Regenerative Anthropology in Fact, Fiction, and Prophecy: Jefferson, Douglass, Twain, Lincoln

Andrew McKenna

Emeritus Professor of French
Loyola University Chicago
amckenn@luc.edu

Truth is the daughter of time. (Francis Bacon)

Abstract

This essay examines the explicit truth claims of certain canonical text of American literature, engaging the complementary insights of René Girard's mimetic theory and Eric Gans's generative anthropology as they apply to writings on slavery and the civil war that ensued over its continuation. Stylistic analysis is especially enabled by Gans's attention to constative and performative aspects of human language, as cannily wielded by the authors studied here. The insights of Girard and Gans afford the opportunity to appraise the indissociable epistemic, esthetic and ethical valences of literary masterpieces.

Keywords: René Girard, Eric Gans, mimetic theory, generative anthropology, speech acts, Jefferson, Douglass, Twain, Lincoln, Faulkner, slavery, civil war

***

Thoughts about wisdom tend to gravitate towards an idea or ideal of real knowledge that is unavailable and even irreducible to the conventions of logic and philosophical argumentation; we regard it as immune to the vagaries of instrumental reason. We tend to think of wisdom as transhistorical, even transcendental, rather than transactional, whence its kinship with religious thought. In Western religious tradition, wisdom is conceived as a perfection of knowledge bestowed as a gift of God. It is granted, for instance, to King Solomon who has prayed for this endowment in preference to riches or power (I Kings 3).

The most notorious instance of this bequest is not aphoristic, as we find in the Book of Wisdom, but episodic; it comes in the form of a narrative, namely, the well-known story of two prostitutes in rival claims for a living infant, each alleging that a dead child belonged to the other. Rémi Brague reminds us of the double heritage of Western culture: from Athens

we have concepts, logic, and the conventions of argumentation; from Jerusalem we have stories, narrative, which have a logic of their own (*Sur la Religion*, Kindle loc. 384-385) for us "story telling animals," as some anthropologists label our species. The argument has been made (Siedenbock, Bandera 1994, among others) that Western culture owes it truth seeking impulse, including its scientific spirit, principally to the biblical tradition of Judeo-Christianity. Marcel Gauchet has labeled this "the religion of the exit from religion," as an ongoing critique of heteronomy, which in terms advanced by René Girard means the exit from false transcendence. What Girard's mimetic theory and Eric Gans's generative anthropology bring to the fore is the narrative dimension of this impulse which is the specialty of our biblical inheritance: stories, not syllogisms. A number of texts, fiction and non-fiction, in American literature will serve to sharpen our focus on this concern.

We know how the Solomon story his ends: the king asks for a sword to divide the child in two, whence the king can discern who is the true mother as the one who would give up the child to her rival rather than have it killed, while the other would rather child die than lose it to her rival. The true mother is focused on the child, the false one on her rival. The difference between true and false, between original and copy, is resolved by the king at a more fundamental level as the absolute difference between life and death, which is the choice that the God of Israel has placed before his people in no uncertain terms (Deuteronomy 30.19-20).

René Girard has commented on this narrative (*Things Hidden*, 237-45) and so have I (*Violence and Difference,* 206-10) because it resonates with all the core themes of his mimetic theory: rivalry leading to a crisis of difference that portends a sacrificial solution. Indeed, this little "theater of envy," which is how Girard describes the works of Shakespeare, is a template for Girard's critique of sacred violence from the point of view of its victim. In 1 Kings 3, mimesis is embedded, all but thematized in the narrative, as the kings' decision is fashioned on the option of killing the infant (*decidere/occidere*). Mimetic rivalry as the fountainhead of violence is the central theme of the story. All the commentaries I have read overlook this outstanding feature: at very epicenter of the narrative (1 Kings 22-23), the king literally repeats the words of the rivals, such that it is clear that this crisis of difference cannot be resolved at the level of verbal testimony. His demand for a sword refocuses the issue on the life or death of the child, the potential victim of the controversy, which resonates with Girard's conviction that the Hebrew bible stands out from mythical narratives for its perspective on violence from the point of view of its victims rather than that of its mystified perpetrators. In this context, the famed wisdom of Solomon is fully and anthropologically intelligible.

Whether or not the Hebrew Bible is the inspired word of God, as averred by believers, or a pious delusion, as averred by unbelievers; whether or not such an event occurred at all, whether or not it is fact or fiction, it is a truthful story, hinging as it does on the absolute difference between life and death, to which all mortals, such as we are, are notionally bound

to subscribe. Truthful stories can be matters of fact, historically verifiable, or genial contrivances of imaginative fiction, this difference being secondary to the demonstrable truth they make available. I could cite as another example the Good Samaritan story in Luke's gospel; it's a tale Jesus made up on the spot, under pressure exerted by a "man of the law" to clarify the practical application of "the greatest commandment," love of God and love of neighbor. The moral of the fable is the pragmatic injunction to "go and do likewise," that is, to imitate the man who comes to the rescue a victim of nearly lethal violence. Hence we have another story, a work of fiction, which binds us to the truth of its conclusion, defeating our reluctance by placing Jesus' hearers and the reader in the position of the dying victim, a "man going down to Jericho," presumably having duly participated in temple rituals. With both Solomon and Samaritan, we are entertained with an imagination, an imaging process, that, as Gans avers, is not static, as in paintings, but scenic, as in plays and novels.

The narrative ends with an imperative, a linguistic form whose difference from declarative utterances typical of narrative I shall explore further in the light Gans's focus on its performative implications. Imperatives typically issue from positive or negative commandments, but also from prophetic speech bearing on the destiny of a nation: Israel in the bible, and ours when it comes to words of Lincoln near the term of the civil war.

