

Short Story 192*: The Card

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Marc Aramini — 27 Apr 2015, 16:53

#THE CARD

"The Card" first appeared in the March 2005 edition of *Asimov's Science Fiction* and has never been collected.

##Summary

An unnamed narrator (who enjoys telling stories and is probably meant to be Gene Wolfe) presents the story a police officer named Augie, the husband of his daughter's friend, relates over the course of a car ride. They pass a man Augie's age "shuffling along the sidewalk" in a bad part of town, which sparks Augie's tale: "See that guy? He's going to damn me."

Augie identifies the man as Wilhelm Boyd Anton, who lived a few houses down from him when they were children. Wilhelm later seemed to be doing well for himself financially, until an event changed his life and he began beating and cutting himself in public, losing almost 50 pounds of weight. He had seen a card floating in a gutter, and when he picked it up, saw that it was one of the rather old fashioned Catholic religious cards with the picture of a saint on them which "went out of style when the rosary did and never really came back." In this case, Wilhelm saw his own name and a painting of himself as a younger man, with the title "Blessed" rather than "Saint" - implying beatification but not canonization. "He was a married guy with a wife who loved him and two kids back then, you understand, starting to get fat and lose his hair." Wilhelm thought about the possibility of doubles and then read about anomalies.

Augie gives several examples of anomalies, first using police investigation metaphors, describing something which doesn't belong at the scene of the crime, allowing a conclusion to be drawn. He mentions a barrette found at a murder scene committed by a woman, a snuff box alone on the counter of a convenience store where a murder and robbery were committed, for the clerk knew the man who robbed him usually bought snuff every day and grabbed it as he walked in, and then other things that don't belong where they are: a kangaroo shot in Minnesota, a pen with the name of a store and a phone number on it that simply don't exist. Augie says the book he researched this in "says that things like that are crossovers from another possibility. ... It's not far from here, only we can't get there. Usually we can't, but sometimes we do. ... So that was the way Billyboy explained the card to himself, see? There was this other world, he'd been different there, and probably God had dealt him the card to show him how it could have been for him."

Augie also reveals that Wilhelm knows exactly where he went wrong:

There had been this one girl. I'm not going to tell you what he made her do, or how he made her do it. Not what she did trying to scrag herself afterward, either. All of it was as ugly as sin ... That last part, the thing she did to herself, wasn't just ugly. It was messy. The thing was, it was supposed to do for her, only it didn't work very good. She stumbled around screaming and bleeding. She'd fall down, and he'd figure she was

down for the count, but when he was trying to call nine one one she'd be up and grabbing him again, bleeding all over him and yelling that she wanted to die, he had to let her die.

Anton tries to save her and patch her up, hoping the whole while that she will die and that it would be over. The hospital will not let him in, and as he dozes there he has visions of the whole event over and over. This continues in the night and the next day, when he still fails to get in to see her. Her brother calls to say she has died, and that he is coming to hurt Anton. "The brother punched him two or three times, knocked him down, and kicked him. And that was that. ... He still had the dreams, only not very often. Then he found the card." After that he begins to cut and beat himself and loses his job.

"He doesn't do that because he likes it, or to punish himself either. He does it to get his mind off what he did and what happened afterward. He's repented and confessed and all that, but he can't stop thinking about it."

Augie claims that Anton could tell our narrator how it ends if he talks to him, for "He knows, see? He's talked to God about it and talked to some angels about it, and talked to Father Mike ... and [Father Mike] told me. ... He knows how it's going to end, and I'm the one that's going to end it."

The narrator must here say that he doesn't want to know about it, because Augie responds: "Hell's bells. Did I ask you if you wanted to know? ... Have a little charity, for Christ's sake. Let me get this off my chest." He says one day Anton will take the card and show it to Augie, and Augie will deny that it is him, reading a different name from the card and showing Anton how little he resembles the picture.

And he'll die. That and all the cutting and whipping and stabbing will be punishment enough for him, for every bad thing he ever did, her included.

