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**“Striving for Theoretical Recognition:  
*Violence and the Sacred* by René Girard”**

*La violence et le sacré* was first published by René Girard in 1972, followed by the American translation, *Violence and the Sacred* (*VS*) in 1977<sup>1</sup>. The work was such that it officially transformed the brilliant literary critic of *Mensonge romantique et vérité romanesque* (1961)<sup>2</sup> into a highly controversial ethnologist, whether to be criticized and often blatantly ignored by most professional anthropologists like Claude Lévi-Strauss, or else wholeheartedly admired by a good many who were fascinated by the perspective of a unified explanation of human origins based on a very simple mechanism of imitation constantly exposed to the danger of degenerating into rivalry and violence. It was truly the birth of Girard as an all-encompassing thinker: without this unforeseeable shift into the field of ethnology his fate would be to remain within the narrower domain of literary studies; but at the same time, this was the beginning of his fortune and misfortune, as constantly being the target now of apologetic appreciation and then again pedantic objections for dilettantism. The time has come, after half a century, for a more dispassionate evaluation.

*VS* is clearly the result of a fresh intellectual curiosity that yielded surprising developments in the theory of mimetic desire he had originally reached in his study of the most important modern European novelists. Only an ingenious outsider could achieve such a daring and exciting enlargement of his initial field of enquiry. To acknowledge this boldness does not make moot the risks of such an endeavor, no different from those already run by Girard's forerunners: Freud, who receives a great deal attention in *VS*, and Friedrich Nietzsche before him, mentioned

<sup>1</sup> R. Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*, tr. by P. Gregory, Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore 1977 (I refer to the printing of 1979). Though stylistically appealing this translation not seldom presents alarming mistranslations and even omits whole sentences from the French original (*La violence et le sacré*, Paris Grasset 1972). For this reason, while keeping to its pagination, I will correct and improve it, including references to the French edition as corroboration.

<sup>2</sup> R. Girard, *Mensonge romantique et vérité romanesque*, Grasset, Paris 1961.

only cursorily in the book but soon to become his main twin and antagonist in the later writings. But what risks do I have in mind? Not a deficit of documentation: Girard's anthropological sources in *VS* are first rate and manifold, beginning with the books of Lévi-Strauss, which had reached its highest reputation during those years, but also and still more important many studies written at the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century. Moreover, Girard did not leave behind his experience and sensitivities as literary critic, regularly adducing the rich Shakespearean subtext at important moments in his narrative, nor his acquaintance with a source fruitfully intermediate between literature and an ethno-religious approach: the Greek tragedies of Sophocles and Euripides. The sum of all this is something powerful and fascinating, setting *Violence and the Sacred* apart as an original and provocative work that transcends the disciplinary boundaries, even more so if we consider that another powerful subtext is lurking and makes itself heard at the beginning and the end of the work: the Biblical texts, evoked by short and incisive analyses. All is ready for what was to be called the mimetic theory, that would soon be fully explained in *Des choses cachées depuis la fondation du monde*, in 1978<sup>3</sup>. And yet, this latter work, while spectacular in its ambitious developments, presents certain theoretical difficulties already present, though less visible, in *VS*.

The first sentence of *VS* is crucial. Girard evokes an institution universally present in the archaic and ancient religions but never fully explained, exactly because it is deeply paradoxical:

In many rituals the sacrificial act assumes two opposing aspects, appearing at times as a "very holy thing" from which it is impossible to refrain without being seriously negligent, at other times as a sort of criminal activity which it is impossible to perpetrate without inviting perils of equal gravity.<sup>4</sup>

Sacrifice unites the highest sainthood and what is most criminal, and this paradoxical union takes place without any blending of the two extremes, for it is their very union that makes distinguishing them possible. At the same time, this tensional unity, which constitutes an atonement, is not merely a theoretical concept, but an act to be performed with precision, according to inviolable rules. There must be a common root at the ground of such an enigma, and it has necessarily to do with experience,

<sup>3</sup> R. Girard, *Des choses cachées depuis la fondation du monde. Recherches avec Jean-Michel Oughourlian et Guy Lefort*, Grasset, Paris 1978.

