

Two Literary Sermons

by [Samuel Hux](#) (January 2020)



Death and The Maiden, Egon Schiele, 1915-16

Of course I use the word *sermon* metaphorically, or perhaps tri-metaphorically. First, because I sit at my desk pen in hand, not gripping the lectern before parishioners. Second, because a sermon is unlike a full theological disquisition relatively brief (for which parishioners thank the Lord), and consequently tends to be of an “introductory” nature. Third, because a sermon tends to be—as honest clergy will admit—the product of just whatever was on his or her priestly or

rabbinic mind the days before the Sabbath and not necessarily a part of a large theological plan. In any case, what follows is what's been on my mind the last few days, the only connection between the two "sermons" is that when I finished thinking about one matter I couldn't close my mind to the second.

I: The Truth the Old Books Tell

It's hard to get a handle on Homer's Odysseus. One scholar has argued that since *odyssasthai* means essentially "to cause pain and to be willing to do so," Odysseus' name roughly is "Trouble." His career bears it out. It's not hard to imagine a Dino De Laurentiis spectacular, a spaghetti western called "A Man Named 'Trouble'." Which is not to say Odysseus is a roughneck without culture. Reclaiming his land and the hand of Penelope, he spares the suitors' minstrel Phemios, for Phemios has a job to do: sing the hero's praises. Then Odysseus turns back to a captive, chopping off his nose, ears, hands, and feet, feeding his genitals to the dogs. Homer gets a kick out of Odysseus: he's a riot.

It used to be thought that one couldn't be truly civilized without some appreciation of the Homeric epics. You may recall the civilized virtues: respect for the mind, for tradition, for the value of *peaceful deliberation*, and so on. Is there a problem here?

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One theme of William Barrett's *The Truants: Adventures Among the Intellectuals*, a memoir of the epic days of *Partisan Review* (1930s-'50s) is the apparent contradiction between the magazine's political and cultural "lines." Avant-garde in politics and culture, yes. But the avant-garde culture *PR* celebrated—the "modernism" of Yeats, Eliot, Joyce, Lawrence, etc.—was hardly reflective of the politics the journal espoused—a vague Marxism. But to assume there's really a contradiction here is to assume *PR* should have been celebrating agit-prop and folk-protest guitarists and similar. The assumption would not have been Marx's, looking up from his Aeschylus, whom he reread every year.

A lesser consideration is one of political commitment and cultural taste, how they square or don't and whether they should. A greater consideration is whether there's a contradiction not between ideology and taste, but rather between the moral imperative to be civilized, which must involve the nurturing of the pacific virtues, and the traditional assumption that one mark of being civilized is a due appreciation of the world's great literature, so much of which—when you come right down to it—celebrates hairy power, aggression, ego(t)ism.

It's misleading to read *The Odyssey* as the story of a man trying to get home, for when he does, he'll soon be off again, spreading inland the word of Poseidon the earth-shaker, god of troublemaking. Home is where you leave a faithful wife. Home for Beowulf in the Anglo-Saxon epic is where you hit up the king for gold bracelets, drink mead, and tell of monster conquests. Still, it's relatively easy to like Odysseus—we value exuberance; maybe easy to love Beowulf—an appreciation

of what inspires loyalty. But, very few exceptions aside, loyalty, except as ritual mechanism of blood feud, is a rare quality in the Norse sagas. Loyalty is abrogated the moment money is a consideration. Ulf, let's say, kills Thormod, whose father Hallvard demands compensation. I'll pay a hundred ounces of silver, says Ulf. No, two thousand, says Hallvard. And on it goes, with no suggestion whatsoever that there's the least thing odd about this.

It's rather disconcerting to find in a medieval literature of kings and earls and retainers an almost naked image of the most rapacious bourgeois society. I invite you to read *Egil's Saga*, if you don't know it. Egil Skallagrimson, who kills a host for skimping with the ale, would assault if he could Odin for the drowning of his son, but makes do with a poem of thanks to the god for the gift of hatred. Egil is more naked than the epic heroes, but I wonder if the juxtaposition does not reveal them in a momentary starker light. Odysseus the manic liar, obsessive cheat, gross avenger of insult to his possessions; Beowulf, booty-conscious and braggart, the bourgeois earl. Do they not suggest many more clothed figures in the cultural monuments we honor, even to a great extent the biblical literature? My god—when you come right down to it—how bloody many of the biblical episodes are, how aggressive for instance some of the women even are: think of the beautiful, and sexy, Judith bagging the severed head of Holofernes. That ought to teach the Assyrians a lesson!