He won't be beatified here - or he doesn't think he will. Father Mike's not so sure about that. But he'll be a saint in Heaven, and she'll meet him there. They'll kiss and she'll forgive him for everything, then and forever.

Only I'll die and be damned and never get out.

Because of the lie. Because when I say it isn't him and pretend to read the made-up name I'll be lying through my teeth.

##Commentary

Like many of Wolfe's modern urban stories in which there seems to be a character who could be Gene Wolfe, this story deals with a very Catholic and dualistic idea. The state of Blessedness which is under discussion is part of a process in the Catholic Church and the canonization of saints, but the story also deals with the possibility of redemption and the difference between a sin born of ignorance sincerely repented and one undertaken with foreknowledge.

The philosophical framework of the tale is that in *this* reality Augie (whose name is probably short for Augustus, the influential early Christian saint who wrote "On Lying") is damning himself by denying a truth that will harm and destroy another human being. There is a sense that there are some moral absolutes at play and a "scale" of damnation - it seems that this particular lie will be mortal rather than venial - in this case, knowingly bearing false witness against his literal neighbor. (See the Catechism in Religious Allusions below for more details here). While it is clear that Augie believes this version of Anton will also be saved, there is a question about whether this particular version of Anton, excoriating his flesh in an attempt to forget his sin, will actually be "Blessed" ... this story seems a more overtly spiritual version of

Wolfe's similarly second-hand first person tale, "A Fish Story" - in which a man sees a better version of himself and is forced to confront what he really is.

The "tale within a tale" narrative framework in Wolfe has been employed several times in his shorter work, and allows Wolfe to create a simultaneous empathy and distance with the secondary speaker in something which one might be tempted to compare with the cognitive estrangement of standard science fiction applied to a modern setting. The unusual thing about Wolfe is that he tends to employ this double narrator in settings which are *almost* realistic. This story, for example, could just as easily be the self-flagellation of a man driven crazy by an image he believes he saw on a card and the aftereffects of a traumatic event for which he feels responsible - yet in Wolfe, for the most part the spiritual or mystical explanation for the events is of course the valid one (Ironically, I feel the most notable exception to this is the event most often simply accepted as mystical in nature: that of Pater's enlightenment in *The Book of the Long Sun*, where Crane's explanation of a brain event, from its first utterance, seems absurd - but might actually be just as true.)

The holy card which was once in vogue among Catholics is designed as a reminder of the communion of saints, who act as intercessors for mortals still living and remind humans of what they are called to be. Here, this card quite literally serves that purpose. (Usually, saints are considered patrons of a particular problem, need, or profession.) Certainly in this case, Wilhelm needed the call to repentance, but it destroys his functional life. The failure of a man to achieve his potential can certainly be attributed to free will, but this story complicates the idea of free will because of Augie's knowledge of the sin which will supposedly damn him - an almost harmless lie, when he is telling a story of attempted suicide and probably sexual sadism (or, alternatively, an abortion) which ends with the sinners reunited in heaven. Augie's sin seems to pale in comparison, and in the Religious Allusions section below we will attempt to look at the orthodox explanation for the relative severity of his transgression. I believe that the primary crux of the tale is that one man's sin might quite possibly serve to beatify and martyr another man - a re-enactment of the salvation of the death of Christ, where the sin of executing an innocent man serves to expiate the multitudinous sins of mankind. One man's damnation is another's salvation in this story.