<sup>4</sup> R. Girard. *Violence and the Sacred*, cit., p. 1 (revised); Id., *La violence et le sacré*, Grasset, Paris 1972, p. 9. Hereafter 'Ivi' and 'Ibid' will refer to the English version, while the original version will be reported with the French extended title.

and indeed with a collective experience, since we are dealing with the oldest periods of humanity, at which time there was no concept of an individual detached from and outside its group. We have already moved beyond any purely formalistic and symbolic theory of sacrifice:

If sacrifice resembles criminal violence, there is inversely no form of violence that cannot be described in terms of sacrifice, as shown for example by Greek tragedy. [...] sacrifice and murder would not lend themselves to this game of reciprocal substitution if they were not closely related.<sup>5</sup>

The sacred is not a kind of mystic phenomenon in the manner of Rudolf Otto's *das Heilige* with its overwhelming features as *mysterium tremendum / fascinans*. The confusion of such philosophical reasonings with the approach of Girard has introduced a serious misunderstanding of the Girardian view of the sacred, which does not at all intend to introduce us to such a mystic-philosophical spectacle, already surreptitiously supernatural while scot free of any burden to adduce a detectable historical genesis. Girard's perspective and Mircea Eliade's assumption of the sacred as an originary and unexplainable hierophany are poles apart. The Girardian sacred is what is farthest and closest at the same time, and to grasp it we need only make an unprejudiced comparison between ourselves living in a society that has been de-sacralized and societies in which the sacred was a living reality whose presence was ever imminent. Girard's sacred is not a mysterious epiphany of the divine but the sheer and brutal fact of a necessity which appears mysterious for the communities experiencing it, though for him it is rationally explainable from the viewpoint of modern science. The very existence of the sacrificial institution shows that sacrifice lay at the very heart of the so-called sacred and that the sacred was structurally linked to violence. The sacred for Girard is nothing but a ritualization of violence through the central act of sacrifice. The alternative is the triumph of human mimesis leading to violence and human violence leading to an endless cycle of violence through an escalation of vengeance.

VS skillfully follows a gradual approach based on undeniable circumstances from which powerful consequences are drawn. In order to adapt his argumentative engine to maximum efficiency, Girard needed a further inference that could involve and implicate his readers within his reasoning, once and for all. The antinomic and inseparable features of the sacred constitute an unescapable paradox that we "civilized" human beings cannot after all ignore or discard as if it were an irrational fancy or problem affecting only primitive people, since we also have daily to

<sup>5</sup> Ivi, p. 1 (revised); *La violence et le sacré*, cit., p. 10.

do with the very same phenomena of competitive mimesis and violent rivalry, except that for us, in our society, the impending danger of mimetic violence is dammed and kept under control by judicial systems. Conversely, the only result of unleashed violence available to primitive societies is an unending chain of revenge and feud. Therefore, how could archaic communities devoid of judicial institutions survive the nightmare of an unstoppable vendetta?

If primitive societies have no decisive remedies for dealing with an outbreak of violence, no certain cure once the social equilibrium has been upset, we can assume that an essential role will be played by *preventive* measures in opposition to *curative* measures [*par opposition aux curatives*]. Here again I return to the notion of sacrifice as I earlier defined it: an instrument of prevention in the struggle against violence.<sup>6</sup>

Girard's argument is two-sided: on the one hand, he wants to demonstrate how and why the primitive communities managed to survive; on the other, he looks forward and emphasizes the quite exceptional situation in which we live. The first step is essential to the entire theoretical edifice Girard is erecting upon the foundation of mimetic desire. Primitive societies were capable of preventive measures because they experienced the very same crisis we still and again know in a spontaneous upsurge starting from internal competition and strife, for which the final remedy was select to a single member who had become mimetically attractive out of some difference such as having a physical defect or a somatic or social distinction, being a foreigner, or simply showing himself weaker at a crucial moment in the struggle. A spontaneous version of the ritualized sacrifice takes shape right before our eyes: it is a spontaneous solution always in danger of failing in case of a return to the previous chaotic fighting, but more and more often reaching a new and saving polarization. Once a single member of the group has been selected, any of his accidental features being enough for the others who imitate one another and join forces against this sudden culprit, he is surely doomed to a quick death because of the intensity the collective excitement has reached. A huge change takes place, from the war of *all against all* to a miraculous peace by means of the war of *all against one*.