The epistemological issue, which is what concerns me here, is that we ignore the wisdom of certain biblical narratives at our own peril. And furthermore, that our Western literary canon, which includes the Bible and is tributary of the latter's claim to cultural authority, is host to demonstrable truths about ourselves at a universal, that is, anthropological level, human self-understanding being a goal of literary studies and of humanities education in general. I will proceed with some textual examples in fiction and non-fiction to substantiate this claim, with specific reference to the relevance of mimetic behavior that they unveil.

My first example comes for Jefferson's well-known comments on slavery in his famous *Notes on the State of Virginia* (1785), whose mimetics have not received the attention they deserve. In aid of his condemnation of slavery, the classically trained author summons Aristotle's *Poetics* (IV) on our being mimetic animals, a constant reference for Girard. His primary concern here is the bad example of the owner's behavior for his children's moral development. No commentary is required for this pellucid little narrative, in which the author, a practiced reader of Montesquieu, displays his neoclassical, enlightenment temperament in carefully balanced, sententious prose:

> There must doubtless be an unhappy influence on the manners of our people produced by the existence of slavery among us. The whole commerce between master and slave is a perpetual exercise of the most boisterous passions, the most unremitting despotism on the one part, and degrading submissions on the other. Our children see this, and learn to imitate it; for man is an imitative animal. This quality is the germ of

> all education in him. From his cradle to his grave he is learning to do what he sees others do. If a parent could find no motive either in his philanthropy or his self-love, for restraining the intemperance of passion towards his slave, it should always be a sufficient one that his child is present. But generally it is not sufficient. The parent storms, the child looks on, catches the lineaments of wrath, puts on the same airs in the circle of smaller slaves, gives a loose to his worst of passions, and thus nursed, educated, and daily exercised in tyranny, cannot but be stamped by it with odious peculiarities. The man must be a prodigy who can retain his manners and morals undepraved by such circumstances. (Ch. XVIII)

"Catches" is a telling expression for the fact that the child is contaminated by his father's behavior; violence is, as Girard has argued, ubiquitously contagious. Regardless of our founding father's notorious dereliction in the matter, the truth of the moral lesson here stands free and clear of it, being grounded as it is in the mimetic, modeling role that parents are bound to play in the attitudes and behavior of their children, in their moral—or immoral—disposition and the actions flowing from it. As with Solomon and Samaritan, the ineluctable truth of the narrative is inseparable from its ethical content.

My next example comes from the pages of Frederick Douglass's *Narrative of the life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave,* chapters VI and VII. Here we have an historical document, and a best seller in its time, that ranks indisputably among the lasting monuments of nineteenth-century American literature. Back-to-back episodes recount the child's inaugural apprenticeship to slavery, his painful consciousness of his degraded condition, and his subsequent apprenticeship to writing.

> When his owner found out that his wife was teaching young Frederick to read, alongside of her own son, we are told, he at once forbade Mrs. Auld to instruct me further, telling her, among other things, that it was unlawful, as well as unsafe, to teach a slave to read. To use his own words, further, he said, "If you give a nigger an inch, he will take an ell. A nigger should know nothing but to obey his master–to do as he is told to do. Learning would spoil the best nigger in the world. Now," said he, "if you teach that nigger (speaking of myself) how to read, there would be no keeping him. It would forever unfit him to be a slave. He would at once become unmanageable, and of no value to his master. As to himself, it could do him no good, but a great deal of harm. It would make him discontented and unhappy." These words sank deep into my heart, stirred up sentiments within that lay slumbering, and called into existence an entirely new train of thought. It was a new and special *revelation*, explaining dark and mysterious things, with which my youthful understanding had struggled, but struggled in vain. I now understood what had been to me a most perplexing difficulty—to wit, the white man's power to enslave the black man. It was a grand achievement, and I prized it highly.

I underline “revelation,” as the author does not, for its biblical resonance, if not its provenance; a truth emerges about “dark and mysterious things,” as if in paraphrase of John’s gospel, where “the light shines in the darkness and the darkness cannot comprehend/overwhelm it.” There is a corollary to this statement that Douglass’s tale illuminates, namely that the darkness is revealed by the light, is known by the light it denies and vainly resists. That’s revelation for you, and it is sharply in tune with mimetic anthropology.

Douglass dwells further on this “prize” to the detriment of his peace of mind, which nonetheless fuels his determination, serving as it does as a negative model of his nascent desire for freedom. In his typically fulsome and elegant style, his careful delineation of this process highlights the role of the obstacle in the path of desire to its object, where the opponent desire is an anti-model for his own, where the good he seeks is illumined by the evil of his condition:

> From that moment, I understood the pathway from slavery to freedom. It was just what I wanted, and I got it at a time when I the least expected it. Whilst I was saddened by the thought of losing the aid of my kind mistress, I was gladdened by the invaluable instruction which, by the merest accident, I had gained from my master. Though conscious of the difficulty of learning without a teacher, I set out with high hope, and a fixed purpose, at whatever cost of trouble, to learn how to read. The very decided manner with which he spoke, and strove to impress his wife with the evil consequences of giving me instruction, served to convince me that he was deeply sensible of the truths he was uttering. It gave me the best assurance that I might rely with the utmost confidence on the results which, he said, would flow from teaching me to read. What he most dreaded, that I most desired. What he most loved, that I most hated. That which to him was a great evil, to be carefully shunned, was to me a great good, to be diligently sought; and the argument which he so warmly urged, against my learning to read, only served to inspire me with a desire and determination to learn. In learning to read, I owe almost as much to the bitter opposition of my master, as to the kindly aid of my mistress. I acknowledge the benefit of both.

In this systematic series of antitheses, we see that the narrator’s goal is motivated by his master’s clarifying prohibition. The young Frederick is scandalized by his master’s words, which unveil the truth of his condition and which ironically inspire his desire to read, which in turn would be scandalous to his owner. The logic of scandal (Girard, *Celui par qui le scandale arrive*) is condign with the model/obstacle relationship.

