

Tales of “Conformity Gone Mad”

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The four “tales” under consideration here come from four entirely different authors and were published over a time span of about one-hundred-and-fifty years (about 1830 to 1980). They are Nathaniel Hawthorne’s “Young Goodman Brown”, Shirley Jackson’s “The Lottery”, Ursula K. Le Guin’s “The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas” and Nadine Gordimer’s “The Moment Before the Gun Went Off”. Our “mad” in the title (borrowed from one of the critics writing about the second story) also stands for such terms as “weird”, “terrible” or “sinister”, describing the relationships between each of the stories and a certain tradition against which the conflict is projected. Consequently, tradition, conformity, convention, ritual/rite, scapegoat... in these stories are the main concepts that define the development of our critical discourse. In this corner of the fictional world, each individual tradition or conformity to community rules and customs, whether inherited or invented, religious, utopian, secular or political, ultimately goes “mad”.

Keywords: tradition; conformity; ritual; community; scapegoat; mad(ness); apartheid; sacrifice.

The four stories we have in mind for this paper were published over a time span of about one-hundred-and-fifty years (1835-1988) and are set in 17th century and 20th century U.S., in a “land of nowhere” (i.e. a utopia/dystopia) and in South Africa, respectively. What groups them together here under this title is the first one’s theme, variously glossed over in the other three: the human/Puritanical justification as a psychological journey into evil, i.e. into the hell of the self. The heart of man as hell is the outrageous fictional premise of these tales authored by writers who are as different from one another as any reader could imagine. Still, they all provide short narratives on this uncomfortable truth about the human psyche and the innate depravity of man. Even though the first one (chronologically) might be seen as somewhat religiously meditative, the second and third as absolutely chilling tales of guilt and evil, and the fourth as a political allegory of the contemporary racial dilemma, they all appear to be exploring and testing the age-old (Biblical) paradox of knowledge inviting and being followed by punishment.

These tales are “Young Goodman Brown” by Nathaniel Hawthorne, “The Lottery” by Shirley Jackson, “The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas” by Ursula K. Le Guin and “The Moment Before the Gun Went Off” by Nadine Gordimer. Before going into thematic and structural details, let us notice how variously interconnected they are: “Goodman” and “Omelas” both contain references to “Salem” (another name for Jerusalem, but also “peace” in Hebrew, or “handsome, intelligent, enlightened” in Arabic, as well as the name of about fifteen towns in the U.S. – in New Hampshire, Ohio, Connecticut, Maryland, Florida, Alabama, Georgia, Kentucky, Iowa, Idaho..., plus the more famous (and relevant for us) Salem, Massachusetts of (Hawthorne’s) witchcraft trials repute and Salem, capital city of Le Guin’s residential state Oregon; both “Goodman” and “Lottery” require that the reader remember (Anne) Hutchinson, of Colonial American

times; “Lottery” and “Omelas” begin on beautiful summer days, with gatherings of townspeople enjoying celebratory occasions – facades for what would prove to be (brutally) violent or shocking ritualistic traditions; and they are both based upon the time-“honoured” scapegoat ritual (implicitly present in the other two); “Lottery” and “Omelas” and “The Gun” seem to observe the latter author’s belief that “there is no moral authority like that of sacrifice” (Gordimer, 1984 : 13); “Lottery” – interestingly enough – got to be banned in the Union of South Africa, the setting for “The Gun”; and, finally, Gordimer’s commentary seems to cover not only her story, but also Hawthorne’s – “Art is so wonderfully irrational, exuberantly pointless, but necessary all the same. Pointless yet necessary, that’s hard for a *puritan* (our emphasis) to understand”.

Next, an unsophisticated reader encounters four types of heroes and/or heroines that may turn out to be the victims or scapegoats in four human communities temporarily functioning according to the rules of more or less unusual traditions; and it is these traditions that form the backdrop against which destinies are being fashioned by the four authors so as to illustrate their rather grim thematic patterns.

