Giornale di Filosofia

JOUVENCE

Indice

Monografico

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Marco Stucchi*, Tania Checchi**
Introduction

Half a century ago, in May 1972, *La Violence et le Sacré* was printed for the first time by the French publisher *Éditions Bernard Grasset*. Although that year lies approximately halfway through Girard's long and productive life (1923-2015), the work probably represents the finest theoretical contribution born of his brilliant mind. The pillars of what would be known later as "mimetic theory" find here their most convincing illustration, which was never abjured or changed, in its fundamental guidelines, by his creator. Therefore, the present volume is not simply bound to an editorial occurrence but to the rich evolution of the theory Girard bequeathed to us.

Indeed, in the following pages, the reader can get a concrete idea of how mimetic theory has evolved up to the present day – but also of how it may evolve in the next decades – and assess its state of health fifty years after Girard formulated it[1]. In order to provide this panoramic view to Girardian scholars, and to anyone else who desires to become familiar with mimetic theory, we have selected thirteen works from professors and researchers who have dedicated, in different ways, a significant amount of their studies to mimetic theory. Among them are authors who have cooperated firsthand with Girard in his intellectual enterprise, some who have pursued mimetic theory in their field of research (taking some new steps and proposing adjustments), and some who have made mimetic theory their primary object of interest.

But what is mimetic theory, at least in regard to its most general elements? Here we would like to sketch a rough outline of the theory as it was formulated fifty years ago, hoping that this will aid the reader to better appreciate the following contributions. We also hope to help the

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[1] Inquiring to which extent *Violence and the Sacred* could be theoretically "deduced" from *Mensonge romantique et vérité Romanesque*, could be interesting but highly controversial and would rule out a non-Girardian audience.

reader appraise the far-reaching nature and the utmost importance of the *Violence and the Sacred*, and thus realize why we have decided to pay tribute to it. Unfortunately, to sum up this theory, and even to indicate the object or the domain of this "one long argument", is far from simple. Each plain answer – "it is about religion", "it explains the origin of human beings", "it concerns the origins of culture" – incurs possible objections; in fact, in the last chapter, Girard finds no better way to describe this elusive "object" than to call it "the unity of unities".

So let us proceed in order, despite the difficulties. At the base of the theory is a complex system of influences linking three general factual phenomena[2]: violence, desire and mimesis (or imitation). These relevant "behaviours" are common to all human beings – though not just to them –, and they are all intertwined in an essential fashion. Without the presumption of being exhaustive – not even Girard proceeded in a systematic way – let us point out just some of these relations, beginning with violence and desire. Girard states in Chapter VI that "in one way or another violence is always mingled with desire" and that, under certain conditions, "violence becomes simultaneously the instrument, object, and all-inclusive subject of desire". This seems to suggest there is a violent component in desire: since it looks for a state of affairs that must be achieved, it requires a force able to change things (more or less abruptly); furthermore, as the change may turn out to be particularly challenging, it could be hard to concretely distinguish between violence as a means for desire and violence as the very object of desire[3]. Moreover, there is also desire in violence, since violence can desire – in the simple sense that it can strive for something – and it will not stop until it finds its fulfillment.

Relations that take place between violence and mimesis are not less intricate or multiform. If we define mimesis as the tendency to be similar or to act similarly to something else, we should note, as Girard does in the very first pages, that "nothing resembles an angry [and then violent] cat or man so much as another angry cat or man". We could then say that violence, at least, produces the same effect as imitation. Throughout his oeuvre, Girard also points out that imitation is a good survival strategy in risky and violent situations. To imitate others, in fact, should make it more difficult to be *distinguished* from others; besides, being able to not get noticed means to divert possible aggression from ourselves. Moreover – and, at this point, we should begin to bear in mind the paradoxical relations of these three large domains of psychosocial life – imitation leads to violence, as mimesis brings individuals to perform the same acts, and some actions, in order to be fulfilled, seem to require a kind of exclusiv-

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[2] Whether they should be labelled as phenomena or categories can be a matter of debate.
[3] Girard has already dealt with this point in *Mensonge romantique et vérité Romanesque*.

ity, and, if so, they necessarily produce rivalry and violence. Finally, precisely because of imitation, it will be more difficult to stop violence, since two violent individuals will mutually copy their own violence, despite the risk this escalation brings about.