Reflecting upon this revelation, Douglass proceeds to report on the effect of slavery on his benign, well-meaning mistress, wherein the crucial misgivings expressed by Jefferson are confirmed, as we witness her moral and emotional degeneration that her husband models for her:

> It is due, however, to my mistress to say of her, that she did not adopt this course of treatment immediately. She at first lacked the depravity indispensable to shutting me up in mental darkness. It was at least necessary for her to have some training in the exercise of irresponsible power, to make her equal to the task of treating me as though I were a brute. When I went there, she was a pious, warm, and tender-hearted woman. There was no sorrow or suffering for which she had not a tear. She had bread for the hungry, clothes for the naked, and comfort for every mourner that came within her reach. Slavery soon proved its ability to divest her of these heavenly qualities. Under its influence, the tender heart became stone, and the lamblike disposition gave way to one of tiger-like fierceness. The first step in her downward course was in her ceasing to instruct me. She now commenced to practise her husband's precepts. She finally became even more violent in her opposition than her husband himself. She was not satisfied with simply doing as well as he had commanded; she seemed anxious to do better. Nothing seemed to make her more angry than to see me with a newspaper. She seemed to think that here lay the danger. I have had her rush at me with a face made all up of fury, and snatch from me a newspaper, in a manner that fully revealed her apprehension.

Douglass's portrayal of his mistress's putative benignity is a strategic paraphrase of prophetic and gospel injunctions that her subsequent behavior, modeled on her husband's, will violate. Douglass is tracking the escalation that is endemic to violence.

Douglass tells us that the first book he read through was a volume of speeches, *The Columbian Orator*, containing a highly improbable dialogue between a slave and his master, who ends up being convinced of the rightness of emancipation and acts upon it. It is a fiction whose message is unmistakable to right-thinking, rational animals, notwithstanding Aristotle's excuses for slavery. The master is obliged to see his position from the point of view of his slave, to see his privilege, which is just that, *privus lex*, a law unto oneself, devoid of universal legitimacy, from the point of view of his victim. We find another version of the condemnation of racial injustice in the imaginary dialogue of J. A. Rogers' *From Superman to Man,* where an educated railroad porter convinces a Texan tradesman of the fallacies of his notions of racial superiority.

Douglass's account of his writing apprenticeship is accomplished by a ruse whereby he engages racial prejudice in order to defeat its degrading objectives. For once he is attuned to the obstacle's role in animating desire, he can manipulate it to his own advantage. He challenges the inherited claim of superiority entertained by white boys his own age by alleging he can write better than they; they fall for the bait, the race-baiting in reverse, and become his instructors. Hired out to work in a shipyard, he observes how timber is marked with letters assigning their place on the vessel. All he can do at first is to copy their handwork:

> I soon learned the names of these letters, and for what they were intended when placed upon a piece of timber in the shipyard. I immediately commenced copying them, and in a short time was able to make the four letters named. After that, when I met with any boy who I knew could write, I would tell him I could write as well as he. The next word would be, "I don't believe you. Let me see you try it." I would then make the letters which I had been so fortunate as to learn, and ask him to beat that. In this way I got a good many lessons in writing, which it is quite possible I should never have gotten in any other way. During this time, my copy-book was the board fence, brick wall, and pavement; my pen and ink was a lump of chalk. With these, I learned mainly how to write.

By engaging his interlocutors in competition, he triggers a rivalry, which implies equality, which the boys are culturally inured to deny. His every failure in this contest results, by their correction, in his ironic success.

He then covertly engages this copy practice in his master's domain, methodically and arduously training his hand to assume his owner's signature and to borrow his identity:

> When left thus, I used to spend the time in writing in the spaces left in Master Thomas's copy-book, copying what he had written. I continued to do this until I could write a hand very similar to that of Master Thomas. Thus, after a long, tedious effort for years, I finally succeeded in learning how to write.

These texts speak for themselves; they always have, which is why our culture endows them with canonical authority. They are, in Gans's epistemological vocabulary, auto-probatory, as are others I shall examine. What a Girardian reading illuminates in them is a consistent and coherent mimetic pattern, which is what Mark Twain implied when he stated that "history does not repeat itself, but it rhymes." This is to say that different events and episodes display common structures and dynamics, often with baleful consequences. William Faulkner's version of this is expressed by the Quentin Compson in *Absalom! Absalom!*: "Maybe happen is never once but like ripples maybe on water after the pebble sinks" (*Novels* 1936-1940, 28). Compson is trying to explain to his Canadian roommate at Harvard his harrowing ambivalence towards the South, a spectral region for thematically placed outsiders. In the end, he expresses his attitude with a vehemence that suggests denegation: "I don't hate it… I don't. I don't. I don't! I don't hate it!" (263). Michael Gorra claims that these divided sentiments mirror Faulkner's own and are generative of his historical insights.

The reason why Douglass's autobiography has not until recently been included in our American canon of literary masterpieces is not due to any cognitive or esthetic deficiency, but to the racial bias ingrained in our culture from its earliest beginnings. As James Madison remarked in a letter to the Marquis de Lafayette, the slave trade was our nation's "original sin," a statement repeated abundantly these days without reference to a founding father and

without due reflection on its properly biblical significance. In the Genesis narrative of its first appearance, sin is markedly mimetic, spurred by rivalry—with God. In Girard's view, the notion of original sin is a great insight, not as to an inherited disposition to evil, but as primarily mimetic and systemic, contagious in the proliferation of evil. With the children of the first parents, we have fratricide born of envy for God's favor, and a futile effort to warn Cain away from it, followed by the interdiction of revenge killing, of violent reciprocity. In the beginning, God has nothing to do with violence. Indeed, if God made us "in his image," then God is the first imitator.

