

Now It's the Women's Turn:
The Art(s) of Reconciliation in Vonnegut's Bluebeard

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Rabo Karabekian, fallen co-founder of the abstract expressionist school of art, has a secret in his Long Island barn: an immense eight-by-sixty-four feet painting by him depicting in a photorealistic style the moment of his release as an American prisoner of war on the morning World War II ended. High above a valley Karabekian sees soldiers and gypsies—and yet also, more imaginatively, friends and acquaintances unstuck in time and placed in this specific historical moment. As a painting, literary critic David Andrews rightly points out, the work demonstrates an aesthetic humanism. Here Karabekian expresses himself in order to engage his audience ethically, exhibiting the ways in which art's purpose is instruction in kindness: to share a moment with Karabekian's tremendous image is to share in a life's experience in all its pain and wonder.

Life—at least political life—rarely imitates art in this way; that is, relations of this humanistic variety hardly ever seems to enter into the political sphere. More often, politics exist along Foucauldian lines, as discipline and punish, that preserve the dominant regime within an unequal power dynamic. However, though very infrequently, we see politics produce an ethical humanism, especially through the increasing use of the truth commission. As government-sanctioned (though not always government-run) panels of inquiry and public confession, truth commissions see as their purpose the airing of some grievance, from social ills to human rights violations. While not every commission functions the same way or even in always-ethical

ways—indeed, some are merely political theatre meant to produce a façade of justice and fairness while maintaining whatever corrupt regime brought it into existence—the equitable versions of truth commissions I would like to invoke today seek to produce an atmosphere of truthful exchange and apology that aims to overcome feelings of ill will and reunite a hate-torn group.

In this paper I would like to consider the political efficacy of aesthetic humanism in relation to truth commissions by putting three ideas in conversation with one another, and argue that through the version of this humanism we see in Vonnegut's *Bluebeard*—often read as a kind of treatise on artistic movements—we can employ the novel as a guide to future progressive politics. First, I would like to explore the ways Vonnegut's Karabekian invokes a double relational apologetics that is both visual (his painting) and literary (his autobiography). Second, I would like to examine in this light the function of truth commissions by looking toward one of the first, and certainly most famous, cases, the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission that followed the fall of that country's apartheid. Third, I'd like to suggest that the centerpiece of both—the public apology—produces a model of justice in the world after the American century in that their incitements to dialogue are the basis for social change. In this way, I'd like to think about how we might engage Vonnegut in new contexts, to use the writer's work as a stepping-off point for thinking about equity in a global context.

To understand how *Bluebeard* functions as a model for a more just society, we need to understand how relationality works for the protagonist artist. Many scholars—as well as Karabekian himself—have looked toward the idea of finding *soul* in the novel as that which offers Karabekian redemption. This “soul” in most cases has everything to do with Karabekian's ability to find his artistic voice and by representing something truly expressive, a process we

know takes many years, and even then, is relegated to the locked barn. As I see it, soul is entirely a process of relationality, that is, of developing meaningful connections to others. In fact, we see this version of soul comingle with aesthetics in the quiet resolution of the novel, where the painting itself ceases to be a painting (as merely an object) at all, but instead a *locus* of relations. As Karabekian describes it near the end of the book after he has begun guiding tours through the barn:

There is a war story to go with every figure in the picture, no matter how small. I made up a story, and then painted the person it had happened to. I at first made myself available in the barn to tell anyone who asked what the story was of this person or that one, but soon gave up in exhaustion. “Make up your own war stories as you look at the whatchamacallit,” I tell people. I stay in the house here, and simply point the way out to the potato barn.

Karabekian’s exhaustion here comes not only from the monotony of retelling the same stories to ever-new visitors, but also simply from the fact that telling his stories is no longer as necessary as it once was. As an artist, he’s created the aesthetic artifact that continues to enliven other minds through contemplation: the horrors of his painting are now the raw material onto which others can project their own “war stories,” the traumas that litter human experience. Further, in his capacity as author of another aesthetic object, his memoir, he has completed the project the painting began; through writing he overcomes the return of grief caused by his second wife’s death, and makes public the record both of his life as well as the painting where he explicitly synthesizes his own (sometimes literal) war stories for public consumption, entreating the reader to connect with him as he has reached out to them through written narrative.

