The Moment of The American in l'Écriture Judéo-Chrétienne

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The Moment of The American in l'Écriture Judéo-Chrétienne

by William A. Johnsen, Michigan State University

There are two fortunes the gods reserve for the unwary children of Hermes. From the one jar comes the interminable application of a single unmodifiable theory, impervious to the resistance of any text. The other jar, to be sure, dispenses a more elegant fortune: to deconstruct this dominant theory by a superior, rival theory discerned in the resistance of the text to it. These two fates offer us two versions of a common misfortune for critical theory: for the psychoanalytic, to argue for the greater health of either René Girard or Henry James.

But if we faithfully follow the bond of positive reciprocity between James and critical theory our working title suggests, we should advance our reading of these two authors so eloquently committed to the superior value of novelistic truth. James's practice draws out more of the potential for realizing a particular historical moment in relation to the structure of desire in Girard's general theory of the demythification of sacrificial violence. Girard helps us better understand the specific social and political force of the virtuous attachments aspired to by James's characters.

Mensonge romantique et vérité romanesque (1961) supports a meditation on the specific historical moment of postrevolutionary France, adjacent to the "structural" and "phenomenological" observations of desire in romanesque and romantique characterizations, which appears mainly in the distinction between external and internal mediation of desire. Internal mediation is more likely in a social system of fixed hierarchical order; disciples in pre-revolutionary France live on a lower social plane than their aristocratic models. Internal mediation begins in a climate like post-revolutionary France, when the model descends to the same plane as the disciple and becomes a rival as well. Thus, in external mediation, the difference between model and disciple is ontological; but in internal mediation, the differences between rivals are contested in the bourgeois marketplace by the acquisition of prestige-bearing commodities. But if the Revolution makes the Restoration of superior being to the French nobility impossible, thus condemning the nobility to earn esteem from the bourgeoisie, thus inciting the desire of the bourgeoisie to earn nobility for themselves, whence came the desire for Revolution? Where is the relation between the potential for the transformations of the structure of desire and the socio-political structure represented? Finally, what potential transformations of these structures are implied for the future? The short answer (they are represented in James's revision of The American) requires a somewhat longer proof.
Girard's novelistic truth reformulates the plotting of desire from a linear to a triangular pattern. Desire is never the unmediated instinct to possess an attractive object. All desire is triangular; objects are designated desirable by the example of a model's desire. The more advanced stages of mimetic desire represent the internalization of the mediator, initially on the same social plane, but finally in the same being. When the disciple begins to locate his aspirations directly in the model, rather than in the object that the model prizes, desire becomes alternately masochistic or narcissistic-coquettish. A masochist does not desire punishment in itself, but he recognizes in punishment and failure the hand of the superior being whose disciple he would become. The model's superiority can only be confirmed by rejection, and his rejection can only be confirmed through repetition. In turn, those who mask their sense of diminished being with an appearance of self-sufficiency no longer risk usurpation by the loss of objects that symbolize being, prestige. If the desired object is the mediator's being, then his apparent self-sufficiency will incite the disciple to unsuccessfully rival, even reinforce, the mediator's self-love. Finally, the process of internalization, which developed through the initial stages of masochism and narcissism-coquetttry, achieves autonomy. The masochist internalizes his own mediator, in self-victimization. No model can improve the torment the masochist inflicts on himself; no lover can rival the self-love of the narcissist-coquette.

For Girard, Proust's representation of the snobbism of the Faubourg Saint-Germain indicates the larger social forms analogous to the later stages of mimetic desire. The nobility have no power, no authority, other than their ability to incite and reject discipleship; they recertify their superior being at the expense of aspirants allowed to come closer before they are rejected.

La Violence et le Sacré (1972) returns to the analogy between the psychological and social structure of desire, and posits the origin of these twin formations in the rituals and prohibitions meant to observe the will of the gods: that is to say, meant to keep humans blind to their own responsibility for their own violence. Sexual and dietary prohibitions serve to avoid two desires converging on a single object. Rituals unite everyone in opposition to a single victim who has been given license for, then found guilty of, all the sins of rivalry (thievery, adultery, incest). Instead of a society ultimately breaking down into inerminable, individual rivalries, or rivalries solidifying into two camps, sacrifice represents this victim as everyone's rival. The radical contrast between the ritual preparation that renders the victim sacrificable (the hominization of animals, the naturalization and privileging of foreigners) and his violent expulsion resembles in many ways the apparently inexplicable rhythms of rejection and acceptance of the Paris salons.