Among all the masterpieces of our American literary canon, the works of Mark Twain stand among the tallest, the most widely read among them being *Tom Sawyer* and *Huckleberry Finn*. And the best-known episode in the first is doubtless in chapter 2, where we read of how Tom lures his friends into the decidedly unappealing task of whitewashing his Aunt Polly's fence. It has served as a staple in mimetic theory commentary. A close reading of this episode, which has ever only been Girard's method, the classical French "explication de texte," will disclose the work's resonance with Frederick Douglass. The episode tracks minutely Tom's strategy of the coquette, as analyzed by Girard (*Things Hidden*, 370-71), in displaying indifference as an attractor of desire, in deploying obstacles that transform an object of negative value into a coveted treasure.

The meaning of this episode is notoriously clear; Twain will harp on its broader significance at its conclusion. I nonetheless find it worthwhile to focus on its artistry, its step-by-step unfolding.

Having failed to bribe the slave Jim to take on the task, Tom is at the lowest point of expectation for relief from this odious burden. This depression, this hopelessness, is the ironic foundation of his strategy; he's bottomed out, with no place to go but up. "At this dark and hopeless moment an inspiration burst upon him! Nothing less than a great, magnificent inspiration." It is at this point that the narrator weaves mimesis into the episode, first as imitation of an object, or objective mimesis, which is what has mostly absorbed critics on this topic. It mostly absorbs Aristotle himself, though in the tragedy he made famous by his commentary, *Oedipus Tyrannos*, it is primarily the subjective, behavioral mimesis of violent doubles that preoccupy the playwright in the verbal duels between Oedipus and Teiresias, and then between Oedipus and Creon; they replicate the mimetic, foundational conflict between father and son at the crossroads.

Tom's friend Ben comes along imitating a steam boat, and Tom's ploy will be to imitate an artist, as one to whom Ben's elaborate mimicry is unworthy of attention; his feigned indifference is bound to ensnare Ben, to ensure that Ben's attention will map onto his own. Ben expects Tom to envy his make-believe; all Tom has to do is to ignore his friend to turn the tables of desire as summed up in the neatly laconic "No Answer," which marks the tipping point in this little "theatre of envy":

> Tom went on whitewashing — paid no attention to the steamboat. Ben stared a moment and then said: “Hi-YI! YOU’RE up a stump, ain’t you!”
>
> No answer. Tom surveyed his last touch with the eye of an artist, then he gave his brush another gentle sweep and surveyed the result, as before. Ben ranged up alongside of him. Tom’s mouth watered for the apple, but he stuck to his work. Ben said:
>
> “Hello, old chap, you got to work, hey?”
>
> Tom wheeled suddenly and said:
>
> “Why, it’s you, Ben! I warn’t noticing.”
>
> “Say — I’m going in a-swimming, I am. Don’t you wish you could? But of course you’d druther WORK — wouldn’t you? Course you would!”
>
> Tom contemplated the boy a bit, and said:
>
> “What do you call work?”
>
> “Why, ain’t THAT work?”
>
> Tom resumed his whitewashing, and answered carelessly:
>
> “Well, maybe it is, and maybe it ain’t. All I know, is, it suits Tom Sawyer.”
>
> “Oh come, now, you don’t mean to let on that you LIKE it?”
>
> The brush continued to move.

I pause here to observe the textual focus of this single-sentence paragraph on the objects of contention, boat/brush; the latter is signaled without agency, which I take to be Twain’s emphasis on an impersonal *mechanism* at work here in this “transvaluation of values.” The rest is what drama critics describe as falling action:

> “Like it? Well, I don’t see why I oughtn’t to like it. Does a boy get a chance to whitewash a fence every day?”
>
> That put the thing in a new light. Ben stopped nibbling his apple. Tom swept his brush daintily back and forth—stepped back to note the effect—added a touch here and there—criticized the effect again—Ben watching every move and getting more and more interested, more and more absorbed. Presently he said:

> “Say, Tom, let ME whitewash a little.”
>
> Tom considered, was about to consent; but he altered his mind:
>
> “No—no—I reckon it wouldn’t hardly do, Ben. You see, Aunt Polly’s awful particular about this fence—right here on the street, you know—but if it was the back fence I wouldn’t mind and SHE wouldn’t. Yes, she’s awful particular about this fence; it’s got to be done very careful; I reckon there ain’t one boy in a thousand, maybe two thousand, that can do it the way it’s got to be done.”

Tom indulges in some hucksterish false advertising, itemizing fictive models for Ben’s desire in a manner perfected by that P.T.Barnum, Twain’s contemporary:

> “No — is that so? Oh come, now—lemme just try. Only just a little—I’d let YOU, if you was me, Tom.”
>
> “Ben, I’d like to, honest injun; but Aunt Polly—well, Jim wanted to do it, but she wouldn’t let him; Sid wanted to do it, and she wouldn’t let Sid. Now don’t you see how I’m fixed? If you was to tackle this fence and anything was to happen to it—”
>
> “Oh, shucks, I’ll be just as careful. Now lemme try. Say—I’ll give you the core of my apple.”

An object of appetitive desire cedes pride of place to art, whose sole attraction consists in the attention it magnetizes. After Duchamp, enter Andy Warhol, Jeff Koons, Damien Hirst…. In the twentieth century, art is converted to forms of anti-art, defying the public to disdain it and so exhibit bourgeois philistinism (McKenna, ”Art and Markets”; Gans, “Modernism and the Triumph of the Market”).

> “Well, here—No, Ben, now don’t. I’m afeard—”
>
> “I’ll give you ALL of it!”
>
> Tom gave up the brush with reluctance in his face, but alacrity in his heart.

We know how this ends, with Ben serving as a model for all of his friends in a mimetic queue to get the job done under Tom’s gleeful and materially enriched observation. Twain closes the episode with reflections on its universal, law-like, significance:

> Tom said to himself that it was not such a hollow world, after all. He had discovered a great law of human action, without knowing it—namely, that in order to make a man or a boy covet a thing, it is only necessary to make the thing difficult to attain. If he had been a great and wise philosopher, like the writer of this book, he would now have comprehended that Work consists of whatever a body is OBLIGED to do, and that Play

> consists of whatever a body is not obliged to do.

