Stand-ins

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In 2003 the American Film Institute voted Atticus Finch, the inspiring father from Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird*, the number-one movie hero of American cinema. It was an arbitrary contest among fictional characters, but I think Atticus' victory makes an optimistic point about what we Americans value in terms of justice and bravery. Our greatest hero, as designated by AFI, is neither a caped avenger nor an action strongman nor a valiant warrior. He is a lawyer and a pacifist, one who uses reason and logic rather than force and technology to teach and effect justice. And for him to beat out Indiana Jones, Superman, and James Bond sends the message that we regard nonviolent methods as the best tactics for creating justice—that we value both justice and peaceful solutions to tough problems.

Atticus seeks justice in a case that requires him to convince a typically prejudiced Southern jury during the Great Depression to acquit a black man, Tom Robinson, of the charge of raping a white woman, Mayella Ewell. Our hero's weapons are his rhetoric and his belief in justice, but his faith that justice will eventually be served does not suggest that he is either naïve or unrealistic; he is painfully aware of the arduous task ahead of him. In the novel he says, "In our courts, when it's a white man's word against a black man's, the white man always wins" (220). He knows that to overcome the jury's racism will be nearly impossible, yet he persists because of his passionate faith in fairness and because persisting is the right thing to do. And he also knows that the jury's racism is not the only obstacle barring acquittal; their desire to rectify the wrong done to Mayella Ewell will prove an additional hurdle. We humans appear to have an instinctive desire to exact retribution for the crimes that we see committed. Because it is plain that Mayella was assaulted and probable that she was raped, somebody has to pay—and evidence points to her father as the guilty party. Unfortunately, the jury is unwilling to take the word of a black man over that of a white family and is perhaps seduced by the ease of blaming Robinson for the crime, so they convict the innocent defendant. Robinson becomes the innocent victim sacrificed to purge Maycomb of

the violence connected to the Ewell case; he becomes the community's scapegoat.

As Atticus says of the jury members, "There's something in our world that makes men lose their heads—they couldn't be fair if they tried" (220). He is specifically referring to their inclination to believe a lying white man instead of an honest black man, but his statement could also refer to man's need for vengeance. It seems that whenever a crime is committed, we humans require that someone be punished; we "lose our heads" when we are so consumed by our thirst for vengeance that we allow innocent people to be sacrificed unfairly. Lawrence Weschler cautions against this tendency in his essay "Vermeer in Bosnia." He finds serenity in the Dutch artist's paintings and uses that peacefulness to question whether the war tribunal is unfairly singling out one criminal for punishment—seeking to effect vengeance and justice—while being unable to punish others guilty of more widespread violence. Weschler believes that Vermeer's paintings "all but cry out . . . [that the subject of the painting] is not to be seen as merely a type, a trope, an allegory. If [the subject] is standing in for anything, she is standing in for the condition of being a unique individual human being, worthy of our own unique individual response" (350). Consider *The Head of a Young Girl* (featured prominently in the recent book and movie *Girl With a Pearl Earring*). Weschler tells us that the girl, in simultaneously turning towards the audience and looking away from it, mirrors the action that we viewers experience when we turn away from the painting and move on with our lives. Seeing the young girl engaged in an action so similar to our own makes us connect with her; realizing that she is a self-sufficient, autonomous individual makes us consider the possibility that we too can be self-sufficient, autonomous. And in recognizing her self-hood we also begin to understand how to distinguish real people from the *typed* genre figures in the paintings by Vermeer's contemporaries. Weschler wants us to learn from Vermeer's art how to avoid the problem of depersonalization—casting a single individual as scapegoat, stripped of his personal identity to stand in for a larger group whose sins he can be punished for. By extension we can surmise that if Vermeer was condemning the idea of depersonalization, he would also condemn the idea of scapegoating.