Girard's ingenious assumption is that sacrifice was born when the pre- or proto-human "hominid" communities, under the lasting impression and memory of a particularly impressive instance of a spontaneous lynching, began imitating that experience in advance and transformed a mechanism unwittingly lived by the group into a conscious and planned rep-

<sup>6</sup> Ivi, p. 17 (revised); *La violence et le sacré*, cit., p. 32.

etition by selecting a victim somehow reminiscent of the earlier one, with a marked tendency to select him from the external world, whether from other proto-human groups or from animals, according to the basic rule of lynching/sacrifice, which is substitution. From now on this preventive reenactment of the originary event became the pillar or foundation of any human community. This is the kernel of Girard's reasoning, though we can manage to tease it out in *VS* if we consult to some extent the future scenario of *Things Hidden since the Foundation of the World* (*TH*)<sup>7</sup>, though even there the presentations of the idea often prove inadequate.

Let us go back to the argument that opens *VS*, regarding the watershed between sacrifice and the adoption of a judicial system. Though convincing, the inference remains somewhat obscure upon closer examination. Why was there such a decay in the sacrificial institution, which Girard not wrongly attributes to the Greek-Roman world? And from what does this strange power of the judicial institution derive, able as it is to some extent to take the place of sacrifice, and to overcome once and for all the unending cycle of revenge? The latter change is fully accomplished only in modern times, and it is clear that Girard already has in mind the more controversial argument about the Jewish-Christian influence on our world that will be developed in *TH*, according to which the Bible revelation of the innocent victim gradually dismantled the cultural systems based on sacrifice and the sacred. But any such influence cannot play a role as regards the Greek and Roman world, since that influence was absent or minimal up to the beginning of the common era. Neither does the reinforcing argument, developed in *TH* and above all *The Scapegoat*, about a foundational event more and more covered by layers of mythology and trying to get a rationale of cultic forms that are less and less comprehensible, apply to the Greeks, since the main point of his use of Greek sources in *VS* is that these authors achieved what important insights they achieved on sacrifice thanks to the sacrificial crisis of the classical world. Something essential has been left out of the picture. Moreover, adducing the existence of judicial systems as an argument with reference to modern times ignores that such were an invention of ancient cultures going back to the Code of Hammurabi and before, and that it was the Romans who perfected it to the highest rational levels. No apologetic theodicy can account for that.

As much as Girard is an acute and relentless researcher for detecting the hidden signs of violence throughout history, I wish to assert here that, to the same extent, he falls mute when it comes to explaining the

<sup>7</sup> R. Girard, *Things Hidden since the Foundation of the World: Research Undertaken in Collaboration with Jean-Michel Oughourlian and Guy Lefort*, tr. by S. Bann and M. Metteer, Stanford University Press, Stanford 1987.

indubitably creative sides of all human civilizations. His thought circles around an origin that he never wants to address straight on. He avoids the phenomenological and philosophical observation that in order to function human culture must have an autonomous meaning and work by and for itself. To forbid violence is surely essential but it is hardly enough to constitute meaning going forward, once the new situation has been reached. Moreover, a cultural prohibition would have been impossible without an autonomous and transcendent perception that enabled them to point to something else that was not prohibited. The drama that generated this something else is centered on a new kind of experience, definable in philosophical terms as the first discovery by some strange animals on the verge of becoming something different of a reality utterly detached from themselves – the discovery of object, of an Object that is real insofar as it is divine.

It is no accident that this short reflection of mine is made possible both by accepting Girard's contribution and consciously rejecting a series of meta-prohibitions that have become a kind of password among many of the scholars and readers who follow him – above all a veritable proscription against philosophy, which is accused of being a scapegoating cultural form par excellence. Girard's real importance comes to light once we get rid of this harshly polemical stance of his, by coming to understand that it derives from a theoretical deficiency in his project, a deficiency that becomes apparent when we consider his treatment of the sources, both ancient and modern, that inspired his writing of *VS*.

We might compare Girard to a Newtonian physicist who starts from strange and fascinating exceptions to the laws of the ordinary world and finally comes upon the pure chaos of a collapsing star or a black hole that he is hopeless to account for. In his exciting and difficult journey Girard needed helpers, beginning (directly or indirectly) with the ones nearest in time, and here is where problems arise. The very first to discover an Event (*Ereignis*) from which humanity was born was Nietzsche, in aphorism 125 of *The Gay Science*, but – to continue the Newtonian metaphor – he was too close to the supernova of human culture and was rapidly swallowed up by the black hole he discovered. The fragments of his madness are the last signals coming from a thinker who lived such a dreadful experience. Girard intuited that he himself was in a similar position and understandably decided to avoid such an outcome by holding a Cartesian and typically French attitude heavily influenced by Lévi-Strauss's anthropology, which also proved to be instrumental to his reaching a more complete view of human origin from a theoretical viewpoint. This account can serve to define the historical role played by *VS*, the peculiar movement of its argumentation, char-

acterized typically by a movement back and forth, with a long series of pauses interrupting an exposition putatively continuous.

