Atonement and Its Discontents: A Genealogy of Retribution in Alissa York's *Fauna*

Brayden Tate

Abstract: This essay will connect the historical roots of the ideology of retribution to its manifestation and critique in Alissa York's *Fauna* (2010). While this ideology has its roots in Anselm of Canterbury's *Cur Deus Homo*, I will argue that the novel depicts the ongoing influence and potential dangers of this ideology, ultimately offering a vision of how to sublimate past wrongs without recourse to violence or retribution. This essay focuses on the character of Darius and the socio-historical origins of his beliefs and actions.

Alissa York's *Fauna* (2010) depicts the dangers of understanding justice as retribution, personifying these dangers through the characters of Darius and his grandfather. In the Western Christian tradition, retribution has historically been central to doctrinal and theological concerns. Beginning with Anselm of Canterbury's *Cur Deus Homo* ("Why a God Man" or "Why God Became a Man"), the Christian West has historically emphasized the satisfaction theory of atonement[1]—in short, the belief that God has been robbed of His glory through humanity's disobedience and requires retribution, which is satisfied by the death of Christ (Anselm 296–98). Fredrich Nietzsche famously analyzed the cultural legacy of this vision of justice as retribution,[2] but I will focus on how this legacy animates the form and thematic content of *Fauna* to offer a contextualized reading

1 Atonement: "The doctrine concerning the reconciliation of God and humankind, esp. as accomplished through the life, suffering, and death of Christ" ("atonement." *Collins Dictionary*).

2 See especially "Beyond Good and Evil" and "On the Genealogy of Morals."

of Darius and his grandfather's retributive understanding of justice. This attention to these theories is not to suggest York's direct engagement with them but to uncover the latent origins of some of the novel's thematic content. I will thus argue that *Fauna* is a novel interested in the continuing legacy of certain theological discourses and that it presents these discourses as subjects for critique and something to overcome.

Fauna positions Darius as a character deeply concerned with what he conceives as the social order and the psychological consequences of changes to it. Seeing himself as a vigilante, Darius believes he will restore the social order through the form of justice that dominates his understanding, retribution. Darius's retributive justice first appears in his first blog post about Toronto's coyote population: "They get in. And its [sic] our job to get them out" (York 37). By referring to the coyotes as "vermin" (38) and desiring to "wip[e] them out" (37), Darius depicts them as destructive to the social world of humanity that he believes takes precedence over, and is distinct from, the natural world. However, the novel uses analepsis to provide the harrowing context of Darius's beliefs. By providing this context, these flashbacks serve as protection against the demonization of Darius.

After the death of his mother, Darius moves in with his grandmother and fundamentalist grandfather, a traumatic part of his upbringing, which engenders his obsession with retribution. Before moving in with his grandparents, Darius had had little exposure to Christianity. This ignorance toward the faith would soon change. During the first dinner with his grandparents, Darius sets a fourth seat at the table for Jesus, "the younger man-not-man" (York 163). He also hears his grandfather pray for God to "protect [them] from the governments that would run [them] down like lambs to slaughter, and from all the Churches that make a mockery of [God's] holy name" (164). Most importantly, Darius hears the reason for the empty fourth seat: "to honour the sacrifice He made" (164). Therefore, through this dinner and the many that follow it, Darius is consistently made aware of

Jesus' crucifixion as a sacrifice propitiating God's retribution on sinful, disobedient humanity. Moreover, his grandfather tacitly likens the death of Darius's mother, Faye, to a substitutionary sacrifice that allows the boy to return to the house of his mother's childhood by "[God's] righteous and merciful hand" (164). Moments like these at the dinner table influence Darius's belief in the requirement of retribution to protect the social order (as he conceives it) from "all the wickedness of the world" (164).

Darius's experience of physical abuse through repeated beatings by his grandfather is another aspect of his upbringing that influences his sense of justice as retribution. Returning to Anselm, the satisfaction theory of atonement has gained many critiques since its inception; for example, by depicting God the Father as punishing His Son for the sake of others, the theory naturalizes abuse and retribution (Weaver 334–36). In *Fauna*, the imagination of Darius's grandfather is saturated by the satisfaction theory of atonement: when his honour is threatened by Darius's illegitimate conception, he seeks retribution through violence towards his innocent wife and grandson.