The narrator's laudatory self-reference parodies the huckster's style, but also conveys his sense of the obvious that eludes most consumers. "Difficulty" here plays the role of the obstacle in the stimulation of desire; Twain's "great law of human action" rhymes, resonates with Girard's law of mimetic desire in human interaction, which requires models, mediators for its incitement, and which is enhanced by obstacles, such as over-pricing, to its attainment, since the object of desire is secondary to the mimesis that generates its value, its interest. Here as elsewhere, Twain intuits the dynamics of our vaunted consumerism, where price is not an index of quality in the object, but of the quality, the standing of the prestigious buyer as an enviable model for other buyers. That hasn't changed, being endemic to human culture.

This fable and its moral can be summarized in no more than 75 words as to what it signifies, but literature is not about the "what" but the "how," the process, how mimetic desire is experienced, how it works at the most fundamental level such that, as Twain extrapolates, we can conceive it, imagine it at other levels in other situations. Twain's dialogue walks us through the process, such that we cannot ignore its effectiveness. The fiction writer shows how mimetic desire is lived, word by word, moment to moment, interactionally, or, to use Girard's only neologism, *interdividually*. Mimesis here is dramatized and thereupon thematized by Twain. It works, as the saying goes, "like a charm," which is to say like magic in its reversal of the flow of desire. The counterintuitive magic here is the magnetic force of crowd mimesis. Social scientists have come up with the label "reverse psychology" for Tom's strategy; this is a welcome addition to our self-understanding, but great writers are always ahead of our academic achievements. Their works stand the test of time, gain "canonicity"; though fictive, we recognize their *realism*, they are objectively true, their object being human interaction, which Gans has always insisted is "a more fundamental category than being."

In one of her lectures, Toni Morrison remarks that in fiction, the reader is made to be an accomplice to the author in seeing the world from the point of view of the work's characters (*The Sources of Self-Regard*, Part II, "The Writer before the Page"). This is a vital aspect of that other best known episode of Twain's fiction, where Huckleberry Finn discovers that the runaway slave Jim, with whom he's been convivially floating downriver on a raft, has been abducted and sold back to slavery by the hucksters who have forcibly joined them: "Jim was gone! I sent up a shout—and then another—and then another one; and run this way and that in the woods, whooping and screeching; but it wasn't no use—old Jim was gone. Then I set down and cried; I couldn't help it" (Chap. 31). The last sentence thematizes Huck's strong affective response, mostly unfamiliar to his readers, and the narrative escorts their attention throughout his efforts to "steal" Jim into freedom:

> I thought till I wore my head sore, but I couldn't see no way out of the trouble. After all

> this long journey, and after all we'd done for them scoundrels, here it was all come to nothing, everything all busted up and ruined, because they could have the heart to serve Jim such a trick as that, and make him a slave again all his life, and amongst strangers, too, for forty dirty dollars.

Huck's clear moral judgment falls not only on Jim's abductors but more generally on the economics of slavery.

Huck contemplates the disgrace, the shame, he would face in his community, "that Huck Finn helped a nigger to get his freedom" : "The more I studied about his the more my conscience went to grinding me, and the more wicked and low-down and ornery I got to feeling." Huck's near despair at this point correlates with Tom's before his task, with the fundamental difference of the ethical component, the turning point in his—and the reader's—moral outlook, which the novelist carefully delineates in Huck's quest for divine guidance. Having decided to report Jim's loss to his owner, Miss Watson, and so protect the runaway from being sold downriver, he decides to pray for that outcome:

> So I kneeled down. But the words wouldn't come. Why couldn't they? It warn't no use to try and hide it from Him. Nor from *me*, neither. I knowed very well why they wouldn't come. It was because my heart warn't right; it was because I warn't square; it was because I was playing double…. I was trying to make my mouth say I would do the right thing and the clean thing, and go and write to that nigger's owner and tell where he was; but deep down in me I knowed it was a lie, and He knowed it. You can't pray a lie—I found that out.

This justly famous statement involves us with two fundamentally different forms of linguistic expression, as first labeled by J.L. Austin: performative and constative utterances. It is a distinction that Gans places at the origin of language in his version of Girardian anthropology (*Signs of Paradox*). The constative is manifest in Huck's "the words wouldn't come," being typical of narrative utterance, as of all declarative sentences (.e.g., it is raining—or not); the performative is manifest in commands but also in prayer, a speech act, an utterance intended to effect change in the world rather than to express a view about it. Constatives are subject to verification or refutation, logical or empirical; performatives, such as commands, oaths, prayers, are sayings aiming at actualization, realization—or hindrance. The former refer to the objective world, the latter engage our ethical participation in the world, often binding us inextricably to moral consequences. The former are either true or false; the latter are actions, good, bad, or indifferent. We practice these different forms habitually, taking them for granted. Not Twain, whose Huck is blocked by what philosophers call a performative contradiction.

The progress of Huck's radical conversion away from his religious formation is a world-class lesson in moral reflection. Huck writes the letter—and tears it up, having "set to

thinking…and got to thinking" about his companionship with Jim, and he perforce brings his readers' "thinking" along with him: "But somehow I couldn't seem to strike no places to harden me against him, but only the other kind." This is a canny understatement, a goad to convert the reader to "another kind" of viewing Blacks than is the custom, guiding his readers step by step through his thought processes. Huck is thinking—an emphatic theme here–"how good he always was….": "I was a-trembling, because I'd got to decide, forever, betwixt two things, and I knowed it. I knowed it. I studied a minute, sort of holding my breath, and then says to myself: 'all right then, I'll *go* to hell—and tore it up.'" Huck resolves this crisis of difference between what he sees as his moral obligation to his community regarding Jim as slave property and to Jim, his "best friend"; between the religiously sanctioned property rights of his community and the more deeply rooted fellow-feeling with his loving traveling companion, the irrefutable, unconditional recognition of Jim's companionable humanity.