In other words, Girard's one-eyed view of religious and cultural phenomena compels him to look for allies, which he afterward feels an obligation to expel with the aim of claiming the originality and peculiarity of his own approach while shedding those features deemed incompatible with it. A few examples can show this operation at work, *in corso d'opera* so to speak, particularly in his treatment of Greek tragedy and of Freud's *Totem and Taboo*.

The interest in tragedy is the backbone of *VS* and it is easy to understand why. The Greek tragedians, above all the ones of the second half of the 5<sup>th</sup> c. BC, put at the center of their dramas the crisis of the whole society, which always triggers the plot and provides its threatening background, as we see in Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex* and Euripides' *Bacchae*, the two theatrical masterpieces that accompany and give support to Girard's analyses. I do not want to comment the great power of these analyses, surely the best treatment of the question at the time (to which incidentally the typically anemic of classical scholars do not hold a candle). The point I want to focus on is Girard's reluctance and perhaps even refusal to acknowledge his debt. His problem was that acknowledging it implied recognizing that already in antiquity there was clear awareness and knowledge of the sacrificial phenomena, modern scholarship on the point notwithstanding. The Greek tragedians were much closer to the religious and social phenomena they represent on stage, but what is clearly a privileged advantage in their understanding, Girard transforms into an unknowing and supine acceptance of sacrifice – something that no doubt is partially true but only one aspect of a richer and wider landscape. This unjust attitude becomes particularly perverse in his interpretation of the *Bacchae*, according to which Euripides's very understanding a truth, even quite prescient of its modern formulation, becomes instead of a merit a defect urgently to be rebuked and cancelled.

*VS* is particularly laudatory toward the more classical Sophocles, who constantly tries to restore a balance between gods and men, even though hardly successful in this. But the author of *Oedipus Rex* is a serviceable ally against Freud's "Oedipus complex" when Girard turns to that. Conversely, the bolder and more modern Euripides must be kept at a distance so as to avoid putting Girard's originality in the shade and above all to prevent problems from arising that the mimetic theorist is not ready to deal with. The comparison between Sophocles and Euripides is quietly unbalanced in favor of Sophocles in his discussion of the crucial aspect of the difference between human and divine, which is both jeopardized and apparently reaffirmed in the mature period of the tragic world:

The triumph of difference once again shields from sight the recently exposed tragic symmetry. Once again tragedy seems to oscillate between audacity and indecision. In the case of Sophocles, the contradiction between the symmetry of the tragic action and the dissymmetry of the mythological content gives us reason for believing that the poet, knowingly or unknowingly, recoiled before an act of even greater audacity. In the case of the *Bacchae* [...] Euripides, too, backed off from committing an act of even greater audacity. But this time the backing off is not performed in silence.<sup>8</sup>

Girard recognizes that Euripides tries to express the contradiction between the revealing symmetry of the tragic plot, how all the tragic characters are on the same level, and the dissymmetry of myth according to which gods and men are on different levels as portrayed in myth and ritual. Alas, Girard in his turn is reluctant to allow Euripides a conscious textual strategy but instead ascribes the position expressed by the chorus in the third stasimon (of the *Bacchae*: vv. 905 ff.) to Euripides himself, as a kind of personal confession that rejects human wisdom and praises instead the simplicity of common men and their tendency always to obey traditional rules and cults. This is flatly an error, since the chorus is stating its own viewpoint which moreover is internally self-contradictory since the Dionysiac tradition is far from traditional. On the contrary, the god destroys all the traditional rules and roles, as immediately signified by Dionysus's coming from Asia and the perfect bankruptcy of Tiresias's and Cadmus's attempt to worship him as a god within the religious order of the polis. If the chorus's stance were one and the same as the playwright's, Euripides should wholeheartedly share also a particularly harsh passage in a tragedy already harsh enough, when the chorus in its refrain of the third stasimon extols holding the hand over the severed head of their enemy. Evidently the Girardian Euripides does not limit himself to irresolution and shyness but in addition is disquietingly bloodthirsty. Not a great compliment to be sure, though any cruel and savage demeanor is never a surprise in the black and white view presented in *VS*, and yet it is a complete misunderstanding. Euripides is continually showing us the radical insufficiency of all the human answers in Thebes to this Stranger God, so strange as to reveal the hidden face of the Theban community. Girard does not want his allies too close, and Euripides pays the penalty for being too insightful. He must be sucked into the undifferentiated and threatening mass of the sacred, at the very moment that the peculiarity of his own position is partially countenanced:

<sup>8</sup> R. Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*, cit., p. 129 (with a minor intervention); *La violence et le sacré*, cit., p. 194.



... Euripides speaks less in terms of religious "faith", in the modern sense, than in terms of the transgressing of limits, of the fearsome knowledge that exists beyond these limits. We do not seem to be dealing in his case with an idle choice between "belief" and "disbelief" – two equally abstract concepts. Something else is at play, something more to the point than an empty skepticism about the gods. This *something else*, still to be discerned, is nonetheless perfectly decipherable in the very text of the *Bacchae*.<sup>9</sup>

This would be a good place to begin but it comes near the conclusion of the analyses of the *Bacchae*, and we can see that Girard's emphasis falls on this "*something else*" on which the tragedian himself is entirely dependent, which diminishes the cognitive and moral courage of his endeavor. The *something else* is the logic of the sacred available only to its modern theorist, and not to an intellectual who is being depicted as wholly subject to a sacred he was incapable of really explaining.

To close the discussion once and for all, the next paragraph delivers a telling general comment on the conclusion of the *Bacchae*:

The murder of Pentheus is presented as both the paroxysm and liquidation of a crisis provoked by the god himself in "revenge" for the Thebans' lack of faith in him, and especially for the resistance of his own family. Having brought about Pentheus' death, the god banishes the rest of the family from the city. Peace and harmony now return to Thebes, which will henceforth worship the new god in the manner ordained by him.<sup>10</sup>

As a matter of fact, this is not the veritable epilogue to the *Bacchae*. True, Pentheus' family is exiled by Dionysus, but this final judgment disrupts the life of the whole city. Pentheus' grandfather Cadmus is the founder of Thebes and thus symbolizes the *polis* as such. No refoundation takes place at the end of the *Bacchae*, a conscious choice made by Euripides we must presume, expressed by the powerful rejection of Dionysian cults uttered by Agave herself in the very last lines of the drama. As to these impressive verses showing a deep criticism against the moral value of Dionysism as such Girard is silent. His mimetic theorem needed to cancel part of the long history upon which it relied to find its own intellectual formulation. In other words, the theory of the victim needed its victims.

These remarks might be enough to give an idea of the interpretive and theoretical limits of Girard's research that were necessary to its formulation but now just as necessary to recognize. But still another point is worth remembering, namely, the mood at work in Girard's crucial analy-

<sup>9</sup> Ivi, p. 130 (revised); *La violence et le sacré*, cit., p. 195.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.* (revised); *La violence et le sacré*, cit., pp. 195-196.

ses of Freud's anthropological thought. It is not an accident that a polemic spark is triggered in connection with his interpretation of Greek tragedy, indeed precisely when Freud's *Totem and Taboo* comes closer to a Girardian perspective. The harshest criticism is aroused by Freud's most insightful passage regarding the deceptive stance of the tragic chorus, quoted just above:

However, I must take care not to exaggerate the similarities between Freud's interpretation and my own. Beyond a certain point, difference prevails, Freud even stumbles on the cultural difference par excellence. [*Au-delà d'un certain point, la différence reparait. Freud retombe même sur la différence par excellence.*] The crowd of doubles stands in opposition to the absolute specificity of the hero. The hero monopolizes innocence while the mob monopolizes guilt. The flaw attributed to the hero is not entirely his since it belongs to the crowd. The hero is a victim pure and simple, charged with a crime he did not commit. This concept of a simple one-way projection of guilt is not sufficient as much as is mendacious [*Cette conception à sens unique simplement "projective" est insuffisante, menteuse*]. Sophocles has a superior profundity in letting us understand, as Dostoevsky does in *The Brothers Karamazov*, that the surrogate victim, even when falsely accused, is as guilty as the others. For that real continuation of the theological notion of sin which is the usual idea of "guilt", we ought to substitute the notion of a violence in the past, the future, and above all the present, a violence equally shared by all. Oedipus himself joined the manhunt. On this point as on many others, Freud remains more clouded by myth than some writers whose insights he systematically rejects out of his highbrowed spirit and scientific snobbism [*Sur ce point comme sur tant d'autres, Freud reste plus embrumé de mythe que certains écrivains dont son esprit de sérieux et son snobisme scientifique repoussent systématiquement les intuitions*].<sup>11</sup>