But this half a story. Egil is as well a hater of the unjust. Beowulf, like ordinary people, feels the need to whistle in the dark. Odysseus is as well a man who would teach his son the ways of honorable kingship and honor his wife more subtly if he were not so possessed by his name. The name, remember, *Trouble*, was given him in a kind of rite of passage by his

grandfather, a violent old reprobate, when Odysseus first draws blood, and bleeds, in a hunt. He's lucky there's anything at all sociable about him. And there the point is.

All three, like so much of the literary tradition of the West, are imaginative projections of poets who knew that civilization is the hard labor of human beings shaped out of poor material. They knew long before Immanuel Kant in *Idea for a General History* that "out of such crooked wood as man is made of, nothing perfectly straight can be formed." Remember the old question (*Life* once had an editorial asking it): Why doesn't literature give us a nicer picture of ourselves? (A recipe for banal literature, that.)

Skepticism about the angelic in human nature does not strike me as insulting. On the other hand, protestations that we have no bestiality by nature do, for by their own logic they attribute any social comity we achieve to an *innate* altruism and pacificity of which we would not be the authors, only the passive beneficiaries. The latter smiling disposition is an assumption, really, that civilization must have been an easy task—so what's to celebrate? The former pays proper respect to a long, difficult struggle and fragile achievement by an unlikely architect, mankind. The greatest literary works are like micro-dramatizations of that long labor. Peopling the mental landscape with goody-goodies, our Transcendentalist optimist Emerson couldn't have written an epic or saga; but grim Saint Augustine might have—in fact he did.

II: Divine (?) Mercy and the Literati

I think we are often unjustly hard on Norman Mailer (or perhaps this is just a confession). Many years before his obsession with Gary Gilmore which yielded his wieldy *The Executioner's Song* (1979), Mailer wondered out loud to an interviewer about a hypothetical murder, saying that if, at the moment of violence, the murderer felt a pang of compassion for the victim, then "what has happened is that the killer is becoming a little more possible, a little more ready to love someone." (Forgetting the poor victim for a moment, one might wonder what the "someone," the recipient of the murderer's "love," might think about this monstrous proposition.) Since the interview appeared with other recipes in *Mademoiselle* back in 1961 maybe this was only a matter of "shock the bourgeoisie"? Or, it being rather hard to imagine that Mailer thought his Big Thinking would be read only by fashionistas, maybe it was a matter of "instruct the intelligentsia."

If Mailer "asked for it," as he surely did, I am not sure who we are to give it to him. There is in literature and among the *literati* a degree of encouragement with saintly psychopaths, saintly *because* psychopathic. For instance, on the occasion of Mailer's *The Executioner's Song*, a reviewer, notably a man of the cloth, referred to Gary Gilmore as "a man so doomed, so cruel, so god-forsaken, yet, in the Christian sense, so God-loved." I understand "doomed," "cruel," "god-forsaken." It's "so God-loved" that bothers me. The implication is not merely that divine love is universal. The implication is paradoxical and double: (1) Gilmore (or any such) is God-loved in spite of his being cruel and in compensation for his being doomed; (2) Gilmore would not be so God-loved if he were not so cruel. Unlike the ordinary miserable sinner's, his life evokes a notion of a certain weird drama of grace.

To put the best face on this for an interval, consider a moving passage by Charles Péguy, who wrote in *La Note conjointe* (1914),

The worst distresses. . . weaknesses, turpitudes, crimes, sins even, are often so many cracks in the armour . . . through which grace can reach man. It is only against the inorganic cuirass of habit that all blades break . . . Not all souls are penetrable . . . This explains the astonishing victories of grace in the souls of great sinners and the impotence of grace in the souls of innocent people, the most innocent people, those who have no cracks in their armour. Those who are never wounded, whose moral skin is intact and makes a faultless leather jerkin. At no point do they offer grace the opening of an appalling wound, an unforgettable distress . . . They do not offer grace that door of entry which sin leaves open . . . even God's charity cannot succor those who are unwounded.

