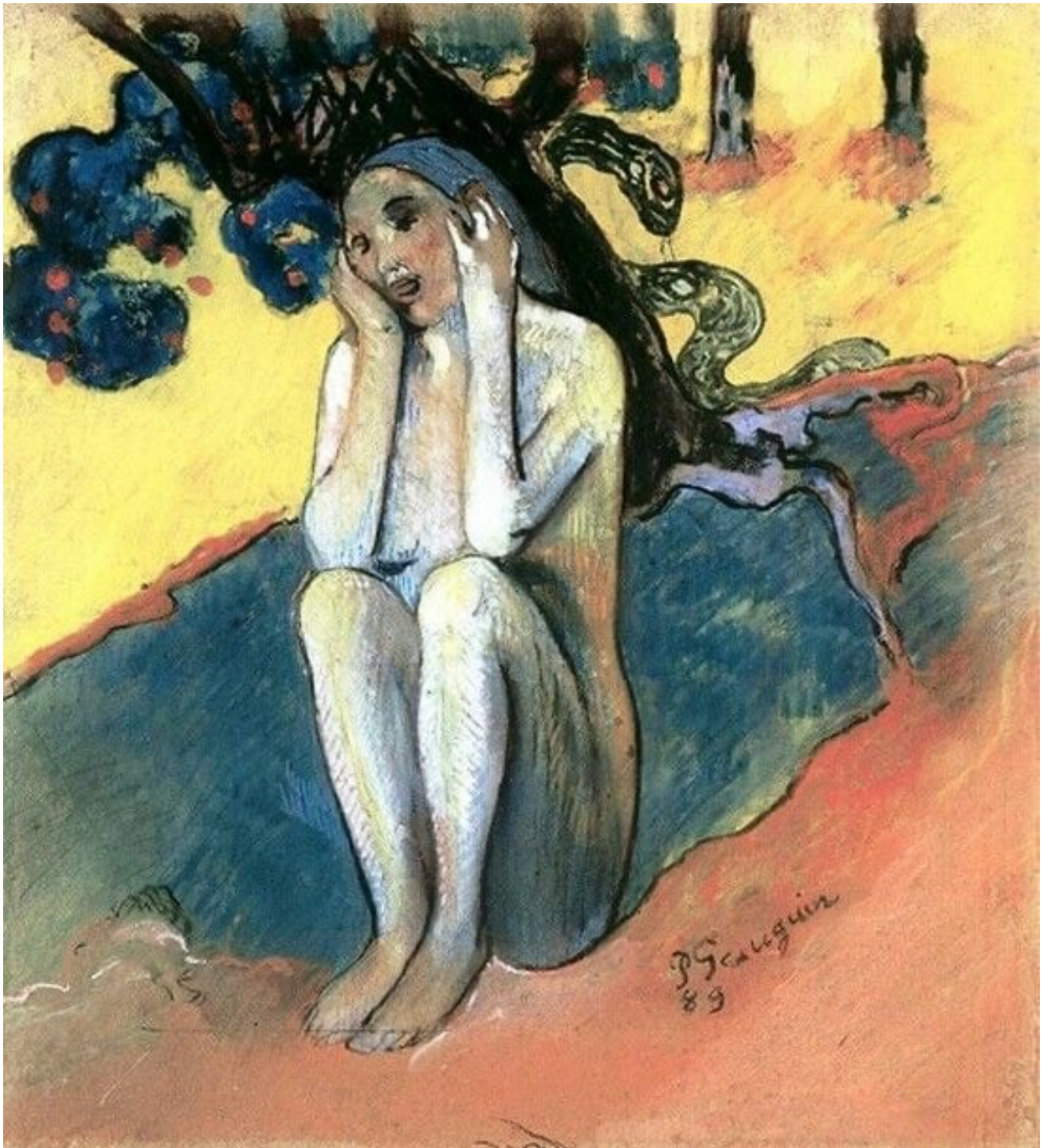


Heroism and Mythomania

by [Theodore Dalrymple](#) (June 2021)



Eve—Don't Listen to the Liar, Paul Gauguin, 1889

The victim is the modern hero and also the highest moral authority: for who would dare to question, let alone oppose, the opinion of a victim on the subject of whatever has made him or her a victim? Thus, we listen to victims with a kind of awed and uncritical, but also terrified, reverence even when they speak of abstractions. If they say something which we suspect or even know to be untrue, we fear to let on to others our derogation from the holy word. To disagree publicly with a victim, to question the undiluted veracity of their story, is to increase the harm they have suffered, and in effect to victimise them a second time. Did not Primo Levi have a nightmare that, when he returned from Auschwitz, no one would believe his account of his experiences and what he saw? As to the heroes of old, they were as likely by their heroism to create victims as reduce their sufferings. Out with them!