Traditions are there, in most (all?) human communities, to be either accepted and observed or challenged and rejected. The second situation is at the heart of some kind of conflict between the individual (hero) and the rest of the “partakers” in the principles or tenets of the respective tradition; or at the heart of an inner conflict that is often even more dramatic (“Goodman” and “The Gun”); and conflict is the source of all (these) stories.

A peculiar case is represented by traditions gone wrong, or weird, or sinister, which places the authors of such stories in the more complicated position of developing subjects on rather difficult themes based upon paradoxical tensions: heroes who may not accept the tradition, but are not at ease with their own decisions; those whose knowledge of the tradition is at odds with their particular way of understanding that tradition; heroes caught up in the impossible dilemma of individual will against traditional “wisdom”; and those who, for whichever of these or other reasons, simply decide to “walk away” from the scene of such (a) conflict/s and move to another, safer world presumably.

The basic conflict – irrespective of the particular configuration it develops into – seems to be that between one form of communal history and the hero’s personal history – which has been the source of most literature from the beginnings of time. A further complication is introduced by the nature of the tradition in question. As its Latin etymological root testifies (*tradere* = to transmit, hand over, transfer), tradition is either inherited from previous generations or simply invented at a certain moment, i.e. deliberately created for personal, commercial or political interests (see E. J. Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger) – and therefore (as in our fourth story) often biased. In either case a tradition is passed down within a community in the form of beliefs or behaviours with symbolic meanings or special significance; and these may be represented by holidays (music, dance, other art forms, anthems, proverbs, story-telling festivals...), social norms, customs, even greetings and other gestures, craft techniques, routines and rituals.

So what we are looking at is a complex body of precedents influencing the present (of all our stories), and hence the tensions between tradition on one hand and progress or modernity on the other, between conformity to patterns of thought and action (doctrines, laws, teachings, legends, practices...) and creativity or mobility, choice or free will. Cognitivists would argue (following, for instance, Friedrich Nietzsche and his *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*) that this is the conflict between knowledge and understanding (see *supra*), between the traditionalists who are sure they know (from such teachings, sayings, stereotypes...) all that is to be known (concerning good and evil), and “free” thinkers who would rather not accept uncritically all these things; in other words, the laws and usages of the land (William James – see *infra* – commented that “we are born into a society whose ideals are largely ordered already”, 1956: 203) against the isolated, lonely individual’s struggle (often tragic or fatal) to find or invent a more inclusive order; i.e. to reject a mode of thinking and/or action justified as “it has always been that way” or mindsets of the form “this is right – whether good or bad – because we have always done it this way”; this may also be de-

scribed as the logical flaw or fallacy (in critical thinking) of *argumentum ad antiquitatem*.

Most people's (story characters') trust in tradition results in such forms of communal existence/practice as rituals, the basic components of the substance of culture (alongside the above-mentioned ceremonies, laws, examples, even institutions, norms, prescriptions, conventions...). As a matter of fact, ritual is equivalent to tradition, as Latin *ritus/ritualis* meant "a proven way of doing something", a correct performance or custom. Studied by anthropologists (Victor Turner, Arnold van Gennep, Max Gluckman, Clifford Geertz, Bronislaw Malinowski, Claude Levi-Strauss, Mircea Eliade...), but also by archaeologists, biologists, historians, psychologists and sociologists, and exemplified by imaginative writers (many more than the four of our stories), "a ritual is a stereotyped sequence of activities involving gestures, words, and objects, performed in a sequestered place [not necessarily any more], and designed to influence preternatural entities or forces on behalf of the actors' goals and interests. Rituals may be seasonal, hallowing a culturally defined moment of change in the climactic cycle or the inauguration of an activity such as planting, harvesting or moving from winter to summer pasture; or they may be contingent, held in response to an individual or collective crisis" (Turner, 1969 : 20).

As we shall see, rituals may consist of sacraments or worships of a deity or demon, accompanied by rites of passage – a person's transition from one state to another, like coming-of-age, or marriage, or initiation into groups or fraternities (as in "Goodman"), or rites of exchange or communion, including forms of sacrifice and offering meant to placate certain powers by transferring victims to them (as, primarily, in "Lottery" and "Omelas"); or calendrical and commemorative rituals meant to impose a cultural order on nature and celebrating seasonal changes (as in "Lottery"); or they (traditions and rituals) may be invented, like the rituals of British monarchy (some of them very recent), or apartheid (see *infra*) as in "The Gun" (including even forms of resistance against the colonial power/s).

