Real People

by Theodore Dalrymple (March 2019)

Untitled, Dario Puggioni

To hate the sin but not the sinner is a counsel of perfection, for it is not altogether easy to disentangle in one's mind a man from his behaviour. Nor, perhaps, should we try too hard to do so, because then we are in danger of succumbing to the bogus psychology of the *Real Me*, according to which a person's true inner character has no connection whatever to his outer conduct, which thereby becomes a kind of epiphenomenon of small account. A man may then behave abominably and still consider himself a saint.

On the other hand, we are all of us sinners and therefore in

need of comprehension, forgiveness and mercy. ‘Use every man after his desert,’ said Hamlet, ‘and who should ’scape whipping?’ No one’s conduct is invariably above reproach, and most people have behaved very badly at some time in their lives.

By the use of judgment, therefore, we must avoid both the Scylla of a sloppy sentimentality and the Charybdis of a harsh and unfeeling censoriousness. This is by no means easy and we are bound sometimes to err in our judgment. Sometimes we apportion blame where we should extend understanding, and sometimes we extend understanding where we should apportion blame. Our judgment is likewise the object of judgment, for we often, for understandable reasons, let it be distorted by emotional considerations that should properly be irrelevant.

The other day, looking for something comparatively easy to read, I picked up a book with the title *Posts-Mortem: The Correspondence of Murder* by Jonathan Goodman. It was a short anthology of letters written by murderers and their victims before (or also, in the case of murderers, after) the commission of the crime.

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Goodman, who died in 2008, was an extremely erudite aficionado of murder, especially in Britain and America. He wrote numerous books, in one of them solving, at least to his own satisfaction, an unsolved case dating back nearly forty years, for which the wrong man was very nearly hanged, having

received a reprieve only at the last moment.

For Goodman, the murders in which he interested himself, once a few decades had passed since their commission, became not so much manifestations of human evil as tragi-comedies of manners. He wrote of them with a somewhat laboured irony that offended some readers and pleased many. As he rightly says in the introduction to *Posts-Mortem*, 'There appears to be a single factor common to those rare cases that capture and hold a wide interest, and this is that they are both appropriate to and evocative of their period and place.' Murder becomes social history.

The first chapter of the book, which was published in 1971, deals with what was known as the *Agra Double Murder Case*. In British India in 1909, the year of my father's birth, an army doctor called Henry Clark, aged forty, who was unhappily married, fell reciprocally in love with the wife an army accountant called Edward Fullam. Divorce at that time was legally possible, but it was frowned upon in the narrow-minded circles of the little community of British servants of the colonial administration. Dr Clark and Mrs Fullam decided to dispose of their respective spouses by murder so that they could be joined together in connubial bliss. Here was a union not till death do us part, but till death do us join.

The two couples separated geographically by the exigences of the colonial service, Dr Clark sent Mrs Fullam poison, principally arsenic, through the post to administer to her

husband, with advice on how to employ it. At first, however, both his poisons and his advice failed to work, though Mrs Fullam faithfully used it as directed. She wrote to Dr Clark informing him of the effects of the poison, known in the correspondence as ‘tonic powders’, and asking what to do next:

> Sweetheart mine, hubby seems quite unaffected by the tonic powders. In fact, he is stronger and better than before, and more passionate [arsenic in small doses was long used as a stimulant, and in fact still is, illegally, for racehorses] I want you to let me know in return what you think of it, my own precious sweetie, and tell me how to go on?

The answer, of course, was more poison, which eventually brought Mr Fullam low. It was suggested to him that he was being poisoned, and he suspected it himself, but nevertheless he continued to take what his wife gave him, social obligation and a reluctance to believe ill of her (for he loved her still) overcoming, even unto death, any doubts he may have had. His daughter Kathleen later described the scene:

Father said, ‘I am going, Kathleen, dear. Be a good girl, and God will bless you. Give my love to Leonard [the brother], and tell him not to fret.’ He then asked, ‘Where’s mother?’ I replied, ‘In the dining-room. Shall I go and call her?’ Father said, ‘No, dear. I do not want her.’

This suggests that he knew that she had killed him, but—with an almost incredible nobility—did not want to tell his daughter so.

The murder might have gone undetected (unexplained death was not uncommon in the India of those days) had not Dr Clark subsequently arranged and paid for his wife to be beaten to death by local thugs. He was immediately suspected, and Mrs Fullam's letters found in the search of his belongings. Mr Fullam's body was exhumed and found to be impregnated with arsenic. Dr Clark and Mrs Fullam were tried and both sentenced to death.

Dr Clark's last request before execution was to see Mrs Fullam. The request was granted but Mrs Fullam refused to see him. Thus (nearly) ended their passionate love story, and one can only imagine Dr Clark's thoughts as he approached the scaffold. He had risked everything for her, acted abominably, and she had turned against him!

