God on Trial: Forgiveness and Justice in the Trial of Mary Doria Russell's *The Sparrow*

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Abstract

Atrocities challenge not only our belief in justice, but they also pose serious challenges to our ability to continue living in the aftermath of injustice. *The Sparrow* (1996), by Mary Doria Russell, is a science fiction story about a Jesuit mission to an alien planet, during which the human characters are confronted with atrocities; the response to being involved in such events is a central theme of the novel. Using Eliezer Berkovits' Holocaust theology, Jacques Derrida's approach to forgiveness and justice, and Yasco Horsman's conceptualization of the trial as a healing event, I analyse how *The Sparrow* points to possibilities of restoring justice.

Mary Doria Russell's *The Sparrow* (1996) is a science fiction novel about a Jesuit mission to a newly discovered inhabited planet that goes horribly awry. The narration alternates between the past mission and the present aftermath on Earth. Initially, these alternations are restricted; a single chapter details only the past or the present. However, at the end of the novel, the past re-emerges in the present when a chapter describing the present suddenly shifts to describe the past. The initial alternation between past and present, separated in different chapters, reflects the narrative structure of a trial in which the past is played out in a controlled setting, whereas the final interruption of the past into the present reflects the way trauma erupts. The main character of the novel and sole survivor of the failed mission, Emilio Sandoz, is tasked with narrating the past in the form of what I argue is a trial. The present storyline details his psychological struggle and attempt to find justice, reflecting the aims of a trial. Although this trial's focus on justice has a strong Catholic perspective due to its Jesuit main characters, it is also an exploration of forgiveness and justice in a broader sense.

While the story focuses on the fictional injustices on the alien planet Rakhat, it also comments on non-fictional injustices, especially the Holocaust. Moreover, in Sandoz's hearings—which take the form of a trial or a confession—he reveals the atrocities he witnessed or of which he was a victim, including sexual assault, cannibalism, mutilation, and mass murder. The Jesuits, despite being shocked and outraged at what happened, forgive and accept the injustice. Sandoz, on the other hand, is angry at God for letting injustice occur and cannot agree. *The Sparrow* highlights this impasse and does not give a final answer as to why injustice occurs or what the best attitude is after atrocities take place, but it explores the possible outcomes of a trial. In this paper, I will analyze the concept of "trial" in various contexts: the legal, the didactic, and the religious—specifically, the Sacrament of Penance. Sandoz's process in the trial allows him—and the reader—to respond to the presence of injustice by contrasting different views on forgiveness and justice.

A trial can be more than a method of applying the law to restore justice. As Yasco Horsman notes, a trial can be "a didactic event" that can assist in a process of "national education—and sometimes even a

process of national healing" (5). For example, the "didactic-therapeutic" aspect is important in truth commissions as they aim at "a process of working through the past, […] a moment of 'healing'" as opposed to punishment for perpetrators (Horsman 6). Horsman argues that the "varying ambitions [of healing and education through trials] are knotted together by a belief that trials can help bring about a moment of closure" (6). The closure hoped for in these trials can be seen as a culmination of the character's *Durcharbeitung* via a trial (Horsman 4). Durcharbeitung is a Freudian concept that means working through and refers to changing from unconsciously acting out the past to conscious memory of that past (Horsman 3). The change between those two stages occurs through "acting out in a particular *scene*, namely the psychoanalytic setting, which Freud compares to a *playground* where the patient can enact his or her repressed memories" (Horsman 4, emphasis in original). The scene enacted in a trial is a safe moment because it is distant from the patient's regular life, and because it is artificial (Horsman 4). In a similar sense, a trial allows for an acting out of the injustice in a safe, separate environment as opposed to the situation in which the injustice occurred initially. Horsman stresses the theatricality of a trial, pointing out that events such as "[t]eaching, acting, performing a religious ritual, and handing down justice—these can happen everywhere, as long as the space in which they take place is symbolically rendered distinct from the realm of mundane life" (8). This distinction from the mundane is rendered through specific roles, arrangements, and customs—in short, through staging and theatre.