The deep entanglement of desire and imitation comes into play here. Mimesis profoundly affects desires, since a great number, if not all, of our most ingrained aspirations are in reality *mimetic desires*, that is, at least in a first sense, desires copied from others. Then again, desire and mimesis share two-way relations: for example, certain desires and certain forms of desiring can trigger imitation. A desire presented as particularly satisfying, intense, and "self-confident" might inspire other desires to take the first desire as a model, that is, to copy it. On the other hand, imitation can be seen as a marker of good desire: if so many desires aim at the same goal, it stands to reason that such a desire is a relevant one, and that it must be attained *by all means*. This is why mimetic desire increases, qualitatively and quantitatively, violent behaviors.

Such a many-sided system of phenomena was not exhausted by René Girard's investigations, neither in his masterpiece nor in his whole academic trajectory. Looking for new relations and yet undisclosed laws that govern the link between mimesis, violence and desire represents nowadays a vital intellectual task, and the reader will discover some possible paths regarding this labor in the following pages. However, Girard's intuition of this "productive triad" of violence-desire-imitation in *Violence and the Sacred* is just the first step of mimetic theory. Putting this set of relations at the centre of his inquiry was the first major theoretical innovation from which mimetic theory was born. The second major step Girard took led him to ascertain that this triad shows a cyclical tendency that inexorably brings about a general situation that can be effectively named with one simple word: crisis.

The violence-desire-imitation mechanism, exacerbated in human beings, seems to be unable to settle into an equilibrium compatible with life. What Girard names "mimetic crisis" is an all-out conflict that sends different spheres into disarray: the "psychic", since the normal mental life of individuals gets jeopardized; the "social", as all forms of social organization tend to vanish; and even the "natural" sphere is impacted. Every order is questioned. Violence and mimetic desire both reach their paroxysm here. And since imitation may be seen as the tendency to be the same as somebody else, the highest degree of a "universal" mimesis is undifferentiation. In fact, according to Girard, a crisis is always a crisis of differentiation.

How to escape from such a terrible plague, which is much worse than any sickness, war, or any other imaginable situation? The third theoretical step of mimetic theory attempts to answer this critical question.

The solution, according to Girard, is to be found in the same context that generated the problem: the triad of violence-desire-imitation. As it happens, the same complex system that produces chaos – that is, undifferentiated (and undifferentiating) violence – also produces order, harmony, and peace. The imitation of others' violence and desire that pervades the community during a crisis also engenders a stochastic chance that this all-against-all violence will converge on a single individual[4], whose removal "miraculously" effects the restoration of order, that is, *difference*. Violence has found what appears to be an ultimate release because the result was arrived at unanimously, and no reactive violence will come after the expulsion to upset the new state of affairs. Because such an ejection establishes a difference – impossible to overcome – between the victim and the others, as well as a difference between "good" and legitimate violence and "bad" violence", "difference", as such, is restored, and with it, primeval cultural institutions emerge. The first "good" violence is to be re-enacted in rituals that therapeutically contain and prevent the rivalrous and disastrous "violence" that hereafter will be proscribed, as it led to the crisis in the first place. This never fully conscious process, which Girard calls the "scapegoat mechanism", will thus set an implicit rule regarding imitation, reducing its dangerous effect: no-one can (or should *desire to*) imitate the victim, the *different one* whose transgressive and transcendent quality is never questioned. The triad attains at this point a new equilibrium – provisory, of course, if seen from a historical perspective – and produces "the sacred", a complex and ambivalent system of socio-religious regulations that offer a chance of survival to human societies. Rites and prohibitions – the pillars of archaic religion– are then born, concludes Girard, from what was originally a spontaneous sacrifice, the re-enactment of which will deploy human culture as a whole.

If we take heed of Girard's hypothesis, we realize that all human societies that have survived a significative amount of historical time had to pass through a high number of repetitions of this dynamic. Crucial to the rise of culture as such, this mechanism has left its mark most, if not all, human endeavours: religion, political institutions, law systems, the arts, philosophy, and technology. This is precisely why it is difficult to circumscribe mimetic theory's field of application, as the reader will note when engaging the essays in the present volume.

Understood as above-described, we firmly believe that mimetic theory represents a crucial turning point in the history of thought. In fact, it opens up unexplored paths, from which there will likely be no coming

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[4] Or even a small group of individuals.

back, inasmuch as it sheds new light on significative portions of the most glorious tradition of Western thought. It carefully develops Hobbesian-like theories on sovereignty, providing them with a firmer foundation. It actually improves Durkheim's theory on religion and society. It offers to Freudian psychoanalysis a range of compelling solutions to some of its key problems. As deployed in *Violence and the sacred*, it also offers a persuasive Darwinian solution to the problem of how the human species originated. And since Girard's theory provides us with conceptual tools to reinterpret any and all cultural phenomena, the finest productions of human history appear under a fresh and challenging guise: ancient myths, the Bible, Greek tragedy, Dante, Shakespeare, up to Dostoevsky and more are ready to yield unsuspected truths.