This is essentially a "hatchet job". Most sentences of the large quote taken from *Totem and Taboo* by Girard could have been written by his own hand, except for the short reference to "the primal father", the *Urvater*, whose figure in the present case is completely secondary since Freud is reasoning about an anonymous victim become a tragic hero only after being scapegoated. Girard's criticism misses the mark. Nowhere does Freud say that the hero is completely innocent, and the question

<sup>11</sup> Ivi, p. 203 (greatly revised); *La violence et le sacré*, cit., pp. 297-98 (in this case my intervention on the American edition is more significant, given that words and whole clauses are lacking. I do not know whether this is due to a modification of his original text by Girard himself, particularly in the case of the harsh final clause against Freud, or the work of the translator's hand, but I can report that in the 90's Girard told me he did not review or correct the translation. In any case the English-speaking public deserves to know the original content of the French text).

here is not how we should distribute innocence and guilt but what is the collective process followed by the crowd in attributing guilt. As Freud says about the tragic hero: "the tragic guilt was the guilt he had to take on himself in order to relieve the Chorus from theirs"<sup>12</sup>. Thus, the hero's function is not to be utterly innocent, but to appear guilty on behalf of the collectivity represented by the chorus. And the often-problematic past of most Greek heroes pre-empts us from establishing his/her level of guilt, which would be in any case out of place considering that even the most sacrificial and bloody character becomes a tragic scapegoat by reason of the guilt of the others. Besides, a wicked figure would be even better since it would make the whole business more likely, provided his destiny is ambiguous enough to make a final divinization or would-be divinization still possible.

Though brief, in this case at least, the Freudian analysis is almost perfect, and is introduced by a spectacular example of his genius, when he fends off the potentially unending questions about the mystery of tragic destiny: "I will cut the discussion short and give a quick reply"<sup>13</sup>. But, his deftness at capturing the essential without being distracted by literary sophistry or even some psychoanalytic conundrum, far from provoking an enthusiastic reception by Girard, provokes punitive measures instead, and sends him on a search for ancient and modern allies as unwitting accomplices – in the present case, Sophocles and Dostoevskij. We can now fully understand why Sophocles is useful to Girard as a weapon against Freud, starting from a trustworthy assessment on Oedipus's scapegoating complicity in *Oedipus Rex*. No doubt the Sophoclean Oedipus has some sinister aspects, still present in the more pious *Oedipus at Colonus*, and Girard in his rebukes is never completely wrong. But calling on Dostoevskij for help shows that it is not here a question of establishing an historical and textual truth, but rather a question of recalling Freud's feeble interpretation of *The Brothers Karamazov* and summoning his readers to cancel once and for all this dangerous rival, whose insights might jeopardize the originality of the new mimetic-sacrificial approach. In other words, Freud is harshly criticized because of the strength of his analysis of the tragic chorus, not its weakness. The final judgment is unmitigated: Freud remains *embrumé de myth* and seriously affected by *son esprit de sérieux et son snobisme scientifique*, despite the fact that his treatment of the chorus is completely undeserving of such stigmatization, something much more ascribable to the French philosophers fond of psychoanalysis during the period when *VS* was written.

<sup>12</sup> Ivi, p. 220 (Freud's quote made by Girard from the Standard Edition of Freud's works).

<sup>13</sup> Freud's quote made by Girard from the Standard edition of Freud's works.