Rituals have relevantly been interpreted as homeostatic mechanisms meant to regulate and stabilize social institutions by adjusting social interactions, and thus maintaining a group ethos (in all four stories); as social dramas they have been viewed as often performing shamanic psychotherapeutic cures, collective catharses allowing people to wear masks, for instance, and be and act as they are not (all tales again, including the last one, where the black son may be seen as the mask for the white father); operating as a social leveler, the ritual may erase hierarchies, but outside the "carnival" itself, social tensions of race, class or gender persist ("The Gun"), hence requiring the periodic release through this pressure valve; so rituals often are means of addressing collective anxiety. More technically (and recently) ritual, like myth (Levi-Strauss), has been analyzed as a symbolic system, language or code (Geertz), as an important form of communication (Maurice Bloch); no wonder then that for the uninitiated or outsider (this reader) they often appear as irrational, illogical, outrageous even. Taking ritual as the earliest cultural and religious human institution, philosophical anthropologist René Girard reduces it to just one type – the reenactment of the original scapegoating murder, with sacrifice as its most "popular" form: and this requires another (useful) digression.

As a psychomyth or ritual, the scapegoat originates in the traditional Jewish feast of Yom Kippur (Leviticus 16) – the Day of Atonement, in which the transgressions of the people in the community (Israelites) were ceremonially and symbolically transferred by the High Priest (the modern author?) onto the head of a sacrificial he-goat – "the escape goat" – which, laden with the sins of others, was then banished into the wilderness to be destroyed. Thus, following Kenneth Burke and others (see *supra*), Girard develops a whole theory of scapegoat atonement: to avoid society/community from disintegrating into oblivion through violence, one person (a child, employee, member of a group or race...) is singled out (displacement psychology or projection) as the cause of trouble and is blamed, expelled or killed (see stories), and thus the people are contented and social/imaginative order is restored; examples go from the sacrificial lamb (Jesus himself is the innocent victim gone to his death to save the whole of Christianity) to witch-hunting, mobbing, bullying or victimization in general (the "fall guy" included). Western cultures may

have also inherited the Ancient Greek scapegoating rite, in which a cripple, a beggar or criminal (*pharmakos*) was cast out of the community, either in response to a natural disaster or to a calendrical cycle; the “pharmakos” was either killed or stoned.

Having summarized all these observations about tradition and ritual (rite), with particular emphasis on scapegoating, we can now try to see what occasioned them in the selected narratives. First, it is easy to notice that the four stories – widely divergent as they may seem in terms of time or setting or style –, have all been written out of their authors’ deep involvement in some kind of personal, autobiographical meditation (Hawthorne, Gordimer) or experience (Jackson, Le Guin) that provided the impulse behind these unusually complex imaginative developments.

Chronologically taken, Nathaniel Hawthorne (1804-1864) was himself a skeptic who brooded about his own beliefs, his own spiritual tradition, and his own morality; and so his anonymously published (1835, in the *New England Magazine*) “Young Goodman Brown” bears the strong marks of the influence of Puritan religion, culture and education; the more so as William Hathorne (sic), the first of his (American) ancestors, described in “The Custom House” preface to *The Scarlet Letter*, arrived in the Massachusetts Bay Colony in 1630 “with his Bible and his sword”; next, his great-great-grandfather John Hathorne served as a judge at the Salem (his birthplace) witch trials of 1692 and condemned a couple of dozen women to death; then there is John Cotton (1585-1652, of the first generation of Puritan divines and early defender of antinomian Anne Hutchinson, herself a real historical scapegoat and a fictional one, as Tess, in “Lottery”), author of “Milk for Babes” (1646), the catechism used in the story by Goody Cloyse to educate young Goodman Brown in the tradition (n.b.) of the Calvinist/Puritan belief that all humanity exists in a state of depravity, except for those who are born in a state of grace (hence the deep hypocrisy of Puritan culture and the dark side of the founding of New England). The crux of the matter/story seems to be that the hero did not learn or comprehend Cotton’s catechism; he only memorized the words and, therefore, had no true *understanding* or ability to apply these tenets/principles to his own life (see Benjamin B. Franklin in McCabe); for him, as for Cotton (grandfather of the more famous Cotton Mather), man was helpless to effect his own salvation and shared in Hawthorne’s belief in a brotherhood of guilt, born out of the Puritan legacy of rigidity and self-doubt.