While Horsman focuses on the public staging of trials (14), the sacrament of Penance is similar to trials but inherently private. Penance, or confession, is a Catholic rite in which a penitent confesses their sins to a confessor and is absolved—possibly after being assigned a penitence—of their sins. Horsman argues that religious ceremonies are, like trials, distinguished from mundane life through staging. Moreover, John M. Grondelski argues that this sacrament "can be understood as employing judicial analogies" (56); confession is not unlike a trial in Roman law, according to Grondelski (57). The penitent fulfills many roles that also exist in a trial: "prosecutor, defendant and defense counsel"

(Grondelski 57), while the priest, as a representative of the Church and thereby God, functions as a judge. Another key similarity between trials and the sacrament of Penance is that they aim at restoration and healing. Confession allows a penitent to restore their connection with the Mystical Body of Christ—the community of Christians to which they were added when they were baptized (Grondelski 65). A member of the Body of Christ who has not confessed their sins and has not been absolved is estranged from the rest of the Church; while they cannot leave the Mystical Body of Christ since baptism is a permanent contract, their relationship has been damaged and can only be restored through confession. One vital difference to which I will return later is that the sacrament of Penance does not have a role for the victim—other than the Mystical Body of Christ harmed by the penitent's sins—in this sense, there is no attempt at establishing justice or redressing wrongs.

One possible outcome of a trial, and an important part of the sacrament of Penance, is forgiveness. Although a person is found guilty, their guilt is forgiven. Julia Kristeva defines this as "a suspension of judgement" (Kristeva and Rice 281), but the phenomenon of forgiveness is charged with paradoxes. In "On Forgiveness," Jacques Derrida elucidates these paradoxes and reveals the religious dimension of forgiveness. Derrida points out that the emphasis on forgiveness in the twentieth century coincided with the invention of the category of crimes against humanity (30). Forgiveness, Derrida argues, can only be given for the unforgivable, for if a crime was not unforgivable, there would have been no need for forgiveness (32). Forgiveness exists in the impossibility of its existence and it must be entirely unconditional (33-34). True forgiveness forgives the unrepentant criminal or the irreparable crime.

What is pertinent here is Derrida's mention of God as either a witness of a crime or the one to forgive a crime. If God is a witness, there might be victims who can forgive the crime; in the latter case, God is the only one who can forgive and victims on Earth are merely witnesses (Derrida, "On Forgiveness" 38). Moreover, Derrida forcefully asserts that forgiveness "should never amount to a therapy of reconciliation" (41), by which he means that forgiveness only exists in a truly disinterested state. It should not have a goal, not even a laudable goal like

reconciliation. Finally, Derrida points out that granting forgiveness usually seems to imply the exercise of a sovereign power, which he believes is not the purest form of forgiveness (59). Instead, he calls for "a forgiveness without power: *unconditional but without sovereignty*" (59, emphasis in original), further complicating the use of the concept in a judicial context and a religious one.

In *The Sparrow*, the Jesuits accuse Sandoz of being "a whore and a murderer" after he was sexually assaulted and accidentally killed the alien Askama, who was like a daughter to him (33). Since Rakhat is outside of the jurisdiction of any judicial system on Earth, he will not stand trial for those crimes in a judicial court. However, he is expected by his Jesuit superiors to submit to "hearings" aimed at uncovering the truth of what happened on Rakhat (169). During these hearings, Sandoz and his interlocutors perform the theatre of a trial. Sandoz plays the role of the defense, while his interlocutors are both prosecutor and jury. Their interactions take place in the Jesuit retreat; the questioning is thus conducted in a space separate from mundane life. The retreat house offers "privacy" while Sandoz is "under siege" in the Roman residence (61, 60). The Father General pushed Sandoz to speak of his traumatic experiences in order to better take care of his health. The Father General claims that "[i]t was necessary" to make Sandoz speak, and moreover, that "it was necessary for [his interlocutors, the jury] to hear it" (496), underscoring the curative effect of staging a trial. Initially, Sandoz cannot speak of what happened and suffers migraines and bouts of violent vomiting. Due to his unconscious traumatic memories resurfacing, he cannot explain what happened or discuss his memories clearly. Sandoz's physical symptoms continue throughout the investigation: apart from the migraines and nausea, he also shatters a cup and destroys a table (294, 489). In this way, "the past is manifested via a set of symptoms" (Horsman 3). However, at the end of the novel, Sandoz does remark that his confession was "like vomiting poison" and that "confession is good for the soul" (501). As the hearings progress, he recovers. The most traumatizing moments Sandoz recalls intrude in the linearity of the story, in the form of flashbacks. Sandoz involuntarily acts out the past, but as this occurs in the controlled setting of the hearings, he can narrate

and turn his trauma into moments of insight. His symptoms then abate, so the trial has its therapeutic effect.