Des choses cachées depuis la fondation du monde (1978) serves to regulate such potential discoveries of sacrificial mechanisms everywhere, from Tupinamba tribes to the Faubourg Saint-Germain, in order to consolidate the consequences of mimesis as the fons et erigo of culture, for anthropological, psychoanalytic, and critical practice. The gradual wearing away of the sacred explanation for human violence, evidenced in the successive erasures, or deconstructions, of the scapegoat mechanism, prepares the conditions for its full revelation in the modern period: man, who has made the gods, the tribe, the nation or, more recently, his instincts responsible for his own violence, must either renounce all violent mechanisms, or plunge into an inerminable round of violence that will not exclude anyone.

Girard verifies our positive relation to this progressive history of increasing comprehension of sacrificial violence in Le Bouc émissaire (1982) by taking up in more detail the medieval "texts of persecution" that make Jews responsible for stillbirths, poisoned wells, and plagues and make their elimination the cure. Girard offers a welcome alternative to mere textuality. To recognize that (1) no modern reader would deny that these texts refer to real persecutions, yet that (2) no reader would fail to
prefer his revelation over the author's reflection of the sacrificial mechanism is to see at once the relation of our powers of interpretation to this text and our advance beyond it.

For Girard, the modern revelation of sacrificial violence recovers the non-sacrificial reading of the Passion adumbrated in the Old Testament and intended by the Gospels. The Crucifixion is not a perfect sacrificial reconciliation between God and man, but a critique of such sacrifices. This reading, in turn, becomes the origin and inspiration of what must be called l'écriture judéo-chrétienne: the textual authority in our culture for creating gestures that refuse violence and sacrifice, including the false values of masochistic self-sacrifice, nonviolently, in the service of unanimous peace.

I hope this regrettably terse summary of a rich theory nevertheless suggests a logic to the following, long-familiar issues of our reading of The American: the title, the motif of exclusion, the Preface, the revisions for the New York Edition, and the hero's name.

James's argument that the American had evolved beyond the late stages of metaphysical rivalry was already in place in 1867:

... I think that to be an American is an excellent preparation for culture. We have exquisite qualities as a race, and it seems to me that we are ahead of the European races in the fact that more than either of them we can deal freely with forms of civilization not our own, can pick and choose and assimilate and in short (aesthetically etc.) claim our property wherever we find it. To have no national stamp has hitherto been a defect and a drawback, but I think it not unlikely that American writers may yet indicate that a vast intellectual fusion and synthesis of the various national tendencies of the world is the condition of more important achievements than any we have seen. (HJL 77)

Following the narrator, readers of Madame Bovary were quick to note disdainfully Emma's second-hand desire, Homais' sordidly successful appropriation of aristocratic forms. James anticipates Newman in brazenly celebrating the belatedness of the American to European nobility: he claims it an advantage, not a crisis, to have no being, just as Newman openly copies, even prefers copies to originals. Newman freely admits the necessity of mediated desire; he seeks instruction. The wonderful humor of James's stylistic revisions ("he spoke, as to cheek and chin, of the matutinal steel") more openly sides with Newman ("Does he think I am going to offer to swap jack-knives with him?") in a jocular refusal to be enslaved to norms meant to exclude him.

James Tuttleton has recently added to the thematic resonances of the title by suggesting it reflects the attitude of the nobility towards Newman (149). In effect, they make him stand for all Americans, all bourgeois aspirants to aristocratic forms. The nearly unanimous record of uneasiness in contemporary American reviews of the novel (usefully collected in Tuttleton's edition of The American) over Newman's fabulous indifference to aristocratic forms suggests that the reviewers certified their greater being through the observation of blunders they themselves would never make. Insofar as modern readers (I am one of these) alternately glory in Newman's innocence and wince at some of his gaffes, we too are "... listening without protest to compliments paid us at the expense of some others" (AA 362), we too perform a sacrificial reading of the text.

Oscar Cargill identified the connection between Emile Augier's intrusion plots and James's novel and suggested they served as compensation for the disappointment of the first-hand experience of the Faubourg Saint-Germain James sought. But James is more than a belated romantic imitating experiences he had never had. Rather, Augier's repetitious melodramas corroborated his own experience of aspiration and exclusion: a class obsessed with
threats of intrusion produce, and are reproduced by suitors who emulate their being.

The Preface, which benefits from the close reading necessary for the revision, suggests a less romantic interpretation of the rivalry between the nobility and the American.