##Religious allusions

In this case, we must actually look at the structure of the Catholic Church's canonization process. Even in modern times, there are four stages to this (Servant of God, Heroic in Virtue, Blessed, and Saint) - and for Wilhelm to be "Blessed", he must have been in the third stage. The issue for this is that the individual must usually be deceased before they can even be declared a Servant of God. A bishop or church authority figure will open an investigation to determine that indeed the person was worthy of veneration on his or her path to acting as an intercessor for the living with God (a saint will have the "beatific vision" - the perfect intellectual communion with the other saints and God that is salvation - and even in the reality of the story, it seems that Anton might be experiencing that: "He talked to God about it and talked to some angels about it and talked to Father Mike down at Saint Scholastica's about it. And he knows."). For the second step, the individual in question must have exhibited certain virtues: faith, hope, charity, temperance, justice, fortitude, and prudence (and Augie begs our primary narrator to listen to his own yet to be committed sin: "Have a little charity, for Christ's sake"). In order for the person to attain the title of "Blessed" which Wilhelm seems destined to achieve in some reality, there must be a documented miracle or a martyrdom. (Will Augie's fatal lie count as a martyrdom for Anton?)

Flagellation has a strange place in the history of the Catholic Church. In the middle ages it might very well be seen as a form of penance for ascetic movements, and in the 13th century it

spread to a social proclamation of piety, but the Catholic Church eventually condemned the act as heretical. However, there are still some Roman Catholic Churches which seem to practice it even in Italy during Lent, with some others, such as Catholics in the Philippines, even crucifying themselves. We should probably view Boyd's actions as "mortification of the flesh" rather than flagellation, an attempt to eliminate and destroy the sins born of the body and its desires - and many penitential saints in the history of the Catholic Church practiced this extreme form of asceticism. The goal of Anton is not to excoriate the sin from his body, though that may be what he is accomplishing - it is, according to Augie, to get the terrible sin and his guilt out of his mind.

Both the catechism and St. Augustine himself have something to say about lying. *The Catechism of the Catholic Church* is very specific on its treatment of the eighth commandment:

"YOU SHALL LOVE YOUR NEIGHBOR AS YOURSELF"

THE EIGHTH COMMANDMENT

You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor.

It was said to the men of old, "You shall not swear falsely, but shall perform to the Lord what you have sworn."

The eighth commandment forbids misrepresenting the truth in our relations with others. This moral prescription flows from the vocation of the holy people to bear witness to their God who is the truth and wills the truth.

Offenses against the truth express by word or deed a refusal to commit oneself to moral uprightness: they are fundamental infidelities to God and, in this sense, they undermine the foundations of the covenant. ...

Man tends by nature toward the truth. He is obliged to honor and bear witness to it: "It is in accordance with their dignity that all men, because they are persons . . . are both impelled by their nature and bound by a moral obligation to seek the truth, especially religious truth. They are also bound to adhere to the truth once they come to know it and direct their whole lives in accordance with the demands of truth." ...

"Men could not live with one another if there were not mutual confidence that they were being truthful to one another." The virtue of truth gives another his just due. Truthfulness keeps to the just mean between what ought to be expressed and what ought to be kept secret: it entails honesty and discretion. In justice, "as a matter of honor, one man owes it to another to manifest the truth."...

Before Pilate, Christ proclaims that he "has come into the world, to bear witness to the truth." The Christian is not to "be ashamed then of testifying to our Lord." In situations that require witness to the faith, the Christian must profess it without equivocation, after the example of St. Paul before his judges. We must keep "a clear conscience toward God and toward men."...

Interestingly, this section of the Catechism even confronts martyrdom, and couches much of the gravity of the sin attached to willfully lying based on the concept of "charity", which Augie directly mentions in his plea to be heard:

Martyrdom is the supreme witness given to the truth of the faith: it means bearing witness even unto death. The martyr bears witness to Christ who died and rose, to whom he is united by charity. He bears witness to the truth of the faith and of Christian doctrine. He endures death through an act of fortitude. "Let me become the food of the beasts, through whom it will be given me to reach God." ...

"Neither the pleasures of the world nor the kingdoms of this age will be of any use to me. It is better for me to die [in order to unite myself] to Christ Jesus than to reign over the ends of the earth. I seek him who died for us; I desire him who rose for us. My birth is approaching". . .

Lying is the most direct offense against the truth. To lie is to speak or act against the truth in order to lead someone into error. By injuring man's relation to truth and to his neighbor, a lie offends against the fundamental relation of man and of his word to the Lord.