Her sentence was commuted because she was pregnant, possibly by Dr Clark. Her son was born in prison in 1913, but she died ten months later, of heat-stroke, the condition that appeared on Mr Fullam's original death certificate. One longs to know what happened to her children. Her great-grandchildren, if any, would now be in their thirties or forties.

This was a drama of Shakespearian intensity, albeit one not expressed in Shakespearian language. The passage of time does not alter the moral quality of Dr Clark's or Mrs Fullam's actions, of course (there has been no age in which they would have been considered meritorious), but it does affect our emotional response to them. If we had been alive at the time we should, no doubt, have quivered with indignation at their abominable conduct; but with more than a century between us,

we reflect more on the paths into which the sexual passion can lure us, and the tragic aspects of the case (including that refusal of Mrs Fullam to see Dr Clark before his execution, and the predicament of the children orphaned by their mother's crime) than the rather obvious moral that poisoning one's husband and having one's wife beaten to death is very wrong.

Mercy and forgiveness are not the same thing, though this is often forgotten and the two things confused. The system of justice can extend mercy but not forgiveness. You cannot forgive people who have wronged others: that is for them to do or not to do, as they think right.

I remember discussing these matters with a medical student back in the days when I would have a medical student attached to me for teaching. In this case, he had just arrived on his first day with me, when my first patient of the day arrived. He had been brought to the hospital by the police, a young Ghanaian man covered in blood—not his own, but that of the young woman whom he had killed only a short time before.

The Ghanaian was an illegal immigrant. I am opposed to illegal immigration in principle, but whenever I meet an illegal immigrant I feel a human sympathy with him because, virtually by definition, he or she has had a hard life, has braved dangers to arrive and lives in an unenviably precarious and anxious condition; no one, surely, would live thus if he had a better choice.

Moreover, I have liked all the Ghanaians whom I have met, though I am sure that there must be villains amongst them, and

so I started with a predilection, absent the blood in which he was covered, in favour of this patient. The police wanted to know whether he was fit to be detained and, if so, whether he was fit to be questioned.

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His story was as follows (unsubstantiated, of course, but plausible). He was living in London, having found himself both a steady job and a place to live. In the circumstances, this was already an achievement. But then, in evil hour, he met a young woman with whom he fell quickly in love and who claimed to reciprocate his feelings. She asked him to come and live with her in her home city a hundred and twenty miles away, which he proceeded to do. All was well for a couple of weeks, but she quickly grew tired of him. She complained that his sexual prowess was not up to that of a previous boyfriend, whom she would telephone and invite round to satisfy her. Unsurprisingly, this led to quarrels and she demanded that he leave. One day she began to put his few belongings out on to the street.

Humiliated and abandoned, he begged her to delay his eviction from her flat. She refused and said he must leave directly. He had, of course, nowhere to go, no job to go to and very little money. He was as bereft as the day he arrived in the country despite all his efforts to make a life for himself. He begged, but she was adamantine. On them morning of what was to be her death she telephoned her former boyfriend, asking him to come round and satisfy her. The Ghanaian stabbed her many times and then called the police.

Unlike most murderers of my acquaintance, he had a nice face and a pleasant, mild manner. Apart from the blood-soaked clothes that he wore, you would never have guessed that he was a killer.

Of course, we had not heard the victim’s side of the story, nor could we have done so since she was dead. Perhaps he had treated her very badly from the first, though somehow I doubted it. The medical student, being a scion of the comfortable middle classes, had heard nothing like this story. He had probably read *Macbeth* at school, but otherwise had been protected from the fiercer passions of life. It was an education for him.

Our sympathies were entirely with him and not with the supposed Jezebel whom he had killed. She had played with his affections and been as heartless as any bureaucrat. Indeed, we imagined that she had experienced a malicious and sadistic pleasure in turning his life upside down, enjoying her exercise of power. She had treated him as if his life were of no significance, knowing perfectly that he had no recourse against her. And the avenging of humiliation is one of the strongest of human motivations.

We had jumped easily to conclusions. We did not know that his story as true, and hardly stopped to think that, even if it were true, his crime would not have been justified. We liked the man, and therefore, while decrying the sin, at least in the abstract, could not entirely decry the sinner.

I asked the medical student to think about it. If the victim had been the very worst of Jezebels, if the man repented immediately of what had done (as, in fact, he had), if it were very unlikely that he would ever do such a thing again (as I believed), would it have been right just to let him off scot free because he represented no further violent danger to society? And if not, why not?

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Theodore Dalrymple's latest books are *The Terror of Existence: From Ecclesiastes to Theatre of the Absurd* (with Kenneth Francis) and @NERIconoclast