My subject imposed on me a group of closely-allied persons animated by immense pretensions—which was all very well, which might be full of the promise of interest: only of interest felt most of all in the light of comedy and irony. This, better understood, would have dwelt in the idea not in the least of their not finding Newman good enough for their alliance and thence being ready to sacrifice him, but in that of their taking with acerbity everything he could give them, only asking for more and more, and then adjusting their pretensions and their pride to it with all the comfort in life. Such accommodation of the theory of a noble indifference to the practice of a deep avidity is the real note of policy in forlorn aristocracies—and I meant of course that the Beüegardes should be virtually forlorn. The perversion of truth is by no means, I think, in the displayed acuteness of their remembrance of "who" and "what" they are, or at any rate take themselves for; since it is the misfortune of all insistence on "worldly" advantages—and the situation of such people bristles at the best (by which I mean under whatever invocation of a superficial simplicity) with emphasis, accent, assumption—to produce at times an effect of grossness. (TA 12)

James regrets allowing their immense pretensions of who and what the Beüegardes are (which closely allied all members of the aristocracy to each other) to stand as qualities of their being, to assist them to mask deep avidity with a policy of coquetish indifference. Rather than depict them as preserving their being by sacrificing someone less good, a comic or ironic view would have seen they have no being at all, only the endless accommodation of its theory. The explicitly contentious phrasing of James's remarks on forlorn aristocracies realistically reflects the rivalry between the American and the nobility, unlike the romantic letter of 1867, which claims to have exceeded its European rival.

James found himself unable to alter the romantic effect of The American, to interrupt the suspension of the critical sense that allowed "the free play of so much unchallenged instinct" (TA 5). To understand the instinct that James was able to submit to the critical sense, we must consider the revised ending to The American. In the first version, a resentful Mrs. Tristram torments the romance of Newman's "remarkable good nature" by suggesting he has victimized himself. The Beüegardes were never hurt by Newman's threat because they knew he would never fulfill it. Newman reverts "instinctively" to the possibility of revenge. Only the loss of his weapon foretells a new round of violent reciprocity, but Newman (and the reader) finish with the regret of an opportunity missed. In the New York Edition, when Mrs. Tristram is assured that the evidence is destroyed, she passes up the opportunity to vex Newman with an opportunity missed, in order to sympathize with him, to repeat that she likes him as he is, to raise his hand and "very tenderly and beautifully" kiss it, and finally, to grieve for Claire.

The revision of Mrs. Tristram's response reflects the revised understanding of Newman's desire for Claire. What determines Newman in both versions is his stand in the Rue d'Enfer. In the earlier version, it released him from "ineffectual longing," but in revision from "ineffectual desire." In both cases, he will "never stand there again": in 1877, because it would be "gratuitous dreariness"; but in revision, "a sacrifice as sterile as her own" (TAMS 465). Both Americans now know that he has turned away from violence—violence to others and to himself.

Exogamy, depending on whether we follow Levi-Strauss or Girard, either knits a community positively, or outlaws the object
of internal mediation: in either case, the social benefits of either alliance or domestic harmony are lost to the Bellegardes because they cannot marry outside their clan. Similarly, the sacrifice of Claire cannot reconcile rivalry into unanimity. If Claire can only reply to the sterile rivalry between the American and the nobility with a sterile self-sacrifice, the recognition of its futility creates a positive reciprocity between Newman, Mrs. Tristram, and the reader, a reciprocity that regrets the loss of Claire.

Tuttleton is surely correct to warn against exaggerating James’s investment in the associative value of the religious figures in the novel, and of the hero’s Christian name, to the Christian value of self-sacrifice (143-44). Lona Hessel (Samfundets Støtter) and Nora Helmer (Et Dukkehjem), the American’s immediate antecedents, and Stephen Dedalus, his descendant, represent modernity as postsacrificial. Violence, against others or oneself, can no longer be justified by the will of the gods, tribal or nationalistic prestige, or the autonomy of the instincts: all are sterile misunderstandings of the consequences of mimesis. But if the modern antipathy of these belated Europeans to the sacrificial values latent in all social forms insists that their use of religious figures cannot promote the sacrifice of Christ, perhaps these texts are part of a vast collaborative, corroborative modernization of the sacrificial reading of the Scriptures, whose history is not yet written: l’écriture judéo-chrétienne.

NOTES

1Mrs. Tristram’s declared fear that Newman had looked like he needed watch-

Mise en Crypte: The Man and the Mask

by Susan Winnett, Harvard University

"Portraits of the dead are at best ironic things..."

The notorious ambiguity or undecidability of The Sacred Fount is a product of