The gravity of a lie is measured against the nature of the truth it deforms, the circumstances, the intentions of the one who lies, and the harm suffered by its victims. If a lie in itself only constitutes a venial sin, it becomes mortal when it does grave injury to the virtues of justice and charity.

By its very nature, lying is to be condemned. It is a profanation of speech, whereas the purpose of speech is to communicate known truth to others. The deliberate intention of leading a neighbor into error by saying things contrary to the truth constitutes a failure in justice and charity.

The culpability is greater when the intention of deceiving entails the risk of deadly consequences for those who are led astray.

Since it violates the virtue of truthfulness, a lie does real violence to another. It affects his ability to know, which is a condition of every judgment and decision. It contains the seed of discord and all consequent evils. Lying is destructive of society; it undermines trust among men and tears apart the fabric of social relationships.

Every offense committed against justice and truth entails the duty of reparation, even if its author has been forgiven. When it is impossible publicly to make reparation for a wrong, it must be made secretly. If someone who has suffered harm cannot be directly compensated, he must be given moral satisfaction in the name of charity. This duty of reparation also concerns offenses against another's reputation. This reparation, moral and sometimes material, must be evaluated in terms of the extent of the damage inflicted. It obliges in conscience....

Charity and respect for the truth should dictate the response to every request for information or communication. The good and safety of others, respect for privacy, and the common good are sufficient reasons for being silent about what ought not be known or for making use of a discreet language. No one is bound to reveal the truth to someone who does not have the right to know it.

It appears as though Augie's sin in distorting the truth is mortal because it lacks the charity he begs our primary narrator for - punishing someone who has already been punished enough to the final brink of death. Is the instrument of one man's damnation the same as another's salvation? There is something transformative and compelling about this concept that might form the crux of the spiritual conflict in the story. In the same section of the Catechism, the goal of art is considered, which might be worthwhile in the positioning of Wolfe as a particularly Catholic artist:

The practice of goodness is accompanied by spontaneous spiritual joy and moral beauty. Likewise, truth carries with it the joy and splendor of spiritual beauty. Truth is beautiful in itself. Truth in words, the rational expression of the knowledge of created and uncreated reality, is necessary to man, who is endowed with intellect. But truth can also find other complementary forms of human expression, above all when it is a matter of evoking what is beyond words: the depths of the human heart, the exaltations of the soul, the mystery of God. Even before revealing himself

to man in words of truth, God reveals himself to him through the universal language of creation, the work of his Word, of his wisdom: the order and harmony of the cosmos-which both the child and the scientist discover-"from the greatness and beauty of created things comes a corresponding perception of their Creator," "for the author of beauty created them."

Created "in the image of God," man also expresses the truth of his relationship with God the Creator by the beauty of his artistic works.

Indeed, art is a distinctively human form of expression; beyond the search for the necessities of life which is common to all living creatures, art is a freely given superabundance of the human being's inner riches. Arising from talent given by the Creator and from man's own effort, art is a form of practical wisdom, uniting knowledge and skill, to give form to the truth of reality in a language accessible to sight or hearing. To the extent that it is inspired by truth and love of beings, art bears a certain likeness to God's activity in what he has created. Like any other human activity, art is not an absolute end in itself, but is ordered to and ennobled by the ultimate end of man.

Sacred art is true and beautiful when its form corresponds to its particular vocation: evoking and glorifying, in faith and adoration, the transcendent mystery of God - the surpassing invisible beauty of truth and love visible in Christ, who "reflects the glory of God and bears the very stamp of his nature," in whom "the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily."

This spiritual beauty of God is reflected in the most holy Virgin Mother of God, the angels, and saints. Genuine sacred art draws man to adoration, to prayer, and to the love of God, Creator and Savior, the Holy One and Sanctifier.