But this only partially explains why we have chosen to pay tribute to his masterpiece fifty years after its publication. In conclusion, we need to make explicit one last reason. According to Girard, human culture cannot be indifferent to an ethical point of view. Since it descends from real scapegoating, it is called upon to take a stance regarding its own origins. Thus, studying mimetic theory is not a simple intellectual matter; it entails a moral commitment: it means to seriously question our own violence and to strive to give it up. Developing mimetic theory leads us to heed the voices of all the victims: past and present, human and non-human, others' victims and, first and foremost, our own victims; finding out, sometimes, that we can also become victims of ourselves when enmeshed in the mimetic maelstrom. However, Girard has insisted that the desertic and deadly landscape of conflictual mimesis can always be reshaped by the *conversion* of a desire, in a new life beyond the vicious circle of victimisation.

What follows is an overview of the texts in this volume. We hope you enjoy them as much as we did. The first paper is by Sandor Goodhart, one of the foremost Girardians and personal friend of the French thinker, who was there to witness essential milestones of the latter's intellectual trajectory. In these pages, Goodhart traces the critical and dialogic genealogy that enabled Girard to formulate his groundbreaking hypothesis about the emergence of archaic religion, engaging with the likes of Lévi-Strauss, Freud, and the Cambridge ritualists to provide us with a precise overview of mimetic theory. Employing in an insightful "jeux de mots" the Girardian term "méconnaissance", Goodhart proceeds then to expose and explain the reasons for the most recurrent misunderstandings regarding Girard's oeuvre: first, regarding his views on Christianity – which in truth, never changed in essence, though he had to advance a more nuanced account of the sense of sacrifice; and second, concerning the notion that his thought presumably implies a certain ethical or ideological advocacy instead of a new hermeneutical tool.

In the second essay, Paul Dumouchel, another close collaborator of Girard, also offers an account of early misreadings of *Violence and the Sacred* that still influence its reception today. Far from being another formalistic and/or symbolic understanding of sacrifice like the one advanced by Hubert and Mauss, Girard's approach goes directly into the pragmatic, though unrecognized, nucleus of the sacrificial practice without failing to explain, as did former functionalist doctrines, the origin of the institution. For him, violence is not a secondary addition to the offering or oblation to nonexistent deities that exclusively grabs the attention of structuralists and the like: violence is involved throughout a process which contingently gives way to a mechanism that, though successful, is not deterministic, as some of Girard's readers claim. *Violence and the Sacred*, according to Dumouchel, formulates a morphogenetic theory of culture and religion that inaugurates an entirely new paradigm.

The third piece in this volume is a polemical assessment of Girard's undeniable achievements in *Violence and the Sacred*, as well as its possible blind spots. Giuseppe Fornari takes us into the exciting new realm of inquiry opened up by a thinker that could be thought of as a daring "outsider" that never felt the constraint of the accepted "wisdom" of the social sciences of his time. This enabled Girard, Fornari tells us, to forge an innovative conception of the sacred that avoided the trap of taking for granted the phenomenon to be explained as an unfathomable given, like Walter Otto or Mircea Eliade did. Nevertheless, Fornari claims that in his attempt to open up a new theoretical and unifying space, Girard obviated the insights of Euripides – favoring Sophocles instead – and Freud's *Totem and Taboo*, foreclosing thus a more philosophical approach that would give us the "quid" of the matter.

In contrast to Fornari's text, Jeremiah Alberg undertakes a Girardian reading of Kant's rational idea of the self in his *Critique of Pure Reason*, taking mimetic theory into the domain of pure philosophy, in order to show the involvement of violent expulsion in the latter's "Transcendental Dialectic". According to Alberg, Girard left us with a difficult task: that of verifying in our own field of inquiry the validity of his trailblazing hypothesis concerning the productive role of the victimary mechanism in every cultural endeavour. His own attempt allows us to discern the mimetic role of key notions like Ansehen, that in its prestige, authority, or reputation functions like the ancient kudos: a cause of order or disorder, depending on its position and aim. The censorship exercised by this notion prevents Kant from recognizing that the searched for unconditioned that "is never itself an object of experience" is the expelled victim that gives rise to the series of substitutions with which thought as such begins. Alberg's is a most notable example of how mimetic theory can traverse the realm of philosophy with astonishing results.