What I am arguing is that Girard, in the foundational pages of his *VS*, had to apply Stendhal's motto, quoted from his letters by Nietzsche in *Ecce Homo*, according to which the best way to inaugurate one's public life is with a duel. The duel in question must meet certain technical criteria: one must select the proper adversary and eliminate him at least symbolically to show one's superiority. It is interesting to remark that Girard's reaction is proportioned to the danger coming from his theoretical enemy/brother, i.e., Euripides in ancient times and Freud in modern times, but much more important to understand the reasons for Girard's unjust treatment, which lie deep in the roots of mimetic theory: at bottom, only the negative and potentially destructive sides of human beings are being considered. Such a reduction has shed much light, but falls short of a complete explanation of the complex and incalculable combination of destruction and creation from destruction itself that is the very kernel of any human culture. The real originary scenario in which animal passes to human is clearly indicated but still not actually available, and Girard's rival adversaries from history play the role of surrogate targets. To say this is not meant to diminish the role of this thinker in contemporary culture: rather, identifying his rightful place brings into view where his work must be taken from here.

A few words will suffice to tell where I, at least, have taken it. Let us go back to the scene of the dawn of mankind: we are still in the animal kingdom but something strangely new is introducing an as yet unperceived dimension which we may call symbolic. The peculiar difficulty is that this dimension is not at all being established. Rather, it is "on the way" and at the same time nowhere. There is nothing more slippery and less detectable than the "boundary" between animal and human, especially where no human is present to draw such a boundary, by which all of us are nevertheless bounded. Nietzsche gave us some insights in aphorism 125 on the death of God, but in a very elliptical and dense way that we can now develop with the help of certain post-Nietzschean thinkers such as Freud, Bataille, and Girard. We are dealing with an event in which the animal could no longer survive, but the human was not yet present to venture some impossible social contract or invoke some non-existent law of Reason or Nature. Effective instincts no longer, rationality not yet. In the middle only chaos, but a chaos concentrating on only one center of pure destruction and pure creation from nothing. *What* was in the middle? An undefined reality capable of both disorder and order and thus literally omni-potent, an indefinable interface both without "faces" and consisting in its sheer and unconceivable "inter-". It is the kernel of any future religious experience, the experience of "something" superior, the prime spark of godhead, the indefinable source of divinity, in a closely pre-personal fashion since the perception of a god as distinctly

and recognizably real was impossible at the very beginning of symbolic (=religious) culture.

That godhead without a god, that divineness without a divinity, is the very point of disjunction *and* conjunction between animal and man, but underway in the midst of these reflections we are already beyond the formulation Girard reached in *VS* and in his subsequent works. The very demonstration of the strength of his thinking shows its limits since in fact we find nothing of the like in his writings. Girard's view on divinization and the origin of gods is simplistic or even rudimentary: according to him a god is but a victim divinized by his deluded executioners, a projection on their part and a mechanical transference of their own violence, a superior and incomprehensible being deemed responsible both for the crisis and its miraculous resolution. This is squarely within the wake of the first theories of religion of 19<sup>th</sup> century, still clearly active in Freud's *Totem and Taboo*, with an anthropomorphic and rationalistic simplification that dates back to the theory of Euhemerus (4<sup>th</sup>-3<sup>rd</sup> c. BC), the mythographer who explained the ancient gods by the divinization of important historical figures such as kings and heroes (the so-called Euhemerism). Yet this Hellenistic writer, who did little more than give shape to a view common among Greek intellectuals of the classical age, had the advantage that the divinization he was referring to was still alive within a cultural framework in which sacrifice was a rite performed daily. Conversely, this idea easily becomes empty and scarcely meaningful in the rationalistic setting of modern researchers not completely aware (nor available to becoming fully aware) of the real import of religious experience as such, a phenomenon to be taken seriously in itself, *as well as* to be explained. We get a typical game of doubles, that is, a powerful theory of human origin incapable of seriously countenancing the autonomous meaning of religion, and a theory of religion which takes it seriously but cannot countenance any idea of an origin of religion. Either an explanation phenomenon-less or a phenomenon explanation-less. But, with Kant, an explanation without phenomena is empty and a phenomenon without explanations is blind.

My work set out to fill this gap, precisely, by filling it with an explanatory approach based on a central mediating experience at the roots of any culture and religion, without discarding anything useful coming from the strongest reflections on the origin of humanity and religion and without renouncing any aspect of religious and cultural phenomena in their true import. This is the aim of my book<sup>14</sup>, and I believe it constitutes the veritable heritage of Girard's seminal work, *Violence and the Sacred*.

<sup>14</sup> G. Fornari, *Dionysus, Christ, and the Death of God*, 2 voll., Michigan State University Press, East Lansing 2021. My warm thanks go to Kenneth Quandt for helping me in checking and revising the text of this essay.

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