In any case, all of this can be condensed into the concluding statements of this section of the Catechism: "Lying consists in saying what is false with the intention of deceiving one's neighbor. An offense committed against the truth requires reparation. The golden rule helps one discern, in concrete situations, whether or not it would be appropriate to reveal the truth to someone who asks for it."

In light of Saint Augustine's importance to the development of Catholic Doctrine, it is worthwhile to take a brief look about his basic conclusion about lying, from his treatise **On Lying/De Mendacio**

Certain it is, albeit all this disputation go from side to side, some asserting that it is never right to lie, and to this effect reciting divine testimonies: others gainsaying, and even in the midst of the very words of the divine testimonies seeking place for a lie; yet no man can say, that he finds this either in example or in word of the Scriptures, that any lie should seem a thing to be loved, or not had in hatred; howbeit sometimes by telling a lie you must do that you hate, that what is more greatly to be detested may be avoided. But then here it is that people err; they put the precious beneath the vile. For when you have granted that some evil is to be admitted, that another and more grievous may not be admitted; not by the rule of truth, but by his own cupidity and custom does each measure the evil, accounting that to be the more grievous, which himself more greatly dreads, not which is in reality more greatly to be fled from. All this fault is engendered by perversity of loving. For being there are two lives of ours; the one eternal, which is promised of God; the other temporal, in which we now are: when a man shall have begun to love this temporal more than that eternal, for the sake of this which he loves he thinks all things right to be done; and there are not any, in his estimation, more grievous sins than those which do injury to this life, and either take away from it any commodity unjustly and unlawfully, or by inflicting of death take it

utterly away. ...

It clearly appears then, all being discussed, that those testimonies of Scripture have none other meaning than that we must never at all tell a lie: seeing that not any examples of lies, worthy of imitation, are found in the manners and actions of the Saints, as regards those Scriptures which are referred to no figurative signification, such as is the history in the Acts of the Apostles. For all those sayings of our Lord in the Gospel, which to more ignorant minds seem lies, are figurative significations. And as to what the Apostle says: "I am made all things to all men, that I might gain all;" the right understanding is, that he did this not by lying, but by sympathy; so that he dealt with them in liberating them with so great charity, as if he were himself in that evil from which he wished to make them whole. There must therefore be no lying in the doctrine of piety: it is a heinous wickedness, and the first sort of detestable lie. There must be no lying of the second sort; because no man must have a wrong done to him. There must be no lying of the third sort; because we are not to consult any man's good to the injury of another. There must be no lying of the fourth sort, that is, for the lust of lying, which of itself is vicious. There must be no lying of the fifth sort, because not even the truth itself is to be uttered with the aim of men-pleasing, how much less a lie, which of itself, as a lie, is a foul thing? There must be no lying of the sixth sort; for it is not right that even the truth of testimony be corrupted for any man's temporal convenience and safety. But unto eternal salvation none is to be led by aid of a lie. For not by the ill manners of them that convert him is he to be converted to good manners: because if it is meet to be done towards him, himself also ought when converted to do it toward others; and so is he converted not to good, but to ill manners, seeing that is held out to be imitated by him when converted, which was done unto him in converting him. Neither in the seventh sort must there be any lying; for it is meet that not any man's commodity or temporal welfare be preferred to the perfecting of faith. Not even if any man is so ill moved by our right deeds as to become worse in his mind, and far more remote from piety, are right deeds therefore to be foregone: since what we are chiefly to hold is that whereunto we ought to call and invite them whom as our own selves we love; and with most courageous mind we must drink in that apostolic sentence: "To some we are a savor of life unto life, to others a savor of death unto death; and who is sufficient for these things?" Nor in the eighth sort must there be lying: because both among good things chastity of mind is greater than pudicity of body; and among evil things, that which ourselves do, than that which we suffer to be done.

In these eight kinds, however, a man sins less when he tells a lie, in proportion as he emerges to the eighth: more, in proportion as he diverges to the first. But whoso shall think there is any sort of lie that is not sin, will deceive himself foully, while he deems himself honest as a deceiver of other men....