Twain's own hostility to religion is notorious, but we have to consider its source in but recently slave-holding America. Huck decides against his religious tradition in a way that Dietrich Bonhoeffer decides against his official church's collaboration with the flagrant evil of Nazism. It is not incidental that the pastor's resolve was nourished by his participation in the services of Harlem's Gospel churches during his stay in New York, whose safety and comfort at Union Theological Seminary he abandoned to escort his Christianity "underground" back in Germany. Back home, he was drafting a treatise on "religionless Christianity" that his execution interrupted (*Letters and Papers*). It would be a Christianity uncoupled from his church's complicity in flagrantly sacrificial practices, from an idolatry of false transcendence.

As Huck pursues the task to reclaim Jim as his "my nigger," he resembles Frederick Douglass in leveraging his culture's bias by repurposing the proprietary claims of slavery underwritten by his own culture. Empathetic identification has overridden, or rather undercut all other considerations, "deep down in me;" it has subverted all putatively "moral" claims on his conscience. So, to reprise this turning point:

> It was a close place. I took it up, and held it in my hand. I was a-trembling, because I'd got to decide, forever, betwixt two things, and I knowed it. I studied a minute, sort of holding my breath, and then says to myself:
>
> "All right, then, I'll *go* to hell"—and tore it up.
>
> It was awful thoughts and awful words, but they was said. And I let them stay said; and never thought no more about reforming. I shoved the whole thing out of my head, and said I would take up wickedness again, which was in my line, being brung up to it, and the other warn't. And for a starter I would go to work and steal Jim out of slavery again; and if I could think up anything worse, I would do that, too; because as long as I

was in, and in for good, I might as well go the whole hog.

Huck finalizes his exit from religion with a humorously folksy colloquialism; the text comically binds the reader to his view.

Ralph Ellison summarizes the "moral" of Huck's recognition scene, his road-to-Damascus *conversion* as follows: "Huck Finn's acceptance of the evil implicit in his 'emancipation' of Jim represents Twain's acceptance of his personal responsibility in the condition of society. This was the tragic face behind the comic mask" (*Shadow and Act,* 50). It is a turning point for Huck, and a possible one for his readers, "a transitional period of American life"–which has failed or refused to recognize it: "After Twain's compelling image of black and white fraternity," Ellison writes, "the Negro generally disappears from fiction as a rounded human being." Ellison cites Hemingway who warns us to "stop where the Nigger Jim is stolen from the boy. That is the real end. The rest is just cheating" (51). Jim Crow laws and rampant lynching among us is ample evidence of that, and Hemingway's "cheating" metaphor evokes all the self-deception recruited in the service of ignominy. In 1901, Twain himself wrote a vehemently sarcastic diatribe, "The United States of Lyncherdom," that he forbore to publish, in the certitude that the downhome humor of his lecture tours that was his living would be no longer welcome on our shores.

"Cognitively feeble" is the way the social anthropologist Ernest Gellner (*Thought and Change*, 203) has characterized humanistic studies, by contrast with the rigor and precision, and the real world predictability, iterability, and efficacy of what we call the "hard sciences." This judgment no longer applies when we see how mimetic theory draws its conclusions from recognized masterpieces of literary realism. Girard's first book, *Deceit, Desire and the Novel*, begins with a quote from *Don Quixote*. The cognitive and moral clarity—the truths, the wisdom, in sum—that they afford their readers is for each one of us to act upon—or not, as has been the case regarding the official and unofficial treatment of African Americans among us, as it had been of Jews among Europeans. Not incidentally, it was the report of pogroms in Eastern Europe that persuaded W E. B. Dubois of the need to create the NAACP.

There have been notorious social science experiments in brutality, such as the Milgram exercise in electrocution and the Stanford Prisoners Experiment. In the latter, randomly selected participants were cast in symmetrical roles of enforcer and enforced, of tormentor and victim. The experiment was aborted because of its baleful effects on all participants, the enforcers being appalled at their adaptation to the role assigned to them. And of course, American religious leaders, spearheaded by Martin Luther King Jr., have successfully experimented with biblically inspired strategies of non-violence in the face of manifest evil, resulting in the nullification of Jim Crow laws, which sanctioned the oppression, and too often the effectual soul murder of African American citizens. Dr. King drew strategies initiated by Gandhi who contemplated them during his stay in officially Christian England.

All this goes back to Israel's foundational narrative of emancipation in Exodus, and there is plenty of evidence that we are far from realizing its social objectives. Not least among Israel's "firsts," to use Gans's anthropological taxonomy (Generative Anthropology, "The Glossary"), was to "cry out" to its God (Exodus 3.7) against its enslavement, whereas slavery was ubiquitous in the ancient world, and institutionally unproblematic. We find it as well in Mosaic law, where it is highly regulated, extending in certain cases to mandatory manumission.

For predictability, in especial, as it concerns the future of our dealings with one another, we turn to prophecy, and this brings to mind Lincoln's second inaugural address as it concerns us still. Lincoln's famous quip, "if slavery is not wrong, nothing is wrong," is wise and true enough, but his last public speech is host to a narrative dimension that is viscerally more poignant—and precise, focusing on numbers:

> One-eighth of the whole population were colored slaves, not distributed generally over the Union, but localized in the southern part of it. These slaves constituted a peculiar and powerful interest. All knew that this interest was somehow the cause of the war. To strengthen, perpetuate, and extend this interest was the object for which the insurgents would rend the Union even by war, while the Government claimed no right to do more than to restrict the territorial enlargement of it.