Weschler considers the possibility that the judges on the Yugoslav War Crimes Tribunal may have been *inventing* peace when they prosecuted people responsible for parts of the Bosnian genocide. As Weschler watches the trial, he meditates on the similarities between the Tribunal's efforts and Vermeer's art: "I found myself thinking of Vermeer with his camera obscura. . . . And I found myself thinking of these people here with their legal

chamber, the improbably calm site for a similar effort at transmutation" (353). In his mind, both Vermeer and the Tribunal are inventing peace. The Tribunal, after all, is attempting to restore peace by punishing the perpetrators of the awful human rights violations that plagued Yugoslavia during its war. Weschler focuses on Dusko Tadic, a former guard of a prison camp, who is charged with twenty different counts of depraved crimes. His punishment—and the punishment of the other criminals—is supposed to heal the wounds of the families whose members were tortured, murdered, or otherwise abused during this genocide; the punishment should instill serenity to the victims' families in the same way that Vermeer's paintings instill a sense of serenity to their viewers.

But in the post-script, Weschler points out that "some felt [Tadic] was being singled out at that early stage of the Tribunal's proceedings primarily because he'd had the bad luck to get caught . . . and the Tribunal had to be seen to be doing *something*" (354). The Tribunal, in the minds of some, may have been overeager in its quest for justice, perhaps coming down extra-hard on Tadic because he was its first defendant and a stand-in for his superiors; punishing him became a substitute for punishing the masterminds of the Bosnian massacres. Did the Tribunal make him a scapegoat for the responsible ones still at large?

Sometimes when an evil is so huge and complicated as to be beyond human form, the only way to redress it seems to be to assign the blame to particular individuals and punish them as representatives of the larger group. Cynthia Ozick elucidates the reason why in her essay "Public Intellectuals." As she criticizes E.M. Forster for choosing "art for art's sake" as the most pressing issue of 1941, she points out the occasional necessity of delineating a specific enemy rather than bowing to an amorphous evil or deciding that we are as much the enemy as those who attack us. She says, "There are those—human beings both like and unlike ourselves—who relish evil joy, and pursue it, and make it their cause; who despise compromise, reason, negotiation; who, in Forster's words, do evil that evil may come" (327). When these specific evildoers can be identified, it is cathartic, and, in my mind, just to punish them for their crimes. After all, if one causes harm intentionally it seems only fair that he or she pay for these transgressions as a way of making it up to those who have been wronged. Maybe it is sometimes necessary to sacrifice an individual—even if he is not wholly guilty—in order to purge a community of the violence that has savaged it. Maybe if Dusko Tadic suffers for more than just his sins, the families of his victims can derive some greater measure of consolation. And maybe that's why Weschler suggests that some-

times we must allow a scapegoat to be punished in place of an entire group—especially if the ringleaders of the group may never be caught.

In his radical documentary, *Fahrenheit 9/11*, filmmaker Michael Moore casts George W. Bush as the scapegoat for causing the Iraq War. By doing so he incites the viewers of his film to call for the President's removal from office as a way of compensating for the phony war and, perhaps, as the first step down the road to peace. Moore indicts Bush skillfully; he spends the first half of the movie entertaining viewers with a bitingly witty expose of the current administration's alarming bumbles, relying on clips of Bush's garbled public addresses and the unsavory facts about his pre-presidential enterprises. He does so to cast the false president as a comic—but evil—figure. But halfway through the movie, Moore shifts the tone of the film; instead of concentrating on the dangerous idiocy of Bush and his cronies, he explores the consequences of the administration's negligent arrogance. The audience's laughter dies away as footage of bodies of Iraqi civilian causalities and awful military violence rolls. Especially moving is the long sequence involving Lila Lipscomb, the initially pro-Bush mother of a young man sent to serve in Iraq. After her son is killed when his helicopter is shot down over Kabul, Moore makes Lipscomb's pain become the focal point of the movie. The grieving mother's pride in the military gives way as she begins to realize that her President is at fault for her son's death. Towards the end of the film, Lila goes to the White House to try to come to terms with her grief. At the gates, she wails, "My son, killed. . . . For what? For oil. Bush is a terrorist." She places the guilt for the Iraq War squarely on the shoulders of Bush the Liar—and because we, the audience, identify with her, we too find ourselves blaming the President. Michael Moore succeeds in making Bush the scapegoat, and by the end of the movie, we want to seek revenge on this man who seems to be singularly responsible for so much violence.