If to be a victim is to be a hero, then to be vulnerable—that is to say, weak and more susceptible than average to victimisation—is to be a hero-in-waiting, a hero *avant la lettre*. A person of fortitude is at best someone who is not true to himself, who will not admit his vulnerability to himself, from a misplaced sense of pride; at worst, he is a brute, a person who tries by his fortitude implicitly to denigrate the vulnerable and the victimised.

It is small wonder, then, that in a cultural climate such as this, some people are willing and able to claim the status of victim even when what they suffered is only one of the inevitable inconveniences of having been born human. It is as if we were prayed not for the Lord to make us strong but to make us fragile. Psychological fragility, of course, is romantic in a way in which strength of mind is not: it is the moral equivalent of the blood that romantic poets coughed up prior to dying early. Apart from anything else, psychological fragility gives one the standing from which to discourse at length upon one's favourite subject, the subject on which one is a world authority, namely oneself.

On my return to Paris recently, I bought and read a book that touches on the thirst for victimisation, or at any rate victim-status, that is one of the characteristics of our time. It was titled *La mythomane du Bataclan*, by Alexandre Kaufmann. It recounts the story of a woman, Florence M. (her full name is never given), who, after the terrorist attack on the Bataclan theatre in which ninety people were killed and hundreds injured, claimed that her boyfriend had been seriously injured in the attack and that he was recovering only slowly after a prolonged period in intensive care. She managed, as a kind of secondary victim, to join an association offering mutual support to survivors of the attack, eventually taking paid employment in the association. But she also claimed, in pursuit of compensation from a state agency that disburses money to the victims of terrorist and other crimes, to have been a direct victim of the attack: present in the Bataclan, she said she had witnessed scenes that prevented her from sleeping, concentrating, and so forth. She was believed, and managed by her tales to extract about \$30,000 from the state agency. Eventually, she was found out and was sent to prison.

She had long been a mythomaniac, living on the fringes of the rock music world, especially that part of it that seems to me to be the musical equivalent of a prolonged black mass. (The attack on the Bataclan took place while a group called the Eagles of Death Metal was playing a 'song' called *Kiss the Devil*, so that one cannot help but wonder whether the attack was a virulent and psychopathic commentary on western decadence.)

She created an elaborate fantasy world, inventing close relationships with characters who resembled people whom she had seen either closely or at a distance years ago, members of rock bands, and keeping up a correspondence with them on Facebook pages that she had herself mounted. At times, she claimed to be Jewish, that is to say a victim *ex officio*.

She even claimed to have been mugged while (and because) wearing a Star of David. She managed to persuade friends in the association that her correspondence with her imaginary interlocutors was real. They took an interest in the affairs of these mythical personages, who supposedly now lived in Los Angeles, and themselves corresponded with them, one of them even falling in love with her supposed correspondent and hoping to go on a journey across the United States with him and Florence and her equally mythical boyfriend. Above all, Florence received a lot of sympathy for the terribly slow recovery of her severely injured boyfriend, who needed intensive rehabilitation from his injuries.

Florence M. was not the only false victim who joined the association, though she was the most prominent and the last to be exposed as a fraud. The false victims had certain things in common: they were more vociferous than genuine cases, their stories were more elaborate, dramatic and more detailed, they were more insistent and determined in their search for monetary compensation or reward from the state for their supposed sufferings. In the case of Florence M., many of the genuine victims found her willingness to listen, console and counsel them reassuring and helpful; she was a sympathetic ear and was, in the cant psychobabble phrase, 'always there for them.'

It takes two to be defrauded, however, just as the late Marshal Mobutu Sese Seko of Zaire (now the so-called Democratic Republic of the Congo) used to say of corruption that it takes two to be corrupt—and he knew whereof he spoke. The person who defrauds must know his customers or clientele, as I suppose that nowadays, when we must call prostitutes sex workers, we should designate the persons defrauded. He must play upon their desires, their vanity, their weaknesses or their prejudices. He must tailor his frauds according to the persons to be defrauded, whether simple or sophisticated, for fraud should not be more complicated or convoluted than

necessary, since every complication increases the risk of exposure.