This telling is the center of the truth commission. Following the end of apartheid in

South Africa in 1994, the new South African government formed the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) in order to provide a forum in which to air the horrors committed under apartheid. Instead of suffering silently, victims were asked to come forward to give testimony of their abuses, while perpetrators, too, were invited to describe and apologize for the crimes they committed; during the hearings, apartheid government agents and liberation forces found themselves appearing in both subject positions. The commission, chaired by Nobel Laureate Archbishop Desmond Tutu, was given the authority to provide reparations to the wronged as well as grant amnesty from prosecution to those confessing. The hearings themselves were shown on South African television, providing transparency to a narrative that from its outset was meant to unify a war- and hate-torn country.

To be sure, there have been critics of the South African truth commission, and indeed, the movement toward truth commissions that the South African example instigated in general. However, there remains something intuitively appealing in the idea that letting one tell one's story arrests a cycle of violence by turning to narrative. Instead of committing yet another crime against humanity (say, corporal punishment against the old regime enacted by the new) that will no doubt receive redress in subsequent regime changes, truth commissions suspend time and the law, as it were, and craft a space where new relations might form. About this Claire Moon, in a recent study of the South African commission, writes, "The TRC was remarkable for bringing into the political domain the more usually private rituals of apology, remorse, and atonement, gestures of the formal acknowledgment of past atrocities perpetrated by the state and its agents on the one hand, and opponents of the apartheid regime on the other." As Moon describes it, the TRC acted successfully as midwife to a new public political climate, one where secrecy was not valued. Though tense and highly contentious moments existed during the commission's

hearings, by bringing the past to light, the South African government forged a space out of which it could face the future openly, without the looming threat of unresolved fears and the violence they might foster.

Art-as-narrative serves this same function for Vonnegut's work. The culmination of Karabekian's "soul search" in the painting "Now It's the Women's Turn" is the reconciliatory-aesthetic object *par excellence*. First, it synthesizes all of Karabekian's relations, crystallizing them in a single aesthetic object. Figures from his life (like Terry Kitchen and Jackson Pollock) and figures from the Karabekian family history without whom he would never existed (the dead woman from whom his mother retrieved the jewels with which they escaped massacre) and even wild temporal displacements (a Japanese soldier) appear side-by-side, equally, as it were, as representation. In representation, they appear on equal levels, as images within a single, unified frame. As an art piece, he fuses the realism of his youth—as homage, he says, to his mentor Dan Gregory—to the postmodern mode of his place and his actions within a recognizable world lauded by his abstract-expressionist friends. Tellingly, Karabekian appears in the painting and mirrors the synthetic work it undertakes: dead center, his back the viewer, Rabo is split by the intersection of the center panels, reproducing his conflicted mindset, and denying a unified absolute point of reference. Even the title itself suggests the tension of changing mindsets, of a masculine worldview that no longer seems valid in the face of the trouble it has caused.

Taken in this way, we can read Karabekian's life story as the move to making trauma—as both victim and perpetrator—public. On the one hand, he portrays himself as a victim. The son of Armenian immigrants who narrowly escaped genocide, were swindled in the escape, and suffered through the apparent poverty and shame the swindling brought, he carries with him an historical burden of victimhood. Beyond this, he's a victim of circumstance, as both a wounded

war hero and hapless user of the defective Sateen Dura-Luxe paint. At the same time, he portrays himself as the perpetrator of a number of misdeeds himself: he's a supremely negligent father, intensely insensitive toward the women in his life, elitist to a fault, and dispositionally speaking, he transcends curmudgeonly.

In the end, Rabo's project of personal reconciliation—of finding a connected soul through art—recuperates his past, but requires exposure to do so. In a roundabout way, he seems to have learned something from the lesson Gregory was trying to teach him years ago. As Gregory had said to Karabekian, asserting who it is that determines the modern world's morality: "Painters—the storytellers, including poets and playwrights and historians...They are the justices of the Supreme Court of Good and Evil, of which I am now a member, and to which you may someday belong." Though Karabekian rejects the dogmatic practice of his master—a realist vision meant to instruct the public in morality—he too ends up rejecting the abstract expressionist school he helped to found, understanding the impossibility of the Genesis Gang's approach, finding it inconceivable that paintings could ever be "about absolutely nothing but themselves." As works of art, they must always enter the world; however, as aesthetic objects, they are always subject to a plurality of meanings. Karabekian rejects absolutism *as well as* its absence, preferring finally to leave meaning up to the viewer. As David Andrews comments about Karabekian's response to art, "Taken to extremes, mimesis and abstraction become equally formalistic, equally inhuman." Or, as I'm suggesting in moral terms today, equally *inhumane*. The soulful—that is, connected—version that emerges combines both aesthetic practices Karabekian has learned in order to highlight the relational aspects. By sticking to Gregory's realism, he connects the viewer to a familiar world; by imaginatively figuring these people within this locale, he invites the reader to consider its meaning. In neither case does he assert his

own moral sense of things into the work, simply allowing these elements to bring about the viewer's own sense of things. By enlivening aesthetic response through his own relationships—both to other people and to art—Karabekian engages ethically with the world.