A few comments: (1) It is a certainty that Péguy's "great sinners" are not of the likes of Gilles de Rais, the 15th century killer of 400 children, or the less proficient but more famous (because the inspiration of Chaplin's M. Verdoux) Henri Désiré Landru. How can one be so certain of that? Through the tone, that's how! (2) Péguy's sufferers are open to grace because they are harmed, not because they are harming. (3) Péguy's intention is not, decidedly not, *épater les bourgeois*, for he writes with incredible sympathy for the wounded—of which he clearly is one. If we cannot see this, we cannot read. He is experiencing an empathic pain, and a personal one—and consequently is not, like Mailer, a smart-ass playing slippery intellectual games. (4) In a word, Péguy's thoughts on this subject are characterized by *authenticity*;

Mailer, who prided himself on his sophisticated knowledge of Existentialism (none of which, apparently, he actually read) was practicing *mauvaise foi*, bad faith.

End of interval and back to “a certain weird drama of grace.”

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Now, of course I don't think I'm talking about Christian *doctrine*. In part we have here the fact that in some fashionable 20th century intellectual environments “philosophical, gratuitous crime and similar paths of horror” as Saul Bellow once put it, compete for that honor and respect “formerly reserved for justice, courage, temperance, mercy.” But only in part. For beyond this Dada and Surrealistic nonsense, there is, I think, an unofficial lay Christian tradition of fascination with the saintly psychopath—“fascination” not meaning *endorsement*, of course, but not condemnation either. Meaning, rather, a kind of horrified admiration and suspicion that the *really big* sinner is on some adventure of the soul denied the morally pusillanimous ordinary person, whose smallness is defined by his quivering concern for the commandments.

Mailer, who I'd imagine was consciously attuned to that secular tradition of Surreal ethics which gave us that lyricist of the criminally inspired, Jean Genêt, was also rather awkwardly assimilated in a second-string sort of way to yet another tradition that's expressed in much of our literature by professing Christians and those so acculturated

to the faith that they don't even have to bother to profess. I note a few touchstones from writers chosen here for their utter admirability as artists. Herman Melville's Captain Ahab, whose spiritual size grows with his monomania, whose hatred of Creation seems a poetic equivalent of prayer. Thomas Mann's Naphta of *The Magic Mountain*, whose concept of Christian charity translates as totalitarian terror. Gustave Flaubert's "Saint Julian the Hospitaller" whose lust for beatitude is expressed as the lust for massacre. Graham Greene's Pinkie Brown of *Brighton Rock*, who murders not merely for gain but seemingly as a challenge to divine grace. Feodor Dostoevski . . . through whose works so many dark saints amble that it's pointless to single one out. And always at the back of one's mind, one wonders what William Blake really meant when he said that Satan was the real hero of Milton's *Paradise Lost*.

Whence this tradition that couples so nicely with the Surreal ethics-beyond-the-ethical? A sketch, and a suspicion, follow.

Mercy is surely one of the glories of Christianity. But, curiously, it's also one of its temptations. Pride is accounted a sin. But it is also, curiously, invited. What does it require to show mercy to a poor lecher, a bumbling thief? Nothing; it's easy to do. What does it require to show mercy to someone truly vicious? A lot. One can even be *proud* of doing it. Christianity may be for most people a mode of worship and a command of behavior. But it is also a celebration of mystery (not only of The Mystery), a poetic recognition that things are not always what they appear, a statement, so to speak, that paradox is not merely a rhetorical tactic but an ontological condition. It's probably this, rather than modes of worship and commands of behavior, that appeals to the literary intellectual. It may be in part a feeling of superiority that functions when the intellectual

nods understandingly about Gilmore being doomed, cruel, and so God-loved. But maybe it is also in part (struggling now to put the better face on things) an attempt to appreciate the mysterious, to respect the paradoxical, to express a wonder at—in Graham Greene’s reverberating phrase, which I know will exhilarate and annoy me all my life—“the appalling strangeness of the mercy of God.”

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