After Sandoz has explained what happened on Rakhat, his hearing or trial is over with him concluding that "[i]t wasn't [his] fault" (492). In his account, Sandoz addresses the charge that he is a "whore" (33) and reveals that instead he was raped (489). Ultimately, Sandoz is the one to pronounce himself innocent of the charge of being a whore in this trial, not his audience, although they evidently agree. Yet, Sandoz does allocate blame; he blames God. At this moment, the novel's central question of the possibility of justice in the face of crimes against humanity—or the equivalent, if committed by and against aliens—becomes apparent, namely the impossibility of reaching justice when a crime of great magnitude has been committed and cannot be redressed. After Sandoz confesses he killed Askama accidentally, Father Candotti attempts to grant him forgiveness but fails. Candotti uses part of the formula that concludes the sacrament of Penance, "*Absolvo te*", which forgives the penitent for their sins, and reconciles them with the church, as discussed above (Russell 496, Grondelski 65). However, as Candotti tries to forgive Sandoz, he is overcome by emotions and cannot say the rest of the formula that would absolve Sandoz: "*Absolvo te—absolvo te…*' but that had to be enough, because he couldn't say the rest" (496). While Candotti forgives Sandoz for killing Askama, it appears that this forgiveness is problematic as it cannot be pronounced. Moreover, the confession-trial does not only produce forgiveness, as Candotti also pronounces a more judicial sentence later. Candotti tells the Father General that "[t]he closest legal term might be involuntary manslaughter" (498). Candotti judges Sandoz but decides that he should not be punished for murder since he did not murder anyone. In this sense, Sandoz does not need forgiveness, because he did nothing unforgivable. Thus, *The Sparrow* reflects the aporia Derrida described, namely that "forgiveness forgives only the unforgivable. One cannot, or should not, forgive; there is only forgiveness, if there is any, where there is the unforgivable" ("On Forgiveness" 33). If what Sandoz did was not murder, it was not unforgivable, and therefore he cannot be forgiven.

However, the question of Sandoz's guilt or innocence is not the main topic of the novel. As the trial progresses, it becomes apparent that the issue at stake is the presence of injustice in the world and humanity's reaction to that presence. The two main injustices described in the book are both linked to religion. First, the murder of the children is linked to the Massacre of the Innocents in Matthew 2:16-18, which describes state-sanctioned mass-murder of children. Second, Sandoz's rape is presented as committed by God. Sandoz tells the Jesuits that he "had nothing between [him] and what happened but the love of God. [He was] naked before God and [he] was raped" (490). Derrida, too, links injustice to religion, but he stresses that "the crime against humanity is a crime against what is most sacred in the living" (Derrida 31). With "most sacred in the living," Derrida refers to the Biblical doctrine of *imago dei*, or that humans are made in the image of God. This idea of *imago dei* is also reiterated by Russell when Father General Giuliani tells Sandoz to take better care of himself by reminding him that his body is "God's creation" and it deserves respect as such (103). Injustice against human bodies is consequently sacrilegious. Thus, Giuliani articulates a view on injustice similar to Derrida's, arguing that injustice is an affront *against* God and placing the onus on the individual person committing it, whereas Sandoz places the onus of injustice on the world and God for permitting it.

While the injustice on Rakhat is obviously fictional, the novel often refers to real crimes against humanity, most often the Holocaust. In response to the Holocaust, philosophers and theologians turned their attention to the existence of evil and the possibility of justice in a world that contains evil, which are also matters the characters in *The Sparrow* question. Sandoz concludes that God is cruel because He allows injustice to exist in the world, while the Jesuits accept the injustices and still believe in a good God. They refer to Holocaust theology, echoing Eliezer Berkovits, who argues that "[i]f man is to be [and to be free], God himself must respect his freedom of decision. If man is to act on his own responsibility, without being continually overawed by divine supremacy, God must absent himself from history" (107). This idea of a

hidden God is evident in *The Sparrow* when Father Reyes tells his fellow Jesuits that

> [t]here's an old Jewish story that says in the beginning God was everywhere and everything, a totality. But to make creation, God had to remove Himself from some part of the universe, so something besides Himself could exist. So He breathed in, and in the places where God withdrew, there creation exists. (Russell 498-499)

Giuliani reminds them of Matthew 10:29, in which it is asserted that "not one [sparrow] falls to the ground without your Father" (*Revised New Jerusalem Bible*), a quote directly referenced in *The Sparrow*: "[n]ot one sparrow can fall to the ground without your Father knowing it" (499). Father Reyes objects, "[b]ut the sparrow still falls" (499), pointing out that even if God is good and the Jewish story and Matthew are both right, God still allows injustice to occur. However, the Jesuits all accept this injustice. Strikingly, in this particular case, the Jesuits are presented as forgiving God rather than a human penitent. The Jesuits conclude that there is no possibility of justice and instead turn to a "suspension of judgement" in the form of forgiveness (Kristeva and Rice 281).