But it is time that we set bounds to this disputation: in the consideration and treatment whereof altogether there is nothing more meet to be, before all else, borne in mind and made our prayer, than that which the same Apostle says: "God is faithful, Who will not suffer you to be tempted above that you are able to bear, but will with the temptation make also a way to escape, that you may be able to bear it." ("On Lying (Saint Augustine)")

##Names

-*Wilhelm Boyd Anton*: His first name means "will" or "desire" and "protection". Boyd means "blond" or "yellow", and Anton means "worthy of praise".

-*Augie*: A shortened form of Augustus (or, in this case, possibly Augustine), Augie can mean "deserving of respect" or "great". Of course St. Augustine is one of the most influential thinkers and saints in the formation of the Catholic Church - he helped to standardize the idea of original sin. [Augustine is also one of the figures which makes the Catholic Church particularly malleable in the light of scientific discoveries, viewing Biblical texts as metaphors for truth which do not necessarily need to be literally true to be valid - this symbolic paradigm greatly informs the manner in which Wolfe writes and seems to be an attitude inimical to many Protestant Fundamentalists - in which the Bible is quite literally inerrant at the factual level. To a symbolist, seven days could be seven trillion years, or even an instant separated into seven stages, and Cain a tribe of troglodytes - but still, some numinous way, *be* Cain.]

-*Father Mike*: The priest at St. Scholastica's, Michael's name means "poor" and "humble". St. Scholastica is the patron saint of convulsive children and nuns, and serves to protect from storms. There was a private St. Scholastica Academy in Chicago which closed its doors in 2012, but in this story it sounds more like a parish than a school.

##Unanswered questions

It seems that Wilhelm was "Blessed" in a different reality, but that the priest thinks he might achieve it in a different way in the reality of this story. Why can't Augie do something different, armed with the knowledge of what might damn him, if Wilhelm can become "Blessed" even after a much more malicious sin? Both would end in the death of another. Is Augie's sin mortal because of foreknowledge and the intentional nature of his future action? Does his lie martyr Anton, in the absence of other miracles, to make him "Blessed"?

If Wilhelm and the girl whom he wronged kiss in heaven, what about Wilhelm's once mentioned and then forgotten wife and children? What about them in this reality, let alone in the afterlife? Did he commit his sin in his youth or later, after he was married and had children?

##Connection with other works

The Arimaspians stories, which deal with the proud reaching for celestial powers; "Procreation", which confronts a man hubristically creating his own miniature universe and naming it after himself; "A Fish Story", in which a man sees a better version of himself going to comfort a dying relative; and "How the Bishop Sailed to Inniskeen", in which an author searches for the past on a remote island and instead finds a priestly specter which he takes as a sinister omen for his own fate - all of these stories involve a kind of personal spiritual search that is explicitly allegorical or religious in nature, and all of them seem to feature a writer or teller of tales who might be Gene Wolfe himself. It is clear that these modern, possibly biographical though still fantastic sketches, are concerned with

possibilities. "The Card" and "A Fish Story" really make this overt, as if stepping sideways into another universe actually seems possible. Even "The Last Thrilling Wonder Story", in which the Wolfe author tried to exert ultimate control, wound up being a story in which stepping through different realities, mimetic or not, was actually possible. I believe this is an outgrowth of Wolfe's spiritual exploration of free will, and is also a feature of *The Book of the New Sun* with its multiple iterations of reality. We cannot change what we have done, but we can change what we are, and in an infinite universe (in Wolfe's fiction, at least), perhaps there truly are a multiplicity of paths that were taken, in some mysterious way.

#Resources

- "Article 8: The Eighth Commandment". *Catechism of the Catholic Church*
2006. Web. 25 April 2015.
http://www.vatican.va/archive/ccc_css/archive/catechism/p3s2c2a8.htm

- "On Lying (Saint Augustine)". *New Advent*, Kevin Knight. 2009. Web. 26 April 2015.
<http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/1312.htm>