These sentences underline the economics of slavery, and the survival, the life or death of the republic as originally constituted. Then begins a serial juxtaposition of impersonal pronouns—neither/neither, each/both, same/same—which fully articulates and thematizes a crisis of difference not unlike the one confronting King Solomon:

Neither party expected for the war the magnitude or the duration which it has already attained. Neither anticipated that the cause of the conflict might cease with or even before the conflict itself should cease. Each looked for an easier triumph, and a result less fundamental and astounding. Both read the same Bible and pray to the same God, and each invokes His aid against the other.

The crisis is resolved by no hieratic moralizing, no fist-pounding injunctions, but in the gentle irony of understatement ("It may seem strange…") capped by a notorious biblical paraphrase, and again followed by recourse to symmetrical pronouns—both/neither. Their relative neutrality exhibit a continuous, heartfelt effort to defang, defuse the argument, to ward off the mimetic vortex of finger pointing polemics. Lincoln is trying to walk his hearers serenely into reconciliation:

> It may seem strange that any men should dare to ask a just God's assistance in wringing their bread from the sweat of other men's faces, but let us judge not, that we be not judged. The prayers of both could not be answered. That of neither has been answered fully.

“You can’t pray a lie.” The crisis of difference is resolved on the fulcrum of slavery, “social death” (Patterson)—its “strangeness” to any sense of justice—to which he gives a visual image, a human face, which he will not fail to elaborate further on.

But first a word, as the saying goes, from his sponsor: “The Almighty has His own purposes. ‘Woe unto the world because of offenses; for it must needs be that offenses come, but woe to that man by whom the offense cometh.’” For “offenses” read here “scandal” as we find in more literal translations; also as “stumbling block” to right conduct. Gorra (324) notes that the German government has sanctioned the placement of “Stolpersteine,” “stumble stones,” in city pavements to mark the places where Jews, by name and date, were rounded up, so as to forfend oblivion of this monumental scandal.

Lincoln then follows a lengthy, carefully scaffolded meditation cast in the speculative mode of an “if” clause, a conditional sentence, which ends up as a rhetorical question in this updating of biblical exegesis to Lincoln’s historical present:

> If we shall suppose that American slavery is one of those offenses which, in the providence of God, must needs come, but which, having continued through His appointed time, He now wills to remove, and that He gives to both North and South this terrible war as the woe due to those by whom the offense came, shall we discern therein any departure from those divine attributes which the believers in a living God always ascribe to Him?

There is a patent echo here of Jefferson’s notes, where the Monticello slave owner weighs the matter succinctly thus: “The Almighty has no attribute which can take side with us in such a contest.”

Lincoln’s next paragraph shifts gears from the declarative to the optative, performative mode of exhortation; more precisely, the first sentence oscillates cannily between them so as to incorporate, absorb his hearers into his vision. The final sentence unfurls with a lavish conditional clause recalling the brutalities of slavery, in order to conclude resolutely (“it must be said,” declarative/imperative) upon confidence in divine judgment as stated in Psalm 19.9:

> Fondly do we hope, fervently do we pray, that this mighty scourge of war may speedily pass away. Yet, if God wills that it continue until all the wealth piled by the bondsman’s two hundred and fifty years of unrequited toil shall be sunk, and until every drop of blood drawn with the lash shall be paid by another drawn with the sword, as was said three thousand years ago, so still it must be said “the judgments of the Lord are true and righteous altogether.”

Lincoln is reading history with biblical lenses. We identify this as political speech but it is far more accurate to acknowledge it as prophetic speech, not only for its emotional power

and biblical references, but also and more especially in view of the evidence in all our information sources that our country still stands under this judgment. This disquieting fact is not unanimously shared in these re-United States, which is why we need prophets—and novelists—to bring their words up to date.

The North won the war, the South won the peace, is how some historians view the matter (Richardson, *How the South Won the Civil War*). This, in fact, is how Michael Gorra reads the works of William Faulkner as obsessively foregrounded in the fratricidal struggle of our civil war whose aims have been "left unfinished" (*The Saddest Words*, 56); it is a "past not dead, not even past" in the novelist's view, whose "scandalous subject matter" depressed the sale of his books even while his critical reception was rising (Gorra, 17). A newly emancipated slave in *The Unvanquished* observes presciently about voting rights, "This war aint over. Hit just started good" (in *Novels 1936-1940,* 454). It is to our literary monuments, not to those cast in bronze, that we must look to understand the multifarious crises of difference bestriding our history right up to present controversies. (History shows that most monuments to Confederate leaders showed up as of 1890 with the rise of the KKK, whose animus targeted Blacks, Jews, and Catholics.) As to the epistemological role of fiction in historical self-understanding, the writer and scholar Saidiya Hartman proffers the useful expression "critical fabulation" (in Okeowo, 48), with the understanding than an uncritical or mythic fabulation would come from the point of view of persecutors, of lynchers, for instance, which Faulkner, for instance, unravels in his 1931 short story, "Dry September."

As Gorra points out, this is America's ongoing *Historikerstreit*, an expression naming the struggles [*streit*] in Germany with the memory of its Nazi past. In *Caste,* Isabel Wilkerson's critique of racialized differences links the two histories by showing the Third Reich's reliance on Jim Crow models, while extending this critique to the ongoing mistreatment of India's Untouchables. Her wide-ranging study can remind us of Elie Wiesel's observation about the absolute evil of the Third Reich that "nothing is comparable to the Holocaust, but everything is Holocaust related."

Everything, at least, of grave concern about humans' recourse to sacrificial violence, where selected victims leverage communal solidarity and identity; where, according to Gans's post-Durkheim anthropology, a sacralized centrality (whiteness, Aryan-ness, Brahminism) convenes membership along its circumference—over against those who are excluded. Whiteness, and "the purity of our women," for example, only became a red-hot cultural issue because of the proximity of a thoroughly subservient population abducted from Africa and routinely subjected to rape, a fact emphasized by Faulkner in his fiction. A presumably foundational identity is, on this account, secondary, being the derivative by-product of its shameful depredations, the negative exposure of its violent discharges. This idea has circulated in the French Left since Sartre promoted the writings of France Fanon, for which Lilian Thuman (*La pensée blanche*) provides a detailed update. GA provides a compact, geometrical image for it.