Destroying those who cause destruction is an important step in inventing peace and restoring order. As Ozick says, "A moment may come when it is needful to be decent to our own side, concerning whom we are not to witness falsely or even carelessly in order to prove how worse we are" (328). To be decent, we must redress the wrongs that are done to the innocent by punishing the individuals responsible. We must not gloss over their crimes—witness falsely against our own side—in the interests of smoothing tensions between warring factions, because if victims do not receive justice their bitterness will fester and may one day lead to a new conflict. Yet we must not let the condemnation of individual villains stand in for healing a country broken by a history of hate. Allowing the punishment of a handful of murderers and

torturers to serve as the only pathway to peace is inadequate. This method does not cut to the heart of the tensions that often allow these hates to explode into violence. It is all too easy to permit these specific, guilty persons to become scapegoats for what may be a larger, uglier, deeper tradition of prejudice that takes more than a trial to solve.

Atticus, AFI's number-one hero, understood the consequences of punishing a criminal instead of truly redressing the prejudice against blacks in Maycomb. He says to his children of the long history of whites abusing blacks, "It's all adding up and one of these days we're going to pay the bill for it. I hope it's not in you children's time" (221). Atticus clearly saw that if steps were not taken to end the discrimination against African-Americans in the South, the tension between the races would one day come to a head and erupt into violence. So it is with any conflict based on hatred and misunderstanding, be it between blacks and whites, Americans and Iraqis, Sunni and Shiite Muslims, or Serbians, Croatians, and Muslims in Bosnia. And so it is of utmost importance that when *inventing* peace, we keep in mind that merely punishing those responsible for specific crimes does not disarm the stereotypes that lead people to commit those specific crimes. Achieving justice is not the same as achieving peace.

So we must take care to pursue both: we must combine the Tribunal's approach for punishing individual criminals with Weschler's implicit caution about depersonalizing and scapegoating. Tom Robinson should never have been convicted. Mayella's father should have gone to jail. But even this justice would not have addressed the underlying prejudice that caused the jury to take the lying Ewells' word over Robinson's. The punishment of war criminals by the Yugoslav Tribunal would serve justice and assuage the grief of the victims' families, but it would not smooth the violent rifts among Muslims, Serbs, and Croats in the area. In fact, it might only ensure continuation of the cycle of ethnic violence if, in later years, instigating groups were able to transform scapegoats into martyrs. The casting out of Bush and his administration would be appropriate punishment for their lying and negligence, but it would not do everything needed to heal the deep divisions between the Muslim East and the Christian West and within Iraq itself. The deeper reasons for these conflicts have been buried in Middle-Eastern sands since the time of the Crusades and cannot be reconciled by deposing a dictator. Merely punishing a criminal does not undo the crimes of many. We must dig deeper and find a more effective way of creating peace by going to the root of hatred and prejudice and erasing their ancient echoes, thereby ensuring that similar crimes will not happen again.

Weschler claims that the Tribunal's and Vermeer's strategies are effective methods for inventing peace; but in reality, we know that they are merely stepping-stones on the road to peace. The sentencing of Dusko Tadic by the Tribunal reinforces the idea that punishment of evildoers must be completed to make way for justice. The message against depersonalization and, by extension, scapegoating that may perhaps have been implicit in Vermeer's work serves as a way to destroy the prejudices that lead to hate crimes and wars. But neither method invents peace all on its own—and perhaps Atticus knew that. He realized that a combination of punishing Bob Ewell, the truly guilty party, and causing the jury to recognize the humanity of a stereotyped person, Tom Robinson, was the only way to invent real peace. This is why Atticus is a hero: he grasped the distinction between justice and peace and set about trying to work at peace through justice. He, out of all the candidates on AFI's list, realized that simply to effect justice and acquit Tom Robinson was not enough. Atticus must also transform Robinson into a worthy human being in the jury's eyes to begin eliminating the prejudices held by whites against blacks. He realized, and perhaps we should too, that justice cannot stand in for peaceful solutions.

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