So the story’s first paragraph gives us the twilight, Salem, the threshold, Faith and her ominous pink ribbons: “Young Goodman Brown came forth at sunset into the street of Salem village; but put his head back, after crossing the threshold, to exchange a parting kiss with his young wife. And Faith, as the wife was aptly named, thrust her own pretty head into the street, letting the wind play with the pink ribbons of her cap while she called to Goodman Brown...” (2012 : 24). Then, consistently enough, comes the journey in the night and into the forest, its evil/guilty purpose, the second traveler (like a father/guide) with the “air of one who *knew* the world” (25, our emphasis), and his staff, in the likeness of a great black snake (dangerous knowledge); next appears the whole village community, gathered together in a congregation with a view to a “communion”, i.e. a newly invented tradition as Goodman’s “Faith is gone...” (30) sour in front of the “unhallowed altar” (33) dominating the partakers in the mystery of sin, while Goodman and Faith are initiated to the forest rite; the traditional tenets of their Puritan world are rejected in the course of one night, as the pillars of that tradition (father, grandfather, his educator Goody Cloyse, the minister, Deakon Gookin and Faith herself) prove to be in league with the devil; Goodman’s speedy growth moves from “to know” and “to observe” to the truth of “to understand”; once again, tradition (religious or other) requires obedience and faith and zeal rather than understanding.

This Gothic tale thus seems to get combined with the Faust legend in a narrative of “threshold man” (Victor Turner) moving from separation, through transition, toward incorporation (van Gennep) as he is stripped of his old identity, only to become a cynic and misanthrope: “A stern, a sad, a darkly meditative, a distrustful, if not a desperate man, did he become, from the night of that fearful dream” (34) until, long after, “they carved no hopeful verse upon his tombstone; for his dying hour was gloom...” (34) (last sentence) – as all the Puritan blame was loaded on the good man, a victim of conformity gone weird.

Best known for her six novels (*Hangman*, 1951; *The Bird's Nest*, 1954; *The Haunting of Hill House*, 1959...) and over one hundred stories of the supernatural (among them “The Possibility of Evil”, “The Omen”, “When Things Get Dark”, “Root of Evil”...), Shirley Jackson (1916-1965) is known to have written to poet Howard Nemerov: “I delight in what I fear”. So, on a bright spring morning in 1948, several months pregnant and with a baby stroller for her toddler, she took a long walk in North Bennington, her village of residence in Vermont, and could not stop thinking about the book her husband (critic Stanley Edgar Hyman) had given her about ancient rites of human sacrifice (by one of the anthropologists mentioned above maybe?); back home she wrote the nine pages of “The Lottery” in less than two hours, posted it that evening to her agent and three weeks later (June 26, 1948) it got published in *The New Yorker*.

The readers’ cathartic response was unbelievably negative: in the following weeks she and the magazine received three hundred odd letters of “hot mail” (most of which she grew too scared to open), other hundreds of phone calls, with many outraged readers cancelling their subscriptions to *The New Yorker* – total disaster. One month later comes Jackson’s response in the *San Francisco Chronicle* (July 22, 1948): “...I hoped, by setting a particularly *brutal ancient rite* in the present and in my own *village*, to *shock* the story’s readers with a graphic *dramatization* of the pointless *violence* and general inhumanity in their own lives” (our emphases); and then a reparation that she did not live long enough to enjoy, as the story would come to be regarded as one of the greatest American pieces of short fiction.

