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A Literary Scholar Examines the Role That Sacrifice Plays in Modern Western Society;
Boston University's **Susan Mizruchi** invokes religion and sociology to argue for the primacy of 'one for all'

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The execution of Billy Budd in Herman Melville's novella is among the eeriest scenes in American literature. As he awaits hanging, Billy takes on the peaceful glow of a sleeping child. "A serene happy light born of some wandering reminiscence or dream would diffuse itself over his face, and then wane away only anew to return," wrote Melville near the end of *Billy Budd, Sailor: An Inside Narrative*.

Without too much strain, scholars have long read the novel as a Christian allegory. Billy is a Christ figure; his accuser, Claggart, stands in for Satan; and the ship's Captain Vere is the God who judges.

Billy Budd is also among the most famous literary depictions of an individual sacrificed to the will of the community -- and hardly the only one, argues Susan L. Mizruchi, an associate professor of English and American studies at Boston University. In her new book, *The Science of Sacrifice: American Literature and Modern Social Theory* (Princeton University Press), she finds turn-of-the-century American writers preoccupied with the idea that there are those who must be abandoned for the good of society as a whole. "Sacrifice is necessary to the maintenance of social order, the achievement of a certain level of culture, and the perpetuation of a certain kind of economy," she writes. "Sacrifice, according to these authors, is not only necessary to modern Western society, it is basic; it makes society what it is."

Ms. Mizruchi, who looks at both literary and social-science texts in her work, is among a growing number of scholars who approach religion in American life through interdisciplinary study. In *The Science of Sacrifice*, she finds novelists grappling with the loss of faith and certainty that comes with modernization. So, too, were their contemporaries, including the coterie of theorists who formed the backbone of professional sociology.

What Ms. Mizruchi describes as the "script of sacrifice" was written into the Bible in the story of Abraham and Isaac. Over time, she argues, the question of sacrifice re-emerges and is transformed in modern dress, as a rapidly changing society deals with immigrants and racial mixing. Her examples range from the extreme -- the execution of Billy Budd and depictions of lynching -- to everyday examples of self-sacrifice, charity, and welfare.

Ten years ago, Ms. Mizruchi began working on what would become the new book. She received tenure at Boston University after publishing *The Power of Historical Knowledge: Narrating the Past in Hawthorne, James, and Dreiser* (Princeton, 1988). At the time, she was thinking about the unusual interest of realist writers in identifying various human types, such as delinquents. Social theorists of the late 19th and early 20th centuries shared that interest, but literary scholars had rarely turned to the social sciences. "I discovered just how untouched they were," she says, "and just how important they were in their time, how widely known."

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The Science of Sacrifice, at 436 pages, is divided into four hefty chapters. In the first, Ms. Mizruchi traces how sociology became a field of study. She read through some 30 years of journals from what would later become the American Sociological Association. Besides the field's leading lights, such as Emile Durkheim and Georg Simmel, she also disinters work by writers who set out to chart and explain the history of social organizations. They include William Robertson Smith's account of Hebraic traditions, Lectures on the Religion of the Semites (1886), and studies by E.A. Ross, Social Control (1901) and Sin and Society (1907).

In other chapters, she reads Herman Melville, Henry James, and W.E.B. Du Bois. Here and there, the book looks at contemporary writing by Toni Morrison and the young playwright Suzan-Lori Parks.

"She takes a very grand stand," says Emory Elliott, Ms. Mizruchi's dissertation adviser at Princeton University and now a professor of English at the University of California at Riverside. "She's daring to use such terms as 'continuity.' She'll probably get nailed by reviewers who say it's too big a stretch. But she's saying this is what literary studies, and the humanities, can and should do."

Though her scholarship is largely planted in turn-of-the-century culture, Ms. Mizruchi finds resonance in contemporary life as well. From a file of notes she pulls out a fragment scissored from a box of Wheat Chex. She plans to take note of it in a forthcoming talk. "Eat Right, Sacrifice Nothing," the box instructs.

The issue is political, too. "The concept of sacrifice informs every forum on welfare where people speculate on whether poverty can ever be fully eliminated, every attempt to rationalize economic inequality on essential grounds, every conviction that AIDS is a retribution for sexual excess or transgression," she writes.

At the Modern Language Association meeting last December, she began a paper on her research by describing in some detail a murder that shook suburban Boston in 1995. Richard Rosenthal, a life-insurance executive, got into an argument with his wife because she had burned their supper. He beat her to death with a rock, removed her heart and lungs, and impaled them on a wooden stake, altar-like, in their back yard, in a crime that to Ms. Mizruchi has all the trappings of a latter-day sacrifice. Mr. Rosenthal, who was convicted of first-degree murder, apparently blamed his marrying a non-Jew for the earlier death of the couple's child.