At the same time, operating at another aesthetic level, Karabekian's autobiography produces the moral narratives that make the painting personally meaningful. On the one hand an autobiography, the work catalogues the factual pieces of his life and relations. At the same time, it also provides ethical commentary and evaluation of these same relations. Presented as a published work (with Vonnegut's note preceding), no doubt the implied publication after Karabekian's death makes it an invaluable companion to the painting (as mimetic guide), as well as an immensely readable account on its own (as literary work open to critical analysis).

As objects of reconciliation both the literary work and the art piece incite dialogue because of their material contexts. As a book, the reader is drawn into the "shaggy dog" hermeneutics of the potato barn's secret. As a painting of a single historical moment, the viewer begs the explanation of just who all these people are, begetting Karabekian's concern about putting the painting in the longest bar in the world because "the customers would be climbing up on the bar all the time, trying to see what was really going on." His concern intuits a natural human desire simply to know *why*? In the same way, explaining how he has been able to hold onto hope for the future despite having heard so much gruesome testimony leading the TRC, Archbishop Tutu explains, "The reason we are shocked by evil is because it is an aberration." In other words, in both cases the provocation is to language, to ask the question, "Why would anyone do this?" In Karabekian's case, it's a question of scale and complexity. In the South African case, it's a question of unfathomable motives. To think that there would be any right answer to questions such as these misses the point; instead, from the aesthetic and political

standpoint the goal is simply to open the discussions, to defuse aggression, and, ultimately, to find routes to better, more just relations.

To be clear, that Karabekian finally gets *soul* does not absolve him of past wrong deeds (just as one's standing before the TRC didn't guarantee either amnesty or reparations). Instead, he simply makes peace with them by bringing them to life in narrative. He says in the novel that in writing his autobiography, he's thought of things he hasn't for years, and begs (to himself, of course), "Let me off this hellish time machine!" This way the autobiography functions for him as a kind of talking cure, (not unlike his much less successful counterpart, the fallen minister Tom Marshfield in Updike's *A Month of Sundays*), a psychologically comforting practice personally, but not one that suddenly repairs all the schisms in his life. Art—whether narrative or visual—clearly has the power to channel anger and sadness, reminding us always of its place in the modern world as moderator of ethical concerns.

To know this we need look no further than a real work of art. In January 2003, when they approached the United Nations Security Council with the U.S. government's case for a preemptive Iraq invasion, the delegation, headed by then-Secretary of State Colin Powell spoke in front of a blue tarp: the textile reproduction of Picasso's haunting painting *Guernica*—an abstract representation of the 1937 German bombing massacre of that Basque city—usually displayed had been covered for the day. One U.S. diplomat said it would have been "inappropriate" for such images to accompany the day's discussion. Inappropriate, perhaps, but certainly providing rhetorical friction to the U.S. message of incursion that day. Such is the power of art to shame us, to stand as permanent witness, to tell the truth of our forever-interrelated human experiences. One can only imagine that this is the same feeling of shame and sadness—and, yet, perhaps hope—that those passing through Karabekian's potato barn visitors

take with them.

Archbishop Tutu has said that “It is not the weak who are able to say sorry—it is the strong.” Apologies acknowledge unequal power relations, implant action into memory, and, through language, connect people via grammar and marking the historical record. By narrating our relations, we empower both ourselves and those who have been wronged. However, to work within language and apology in the way that Tutu and others have used them looks for forgiveness without forgetting. Here art—either visual or literary—provides a mode of remembering actions and bringing them to light and life in perpetuity.

Just over a week before this paper was originally given, we saw the signs of this potential shift begin to happen in American policy as President Obama publicly expressed regret for the casualties that Afghan civilians have suffered, the result of American military action and occupation abroad. The admission of civilian loss of life—obvious to those living in Afghanistan—doesn’t tell anyone directly involved anything they don’t already know, or attempt to repay the loss of life. Indeed, what words could ever do that? Instead, the presidential apology ritualizes and makes powerful the agents involved by expressing responsibility. In the same way, what we see from putting Vonnegut and the Truth and Reconciliation Commission into discussion with one another is this: though apologies and admissions of guilt may not ever be enough, they are things that every person has to offer.

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