This perfectly crafted narrative also begins memorably: “The *morning* of June 27th was *clear* and *sunny*, with the *fresh warmth* of a *full-summer* day; the *flowers* were *blossoming* profusely and the grass was *richly green*. The people of the village began to gather in the square, between the post-office and the bank, around ten o’clock... In this village, where there were only three hundred people, the whole *lottery* took less than two hours, so it could begin at ten o’clock in the *morning* and still be through in time to allow the villagers to get *home* for noon *dinner*...” (2005: 291, our emphases).

The communal rite in this tidy Yankee village requires that the community be nourished by solstice blood, as the annual summer ritual is practiced to ensure a good harvest, according, naturally, to an old proverb remembered by Old Man Warner (n.b.) – “Lottery in June, corn be heavy soon” (297). And soon enough, as the lottery becomes eerier and eerier, approaching the macabre and turning from daydream to nightmare, the story itself turns into a cutting commentary on the dangers of a complacent society’s blind obedience to tradition (“There’s always been a lottery”, 297). Slips of paper are distributed in two rounds from a black box (a Mr. Graves aptly prepares them), stones are picked by all villagers, the victim/scapegoat is conveniently selected (a namesake of Mrs. Hutchinson, the dissenter, banished/excommunicated for her antinomian heretical beliefs from Massachusetts in 1638), and the final six infamous words close the tale: “And then they were upon her” (302); the previous commentary is appropriately neutral: “Although the villagers had forgotten the ritual and lost the original black box, they still remembered the use of stones” (302). The ironic tone (probably missed by most of the first readers) subtly controls the presentation of a sinister ritual, in which mass psychology proclaims tradition as paramount, in a dystopian tale on the dangers of “conformity gone mad” (Murphy, 2005: 1).

Ursula K.(roeber) Le Guin (b. 1929), author of soft science fiction novels (*The Left Hand of Darkness*, 1969; *The Dispossessed*, 1974; *The Telling*, 2000...) and short stories, while drawing on ideas from anthropology, sociology and psychology, exploits fantasy to explore dimensions of social and psychological identity. “The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas (Variation on a Theme by William James)” was first published in *New Dimensions 3*, a science fiction anthology edited by Robert Silverberg and then in the 1975 volume *The Wind’s Twelve Quarters*.

Her title invites us first to mention that from 1959 onwards the Le Guins have been residents of Portland, Oregon, and we can imagine her/them, on one or several occasions, driving out of North Portland, through the Pearl District, not far from downtown Portland, and looking at the large colourful well-lighted window sign SCAPEGOAT TATTOO, “Tattoo and Piercing,” near the intersection of Stark Street and 12th Avenue; then, from Portland straight south, down the

Willamette River Valley, through Beaverton and Oregon City, to Salem, the state capital. As she drove back from Salem O(regon) – personal confession –, she looked in her rearview mirror and read the city/state sign backwards, i.e. Omelas. Back home she may have remembered Balzac's thought that "Behind every great fortune there is a crime".

Next come her readings of William James (1842-1910) – an inspiration not only for her subtitle. In his 1907 *Pragmatism: A New Name for Some Old Ways of Thinking*, following his acknowledged master Charles Sanders Peirce ("Truth is what is pragmatically useful"), Henry James' brother also thought that "truth [is what] happens to an idea" and that an action is right if it tends to promote happiness for the greatest number of people. But Le Guin most readily remembers James' "The Moral Philosopher and the Moral Life", first delivered as a lecture to the Yale Philosophical Club in 1891 and later included in *The Will to Believe and Other Popular Philosophy* (1897), which she comments upon in her "The Scapegoat in Omelas" (*The Story and Its Writer*). The relevant quotation is this: "If the hypothesis were offered of a world in which... millions were kept permanently happy on the one simple condition that a certain lost soul on the far-off edge of things should lead a life of lonely torture... [most people]... would feel that the enjoyment of such a utopia would be a hideous thing at such a cost" (1956: 185).