Such tales seem far away as Ms. Mizruchi sits on a leather sofa at home. Her husband, Sacvan Bercovitch, is a professor of American literature at Harvard University. Their son, Alexander, just turned 6, and the birthday balloons have been left to deflate slowly in a corner of the otherwise immaculate living room.

Last semester she taught a course on death and mourning in American culture, part of the preparation for her next book, tentatively titled *The Other Country: Death and Its Metaphors in Modern America*. Why the interest in such morbid matters? "Maybe it's because I have a good life," she says. "I'm happy."

"I have to say the writers who interest me are gloomy," she adds. "It's a fact."

Before entering graduate school in literature at Princeton, she imagined that she might become a rabbi. Those two interests -- religion and literature -- meet a third in the new book: the study of sociology. Both her father and her brother are sociologists, and she grew up in Cortland and Syracuse, N.Y., near the campuses where her father taught.

Scholarship on religion has a long, if interrupted, history within literary studies. Ms. Mizruchi is among those who want to give it a secure place in the growing field of cultural studies. She and Jenny Franchot, a professor of English at the University of California at Berkeley, are editing *Religion in an Era of Cultural Studies* for the Princeton press; it includes papers presented at the 1997 M.L.A. meeting and an essay by Jack Miles, author of the Pulitzer Prize-winning *God: A Biography*.

In her new book, Ms. Mizruchi defines sacrifice as a collective ritual, an expression of group beliefs, and an appeal to a higher authority on the group's behalf. Sacrifice is a test of social relations -- an affirmation of kinship ties in a world where they don't matter as much as they once did. There is a poignance to the effort, a bid to bridge the unbridgeable gap between humans and gods. "Sacrifice has long been viewed as a rather precarious enterprise," Ms. Mizruchi notes in a paper she is slated to give at Dartmouth College this month. "It appears out of place, outmoded, a historical remnant that is fast disappearing."

That tension was already evident in 19th- and early 20th-century writing. Absolute distinctions among peoples were no longer viable. The relationship between faith and rationality was a question of the day. Social scientists strove to explain how people interacted in secular society. "Sacrifice as a category helped to articulate these dilemmas," says Ms. Mizruchi.

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In their work, the writers she describes enacted the debates of their day. But they were hardly oblivious to how those matters were being addressed in scholarly and philosophical circles. Clearly that was true of Du Bois, who lived in both worlds. Although she is a bit shy about playing literary detective, Ms. Mizruchi points out a link between Melville and the philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer that, she says, has gone unnoticed until now.

Scholars have known that Melville was influenced by Schopenhauer's pessimistic philosophy. But according to Ms. Mizruchi, a powerful piece of Schopenhauer's writing -- a section of his 1819 book, *The World as Will and Idea* -- seems to have had a direct impact on Melville's depiction of the cabin scene in which Billy Budd is trapped by Claggart.

Schopenhauer describes in detail how a white squirrel becomes transfixed by the gaze of a serpent. Without exerting physical force, the serpent draws the squirrel into its jaws -- to certain death. "What monstrous kind of nature is this to which we belong!" Schopenhauer exclaims, upset by the squirrel's apparent willingness to accept its own doom.

Similar language appears in *Billy Budd*. "Claggart deliberately advanced within short range of Billy and, mesmerically looking him in the eye, briefly recapitulated the accusation," Melville writes. A bit later he adds, "The first mesmeristic glance was one of serpent fascination; the last was as the paralyzing lurch of the torpedo fish." Billy ultimately does sacrifice himself. But first he strikes out and kills Claggart. Later, he blesses Captain Vere, who has sentenced him to death. In the spiritual economy laid out by Melville, each of the three characters sacrifices and is sacrificed. "Sacrifice, according to Melville, represents a search for moral coherence," writes Ms. Mizruchi.

The search continues in the 20th century, as other groups are cast out along the way. Ms. Mizruchi ends her book by describing how black Americans became an out group in their own country, well after the Civil War. Du Bois sought to rewrite that story by promoting a "gospel" of self-sacrifice for black people -- and by calling attention to the ways that the ideology of sacrifice pits one group against another.

His warning is relevant today. "Sacrifice is deep within us," Ms. Mizruchi says. "This history is important for us to hear and to know."

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