Prophetic speech is not mere fortune telling, as we sometimes suppose, but we should not be surprised to credit it with a certain measure of predictability, Lincoln to witness. The difference between true and false prophets is subject to the judgment of history, and our best writers engage us in a "discovery procedure" (Gans) to better understand it. The judgment of history idea is itself biblical, emanating from Israel's highly self-critical narrative and prophetic traditions (Sacks). Athens knows almost nothing of this, though Thucydides' devastating account of the Peloponnesian, i.e., civil, wars is condign with it. Girard (1973) regards the "Greek miracle," especially its tragedians, as a failed revelation, in that it didn't take worldwide.

In its minatory mode, prophecy warns the community away from adherences that will lead to its destruction; it denounces the "refuge of lies" (Isaiah 28.17; see Bandera 2013) wherein it deceives itself about the benefits of its sacrificial practices, which, however deritualized, are thriving among us today (Haden). Prophetic speech tells us, if we have ears to hear and eyes to see, the truth about ourselves that we are very often unwilling to acknowledge. It is, at its best, the natural, congenital ally of such literary masterpieces as examined herein, where we cannot fail to observe the indissoluble partnership of the esthetic and the ethical that Gans always asserted, and to ponder their affiliation with our truth-seeking aspirations, anthropological and therefore historical as well.

WORKS CITED

Bandera, Cesàreo. *The Sacred Game: The Role of the Sacred in the Genesis of Literary Fiction*. University Park: U of Pennsylvania P. 1994.

—–. *A Refuge of Lies: Reflections on Faith and Fiction* (Studies in Violence, Mimesis, & Culture). East Lansing: MSU P. 2013.

Bonhoeffer, Dietrich. *Letters and Papers from Prison*. (Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works English Edition, vol. 8). Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress. 2010.

Brague, Rémi. *Sur la Religion*. Kindle ed. Paris: Flammarion. 2019.

Douglass, Frederick. [1854]*A Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave*. https://www.ibiblio.org/ebooks/Douglass/Narrative/Douglass_Narrative.pdf

Ellison, Ralph. *Shadow and Act*. NY: Vintage. 1963.

Faulkner, William. *Collected Stories*. New York: Random House. 1950.

Faulkner, William. *Novels 1936-1940*. New York: Library of America.1990.

Gans, Eric, *Signs of Paradox*: *Irony, Resentment, and Other Mimetic Structures*. Stanford,

CA: Stanford UP. 1997.

—–. “Modernism and the Triumph of the Market.” *Chronicles of Love and Resentment.* No. 671, Aug. 29, 2020. ttp://anthropoetics.ucla.edu/views/vw671/

Gauchet, Marcel. *The Disenchantment of the World: A political History of Religion.* Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP. 1999.

Gellner, Ernest. *Thought and Change*. Chicago: Chicago UP. 1964.

Generative Anthropology. “The Glossary.” https://theglossary.home.blog/generative-anthropology/

Girard, René. *Deceit, desire, and the Novel: Self and Other in Literary Structure.* Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP. 1966.

—–. “*La Violence et le sacré*: Discussion avec René Girard.” *Esprit*. Nov. 1973.

—–. *Things Hidden Since the Foundation of the World*. London: Athlone. 1987.

—–. *Shakespeare: A Theater of Envy*. London and NY: Oxford UP. 1991.

—–. *Celui par qui le scandale arrive*. Paris : Desclée de Brouwer. 2001.

Gorra, Michael. *The Saddest Words: William Faulkner’s Civil War.* New York: Liveright. 2020.

Haden, Kyle Edward. *Embodied Idolatry: A Critique of Christian Nationalism*. New York: Lexington Books. 2020

Jefferson, Thomas. *Notes on the State of Virginia* (1785). https://docsouth.unc.edu/southlit/jefferson/jefferson.html.

McKenna, Andrew. *Violence and Difference : Girard, Derrida, and Deconstruction*. Champaign, IL: U of Illinois P. 1992.

—–. “Art and Markets.” *Chronicles of Love and Resentment.* No. 418 Jan.21, 2012. http://anthropoetics.ucla.edu/views/vw418/

Morrison, Toni. *The Sources of Self-Regard: Selected Essays, Speeches, and* Meditations. NY: Knopf. 2019.

Okeowo, Alexis. “Secret Histories.” *The New Yorker*. Oct. 26, 2020.

Patterson, Orlando. *Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study. Cambridge. MA: Harvard UP. 1982. Rpt. 2018.*

Richardson, Heather Cox. How the South Won the Civil War: Oligarchy, Democracy, and the Continuing Fight for the Soul of America. New York: Oxford UP. 2020.

Rogers, J. A. *From Superman to Man.* https://muse.jhu.edu/book/36942.

Sacks, Jonathan. *Not in God's Name: Confronting Religious Violence*. New York: Schocken. 2015.

Siedentop, Larry. *Inventing the Individual: The Origins of Western Liberalism*. Penguin UK. 2014.

Thuman, Lilian. *La pensée blanche.* Paris: Editions Philippe Rey. 2020

Twain, Mark, *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*. Seattle: AmazonClassics.

—-. *Huckleberry Finn*. Seattle: AmazonClassics.

—-. *The United States of Lyncherdom*. http://www.people.virginia.edu/~sfr/TWAIN/lyncherdom.html

Weisel, Elie. "The Trial of Man and the Trial of God." Lecture at Loyola University Chicago. April 12, 1980. Recording courtesy of Moriah Congregation, Deerfield, Il.

Wilkerson, Isabel. *Caste: The Origins of Our Discontent*. New York: Random House. 2020.