The abuse Darius receives inspires his curious interpretation of C.S. Lewis's *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* (1950), which his grandmother reads to him in secret to avoid punishment from his grandfather and further feeds his retributive mind. For example, when his grandmother tells him that his mother used to enjoy having her name replace Lucy's, Darius asks if he can be Edmund (York 267–68). Darius's grandmother asks "Are you sure? He has a pretty rough time of it," to which Darius only nods (268). Darius's identification with Edmund whilst knowing "he has a pretty rough time of it" demonstrates his growing sense of retribution and, even, sadomasochism. In this essay, I will generally use "sadism" to refer to Darius's later desire to inflict pain, a desire caused by theologies of retribution and his abusive past, and "masochism" to refer to his growing enjoyment of receiving pain as a child. However, in this passage of the novel, both sadism and masochism are developing in Darius (hence my use of the portmanteau

"sadomasochism") because he enjoys the abuse inflicted on another person, a person he identifies himself with. For instance, "when Peter called his younger brother a poisonous little beast, Darius felt the injury keenly and shared in the dark fantasies it spawned" (York 270). In other words, Darius begins to pathologically enjoy the abuse committed against others and himself.[3]

Moreover, Darius has a difficult time believing that Edmund-Darius "was forgiven by them all" (272), but when he finds out that "Edmund-Darius was a traitor, and according to the deep magic, the White Witch was owed his blood," Darius "nodded and began believing again" (272). Connecting this passage to the subjects of retribution and abuse, Darius has an easier time believing that he is guilty and deserving of punishment than being forgiven and loved, a sign of masochism. When Aslan is effectively crucified in the story,[4] the story becomes real to him, "so real it threatened to drag Darius down and hold him under" (273), thus showing how his imagination is saturated with images of retribution and abuse to the point that he identifies with imaginative works when they present such content. Lastly, Darius is not satisfied when Aslan kills the White Witch because "there was bloodletting, but not the particular blood Darius longed for" (274). This dissatisfaction suggests that the violence is not violent enough for him or that, foreshadowing his grandfather's confrontation with the cougar, he wishes it was his grandfather's blood—sadism developing out of his masochism.

Darius's blog post decrying people "turning … the other cheek" (277) on the coyote "problem" and describing how he killed and mutilated a coyote presents his retributive sadism. By telling his readers "you will want to be there" (278) when the animals are dying from cyanide poisoning, Darius demonstrates his enjoyment in the suffering of oth-

3 Darius also partially embodies Freud's outlining of a triphasic progression to sadomasochistic fantasies produced by corporal punishment (see "A Child is Being Beaten").

4 For a detailed analysis of the connection of Aslan's death to Christian theories of atonement, see Brazier 296–303.

ers, especially when it fulfills his sense of retribution as justice. Also, by criticizing people "turning . . . the other cheek," he turns against Jesus's critique of retributive justice ("but if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also" *NRSV*, Matt. 5.38–39) and thus shows greater affinity for the passage Jesus refers to in His critique ("eye for eye, tooth for tooth" Lev. 24.20). In his response to this blog post, Stephen condemns Darius's actions and is bewildered that, even after all his violence, Darius is "not satisfied" (York 286). Stephen sees Darius's violent acts as an (ineffective) attempt to stop a "low-down feeling" of fear (286), but what Darius fears is surveillance—he "suggests to readers of his blog that watching is never benign: it is necessarily predatory and dangerous" (Dean 146). Given Darius's history of abuse and, related to this abuse, his constant paranoia of being watched, Stephen's observation is astute.

In the last flashback to Darius's childhood with his grandparents, there is a recounting of the event that led to the death of his grandmother and the solidification of his retributive sadomasochism. The novel initially presents the event as traumatic because it seems to depict the death of Darius's grandfather in a cougar attack. However, as the chapter unfolds, it is revealed that his grandfather survives the attack, while his grandmother perishes in her attempt to use the attack as an escape from her abusive husband, leaving Darius alone with his grandfather (York 360). Unlike the children in *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, who close their eyes when Aslan is killed, Darius does not close his eyes while he watches the attack, revealing his fixation with sacrifice (York 355). When "the Mountie let slip exactly where Grandmother had died," Darius begins to see himself as "the chunk of meat you throw back over your shoulder while you're sprinting for the gate" (360). In other words, Darius sees himself as a sacrifice that allows for the "salvation" of others, the freedom of his mother and grandmother from his grandfather. This self-image solidifies Darius's pathological obsession with retributive sadomasochism.