Sandoz, unlike the others, cannot forgive God. He chooses "to believe that God is *vicious*" for allowing injustice (490, emphasis in original). When Sandoz blames God for the injustice, he expresses a kind of incomprehension. Earlier in the story, Sandoz believed he understood the presence of injustice and believed God was just. He confesses to Giuliani: "I thought I understood. There are moments, John, when your soul is like a ball of fire, and it reaches out to everything and everyone equally" (495). Here, Sandoz expresses an understanding of justice similar to Derrida's approach. Derrida argues that justice is "a movement toward the particularity of the Other" (Valverde 658), and thus not a fixed point but moving towards something that is out of reach. Since genuine intersubjectivity "can never be fully accomplished," justice can only be reached towards, but can never be fully achieved (Valverde 658). Derrida argues that justice is an address to the Other ("Force of

Law" 949), but when one addresses another, one cannot speak their language because of their alterity. Sandoz, however, believes that he has come close to real justice when his soul was "like a ball of fire," reaching out to everyone (495). Sandoz keeps striving towards an understanding and when he cannot find it, he despairs, but still refers to the moment when he did understand. After his confession, Sandoz is implied to have future access to justice because he keeps reaching towards the Other. Giuliani remarks that Sandoz is like *The Captives* (ca. 1520-1534), a series of sculptures by Michelangelo, also referred to as *The Slaves*. Giuliani describes them to Reyes:

> Out of a great formless mass of stone, the figures of slaves emerge: heads, shoulders, torsos, straining towards freedom but still held fast in the stone. There are souls like that, Reyes. There are souls that try to carve themselves from their own formlessness. Broken and damaged as he is, Emilio Sandoz is still trying to find God in it all. (Russell 497)

This passage indicates that Sandoz is still reaching for justice. He cannot accept what happened and forgive the injustice as the Jesuits do, because he tries to find justice.

The chapters that alternate between past and present mirror the process of Sandoz' Durcharbeitung. However, since *The Sparrow*'s consideration of injustice is also a consideration of injustice in the real world, the process of Durcharbeitung in Sandoz' trial is also an invitation for the reader to work through the injustices of our world. The protagonist's trial becomes a model for any judgement regarding injustice in the world. While the story centers on religious characters and doctrine, it raises universal questions in response to tragedy, and the religious themes serve to highlight the underlying religious dimension of justice and forgiveness that Derrida points out. The novel's ending is undecided. The Jesuits have forgiven God, but Sandoz is still "straining towards" something (Russell 497). By ending the novel in this way, Russell seems to ask the reader to consider whether justice can be

reached and whether forgiveness is possible or even desirable in the face of atrocity.

Sandoz's trial in *The Sparrow* is a way for Russell to question and challenge her readers on the matter of injustice and forgiveness. However, the trial also functions as a confession, which is how Russell explores the religious background of issues of justice and forgiveness. Sandoz is forgiven and acquitted at the end of his trial, which shows the tension in the aporia of forgiveness that Derrida describes. Sandoz is forgiven for something forgivable, and he is forgiven by someone who may not even have the right to forgive. On the other hand, Sandoz himself cannot forgive the injustice he witnessed and suffered, and instead keeps seeking justice. The Jesuits' forgiveness appears to be an acceptance of suffering and injustice, while Sandoz's refusal appears to be committed to justice. However, Sandoz despairs because he aspires to justice, but cannot reach it. The inability to find justice despite his movement towards it demonstrates the difficulty of moving past atrocities like crimes against humanity, but Sandoz' continued straining towards justice suggests we may be able to move closer to the Other.

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Biography

After studying English at Leiden University, Maria Aaftink started a Research Masters in Literary Studies at the same institution. One of her main interests is how religion features in literature. She is currently working as a student assistant on the compilation of a book on the history of ecological thought.