And hence "Omelas" – a bitter, deft parable about the cost of good life, as the postmodernist writer plays with chaos. Like the village in "Lottery" (initially), Omelas is the dys-/utopian city of happiness and delight (Festival of Summer, clamour of bells, soaring swallows, sparkling flags on the boats in harbor, music, dancing people, horse races, sex, drugs, beer, "delightful rituals"), where everything is pleasing except for the *traditional* secret of the community: the good fortune of the city requires that a single unfortunate child, the scapegoat, be kept in perpetual filth, darkness and misery, and that all its citizens should be told of this on coming of age (rite of passage). As in other cases, "the rules and laws of the society" (2012: 226) are unknown to the narrator, who only notices that these were not simple folk, "dulcet shepherds" (226), or "noble savages" (226) or "bland utopians" (226), but mature, intelligent adults: "one thing I know [he informs the reader] there is none in Omelas is guilt" (227).

No guilt about the fact that in the other world of the city, in a dark, windowless, locked small room, like a "broom closet" (228) or a "disused tool room" (228) with a dirt floor, a child is sitting, a boy or a girl, of six or maybe ten, feeble-minded, defective or grown imbecile through fear (somebody kicks it from time to time), malnutrition (a half-bowl of corn meal and grease a day) and neglect; it (always an "it") is so thin there are no calves on its legs and has a protruding belly, and screams, or cries, or whines something like "I will be good... Please let me out. I will be good" (228). And the terribly outrageous thing is that "they all *know* it is there, all the people of Omelas... They all *know* it has to be there. Some of them *understand* why, and some do not, but they all *understand* that their happiness, the beauty of their city, the tenderness of their friendships, the health of their children, the wisdom of their scholars, the skill of their makers, even the abundance of their *harvest* and the kindly weathers of their skies, depend wholly on this child's abominable misery" (228-229, our emphases, here and elsewhere).

The situation is "usually explained to children [catechism?] when they are between eight and twelve, whenever they seem capable of *understanding*" (229). The terrible paradox (of tradition) however, is that "there is nothing they can do" (229), as "those are the *terms*" (229), "strict and absolute" (229); they all "*know* that they, like the child, are not free" (229). Still, "there is one more thing to tell, and that is quite incredible" (in terms of this terrible tradition) (230): sometimes, a boy or a girl, a man or a woman will "walk straight out of the city of Omelas, through the beautiful gates..., out into the darkness of the fields... each alone,... and they do not come back" (230). The conventional, unidentified, mysterious, but omniscient narrator also ponders that "it is possible... [this place] does not exist [Goodman Brown's dream world]... But they seem to *know* where they are going, the ones who walk away from Omelas" (last sentence) (230); not long after we have learnt such truths as "only pain is intellectual, only evil interesting" (226), and that "the treason of the artist" (226) consists in his/her refusal to admit the "banality of evil" (226) and

“the terrible boredom of pain” (226). So there is a third verb for one’s final choice: not only “to know” or “to understand”, but also “to ignore”.

Atheist Le Guin’s imaginative commentary is not only on the child as Jesus, who gives his life, after great suffering, for the future and happiness of multitudes, but also on the great American theme of “life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness”, together with “all men created equal”, as “unalienable rights” given to all human beings by their Creator, and borrowed by Jefferson from philosopher John Locke, to be proclaimed in the 1776 Declaration of Independence. Only the author is mercilessly locked up in her own paradox: “To exchange all the goodness and grace of every life in Omelas for that single, small improvement: to throw away the happiness of thousands for the chance of the happiness of one: that would be to let guilt within the walls indeed” (229). And this is conformity gone terrible – the “terrible justice of reality” (229).

Apartheid (“the state of being apart” in Afrikaans – “aparthood”) is one of Hobsbawm’s “invented traditions”, introduced by the white occupying forces in South Africa; in fact, a system of racial segregation enforced through legislation by the National Party Governments between 1948 and 1994 in order to maintain the Afrikaner minority rule; after 1970 the black people (one of the four kinds of inhabitants, alongside whites, coloured, and Indians) are deprived of their citizenship, legally becoming citizens of the ten tribally-based self-governing homelands called Bantustans; internal resistance and unrest, together with external embargoes and sanctions result in apartheid reforms in the 1980s (when “The Gun” was written and published) and the 1994 multi-racial elections won by the African National Congress and Nelson Mandela (1918-2014).