In the novel's climax, Darius waits outside a coyote den and is confronted by a coyote. However, the coyote does not attack but actually "startles him by staying put" (367). This passivity subverts Darius's projection, caused by the trauma of his abuse, on the coyotes as vicious predators and his sense that he is guilty and deserving of punishment. This subversion destabilizes his understanding of the world, leaving him brooding over if he should shoot or "surprise everyone, including himself, and abandon the gun—leave it to rust away into nothing, rise up and run for his life" (368). For Darius, shooting would be to choose retribution and thus the side of his grandfather, while running would be to choose to "turn the other cheek" and thus the side of his mother and grandmother. At this impasse, Darius experiences a "new-born feebleness" (368) that leaves him unable to act out his retributive sadism and reminds him of his previous beatings in his grandparents' outhouse; he recalls "his belt-scarred buttocks … [and] there's an odour to the feeling, a sudden putrid waft" (368). However, since he is still psychically trapped in the framework of retribution as justice, Darius takes his own life. In other words, although Darius may no longer explicitly attach this framework to Christianity, he still operates as though he has only two choices: either the coyote dies, or he dies. Analogously, this dichotomy is related to the satisfaction theory of atonement where either Christ or the sinner must die to restore God's injured honour.

In the last chapter of *Fauna*, Guy and Edal run over a snapping turtle but do not kill it, a sublimation of the retributive sadism personified by Darius. While the turtle Letty and Edal ran over earlier in the novel is killed, this turtle "appears miraculously unharmed" (373). Moreover, in connection to our focus on Darius, this accident demonstrates the novel's argument for the non-necessity of (animal) sacrifice in order to create and maintain the social order. By resisting death, the turtle asserts itself and nature in the social world of humanity—not just as something to be sacrificed to maintain this world's order, as animals function for Darius, but as something integral to this world irrespective

of humanity. Therefore, the turtle's vitality embodies a critique of violent scapegoating as a solution to psychological and social chaos and thus a critique of Darius's retributive sadism.

In *Fauna*, Darius views coyotes as predatory threats. Ironically, in his fixation on coyotes as predators, Darius comes to embody the actions that he attributes to these animals. This essay has read these actions as rooted in the legacy of satisfaction theories of atonement, which flood his understanding of justice and fuel the abuse Darius received as a child. This essay has thus read *Fauna* as a novel attuned to the potential dangers of these theories, ultimately ending in a critique of this view of justice as retribution. In conclusion, *Fauna* offers a vision of how to sublimate past wrongs, eschewing recourse to violence or retribution.

Works Cited

Anselm. "Anselm of Canterbury on the Atonement." *The Christian Theology Reader*, edited by Alister E. McGrath, Wiley Blackwell, 2017, pp. 296–98.

"atonement." *Collins Dictionary*. collinsdictionary.com/dictionary/english/atonement.

Brazier, P. H. "C.S. Lewis on Atonement: A Unified Model and Event, the Drama of Redemption—Understanding and Rationalizing the Tradition." *Heythrop Journal*, vol. 56, no. 2, 2015, pp. 285–305.

Dean, Misao. "Habitat Recovery: The Don Valley in Alissa York's *Fauna*." *Journal of Canadian Studies/Revue d'études canadiennes*, vol. 54, no. 1, 2020, pp. 137–52.

Freud, Sigmund. "A Child is Being Beaten." *On Freud's "A Child is Being Beaten,"* edited by Ethel Spector Person. Routledge, 2018, pp. 1–28.

Nietzsche, Friedrich. "Beyond Good and Evil: Prelude to a Philosophy of the Future." *Basic Writings of Nietzsche*, translated by Walter Kaufman, Modern Library, 2000, pp. 179–435.

---. "On the Genealogy of Morals: A Polemic." *Basic Writings of Nietzsche*, translated by Walter Kaufman, Modern Library, 2000, pp. 437–599.

Weaver, J. Denny. "J. Denny Weaver on Violence in Traditional Approaches to the Atonement." *The Christian Theology Reader*, edited by Alister E. McGrath, Wiley Blackwell, 2017, pp. 334–36.

York, Alissa. *Fauna*. Vintage, 2010.