Once on a bus in rural Colombia, I witnessed a salesman of patent medicines do a roaring trade in an ointment that was almost certainly of little value beyond its placebo effect. There was, according to his sales patter, almost no human ailment which it would not alleviate, if not cure outright. When I saw the poor credulous peasants on the bus eagerly part with their little money, I was mortified. I wanted to intervene, to tell them not to waste their hard-earned cash on so worthless a product, but I desisted. It occurred to me that they were buying not ointment, but hope and reassurance, and that these were worth something. Deprive them of that hope and reassurance, and what would be left them? No doubt the hope and reassurance were in some sense false, but is not false hope a commodity to which we shall all sooner or later turn? The salesman of patent medicine, who came aboard the bus, knew that the peasants, if ill, would not, for a variety of reasons, turn straight away to qualified doctors; he knew that they needed something cheap that would offer them interim solace, as it were. True enough that he was, in a sense, swindling them, but he was also providing them with something that they needed.

Not all frauds have so benign a side, of course. The late Mr Madoff ruined many people and left some penniless in a thoroughly heartless way. Nevertheless, he must have had an insight into at least facets of human nature and psychology to have been so successful for so long. For example, he appealed to a desire for exclusivity and privilege. Instead of advertising to all and sundry, in the normal vulgar way of hucksters, he issued exclusive invitations to people to invest with him. By so doing, he made them feel that they were members of an elite, those good enough to be worthy of Mr Madoff's financial assistance. Normally a salesman is grateful to his client; Mr Madoff reversed this relationship, such that

the client came to feel grateful to his salesman. He was honoured to be relieved of his money.

Because Mr Madoff was interested only in people with a considerable sum to invest, he knew that his appeal must be sophisticated, for people in possession of such sums are not usually gullible pigeons for the plucking. His offer must be alluring enough to greed but not so far-fetched as to court disbelief. Unlike the salesman of patent medicines on the bus in Colombia, who could safely claim what any educated person would at once see was absurd, Mr Madoff had to offer something plausible to sophisticated people, thereby balancing the thirst for profit by a sense of reality. Therefore, he offered them not spectacular, but steady and good, returns year after year, ten or twelve per cent. If he had claimed returns of fifty per cent a year, they would have smelt a rat; if he offered less, they would have had no reason to invest with him. It was a delicate balance to maintain.

Florence M. knew that her society had both a thirst and an uncritical respect for victimhood. I think that even without a financial incentive to be a victim, she would have enjoyed the role and found it rewarding. That the state was prepared to indemnify her for what she said she suffered was a bonus. Her mythomania derived from a desire to be remarkable without having any particular talent or gift to make herself so. Her education had been mediocre (one of the first warning signs that she was a fake was that she and her supposed correspondents all made spelling errors, precisely the same ones). The desire to stand out, not to be content with the very ordinary station to which one's abilities and destiny has called one, is probably more prevalent now than ever before, thanks to celebrity culture and its baleful omnipresence in people's lives. Without her mythomania, her life would have been humdrum indeed, and the quality of being humdrum is humiliating to those whose minds are filled with dreams of fame. But with all her mythologising, she could postpone her

mental rendezvous with her own mediocrity, or profound ordinariness, at any rate as long as her mythologising was not publicly exposed as a fraud. More than, say, Mr Madoff, Florence M. was pitiable, at least if a life of bitterness caused by unfulfillable dreams is pitiable.

She made herself vicariously interesting to others through her invention of a badly-injured boyfriend. With a badly-injured boyfriend, hence an honorary victim herself, who could tell her to buzz off or shut up? She had an inordinate, even morbid, fear of being, and more especially of appearing, ordinary. That, no doubt, is what attracted her to an 'artistic' milieu with a satanic aesthetic (I used the term descriptively, not theologically), in which exhibitionism is the only talent. She had herself tattooed and dyed her hair pink. This was not merely youthful folly, or a stage of rebellion against a parental respectability deemed stifling: her tastes had not changed by the age of nearly fifty. She was caught in coarse adolescence as an insect caught in amber; and the longer she continued her taste for nihilistic ugliness, the less was she able to retreat from it without coming to the realisation that, in her search for being exceptional, she had devoted herself not merely to radical worthlessness, but to a way of life that made the world uglier.

Florence M was an admirer of a French rock band called High-School Motherfuckers. Their style of music, or noise, is called *sleaze*. I leave it to the reader to imagine what it sounds like. You can buy T-shirts with the name of the group emblazoned on them, round a skull, as also badges. There is a brand of beer named for the group. This is so awful that it is almost funny.

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Theodore Dalrymple's latest books are [*The Terror of Existence: From Ecclesiastes to Theatre of the Absurd*](#) (with Kenneth Francis) and [@NERIconoclast](#)