Against the background of this tradition writes Nadine Gordimer (1923-2014), Nobel Prize winner in 1991, author of fifteen novels (one about Mandela, in 1987 – *A Sport of Nature*), one volume of (six) plays and twenty of short stories (*The Moment Before the Gun Went Off* in 1988, *Beethoven Was One Sixteenth Black* in 2011...); as a political and literary activist, she was a protester against apartheid, joined the African National Congress, helped Mandela edit his famous speech “I Am Prepared to Die”, served on the steering committee of South Africa’s Anti-Censorship Action Group (with several of her books banned – like “The Lottery” – by the government), was a founding member of the Congress of South African Writers and served as vice-president of International PEN; Gordimer has always been interested, in her fiction, in the moral and political tensions of her racially divided home country (lived in Johannesburg all of her life, with a few years of teaching positions in the US), the connections between power relations and truth, moral ambiguities and choices.

“The Gun” is set in a South African farming community in the 1980s, where and when truth and objectivity are often hard to find and in the end there is no one who *knows* the whole truth of the situation (except, perhaps, for the writer and, to some extent, the reader); the last paragraph makes this *unknowing* quite plain: “How will they ever know, when they file newspaper clippings, evidence, proof, when they look at the photographs and see his face – guilty! guilty! they are right! – how will they know, when the police stations burn with all the evidence of what has happened now, and what the law made a crime in the past. How could they know that *they do not know*. Anything. The young black callously shot through the negligence of the white man was not the farmer’s boy; he was his son” (2003: 117).

The time “before the gun went off” (116) is one of a frail tradition of apartheid (strongly supported, ironically, by the narrator, an unmistakable apartheid sympathizer, a device by which Gordimer manages to storm the apartheid fortress from within), made up of old Willem Van der Vyver, who had symbolically and factually loaded the gun and passed it on, as it were, to his son Marais; in his turn, this second Van der Vyver unwittingly (as in every tradition-based act) takes it on his hunting trip (ritual) only for it to accidentally go off and kill Lucas, his illegitimate (hypocrisy in all four stories) black son: three generations caught up in an invented tradition gone sinister as Marais holds his bleeding son in his arms – and then buries him (at his own expense). Again, tradition provides no real knowledge – much less understanding.

And the moment after the gun went off is that of the father who remains as the only one in

the story to know the truth, but his knowledge is not power: it is punishment; and, paradoxically, the people in the community “understand how he must feel” (112), because they do not know; this is also the moment of the scene over the grave, in which Marais and the dead man’s mother (a second “knower”) “stare at the grave in communication like that between the black man *outside* and the white man *inside* the cab the moment before the gun went off” (116). A sort of communication made possible by the fact that just as Van der Vyver has failed to *acknowledge* his white-black son, the white community has refused to *acknowledge* the culture of discrimination and oppression they have been supporting. Carmela Ciuraru widens the perspective: “When Johannesburg people speak of tension they don’t mean hurrying people in the crowded streets, the struggle for money, or the general competitive character of the city life. They mean the guns under the white men’s pillows and the burglar bars on the white men’s windows. They mean those *strange moments* (our emphasis) on city pavements when a black man won’t stand aside for a white man”. And Gordimer herself makes an even stronger point: “It is easier for the former masters to put aside the *masks* [hypocrisy again] that hid their humanity than for the former slaves to recognize the faces underneath” (2004: 12). And this underlies her philosophy of never pretending to offer solutions to the heartbreaking and at times horrifying situations in her tales; because in all of them, including “The Gun”, “the facts are always less than what really happened”, in a story (again) of conformity gone sinister.

If the scapegoating pattern features one human being sacrificed for the good of the others in the community, “The Gun” offers an *accidentally* killed young man, with an identity shrouded in mystery, whose sacrifice brings only limited knowledge and no good to the community or the protagonists. The dark secret is there – as in all of the other ones –, and the common denominator seems to be made up of knowledge as acceptance and understanding as rejection – though even this remains unclear; what is unquestionable is the problem of guilt (which comes from knowledge) and the fact that each individual tradition or conformity to community rules and customs, whether inherited or invented, religious, utopian, secular or political, ultimately goes weird, mad, terrible or sinister.

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