In this same vein, Stéphane Vinolo takes us into an overtly philosophical discussion of the epistemological status of mimetic theory as exposed in *Violence and the Sacred*. From the very beginning, Girard insisted in the realism of his theory. Nevertheless, in the midst of today's constellation of "realisms", the question as to which kind, if any, Girard's thought pertains, remains mostly unanswered. And that is what Vinolo successfully attempts in his text. In stark opposition to aesthetically formal – and deeply mythical – takes on desire that fail to recognize the relational and conflictual nature of desire, Girard tries to reach the non-symbolic kernel that remains exterior to all texts and rites through a hermeneutic that, though not exempt from difficulties, follows the logic of a palimpsest: that of the "pharmakos" whose expulsion is always textually veiled.

Silvio Morigi begins his text pointing out how for early Girard the "mensonge" inherent in "mimetic desire" produces a nihilistic uprooting from reality which results in what the French thinker calls an "ontological sickness". That "mensonge" resembles the "méconaissance" inherent, according to *Violence and the Sacred*, in the "scapegoat mechanism". Born from sacrifice, primitive symbolic thought would share in this uprootedness. Morigi also shows that this estrangement from reality is eerily similar to a contemporary textual nihilism for which there is nothing but an auto-referential language that will always strive in vain to reach the real. If indeed Western logos too bears the imprint of those violent origins, a paradox inhabits the writing of the Gospels. They demystify the violence of the "scapegoat mechanism", but they can do so only by using that logos. For Morigi such a paradox is overcome by Girard 's exegesis, in *The Scapegoat*, of the "parabolic" language of Christ and of the Gospels´ demonology.

Gianfranco Mormino, for his part, takes us back to one of the most impressive analysis contained in *Violence and the Sacred*, that of Lévi-Strauss's critique of the biological family as the foundation of all kinship relations. In his furthering of this critique, Girard would appear as an über-structuralist, Mormino contends, inasmuch as his theory of the emergence of the symbolic would account for the formidably gradual recognition of biological truths, giving culture the first and last word, a notion that would upend any presumed "natural" and naïve normativity.

Maria Stella Barberi – who partnered with Girard himself on many occasions, especially in exploring his political and religious philosophy –, through a close comparison between Freud's *Totem and Taboo* and Girard's *Violence and the Sacred*, reflects upon *méconnaissance* and the recognition of the victim's sainthood as historical and anthropological phenomena.

If Girard's mimetic account of the origin of culture has indeed a morphogenetic character, then no scientific realm should be foreign to its application. As a tribute to its fecundity, Fabio Bachini, Ivan Blečic, Paul

Dumouchel and Emanuel Muroni engage in a Girardian analysis of the emergence and transformation of spatial objects whose evolution is not only influenced by their participation in the mimetic triangle that reigns over desire but can conversely impact the latter's deployment. Thus, their description of different forms of space as arising from distinct mimetic relations – and sometimes producing counterintuitive effects – provides us with fertile ground for further inquiry.

Among the various issues and questions discussed by René Girard in *Violence and the Sacred*, one that has attracted some attention within both contemporary philosophy and anthropology is the emergence of kingship and the "paradox of sovereignty", which for Girard stems from the ritualization of human sacrifice. By critically examining two prominent positions in this regard – that of Giorgio Agamben's in *Homo Sacer* (1995), and that of David Graeber and Marshall Sahlins in *On Kings* (2017) –, Pierpaolo Antonello's essay aims to clarify the political dimension of those arguments vis-à-vis Girard's explanation and to unpack some key epistemological elements of Girard's theory of the sacred.

Tania Checchi's text entails a phenomenological approach that explores the affinities between Emmanuel Levinas's and Girard's critique of myth in terms of its temporal effects as deployed in the realm of art. Checchi attempts to show how Levinas' critique of the mythical background of art as such finds a robust confirmation in Girard's description of the temporal distortions that myth brings about. In between the mythical universe that opts out of the true course of time on the one hand and originary temporality on the other as a withdrawal from the eternal return of our mimetic rivalries, art would confront us, according to this author, with its ambivalence and open hermeneutical possibilities.

Though no theologian himself, Girard's thought, from its inception, impacted the theological world, and the fecundity of his decades long dialogue with Father Raymund Schwager cannot be overestimated. Chelsea King explores what mimetic theory's engagement with some of the most renowned exponents of feminist theology would look like with fruitful results, properly updating and expanding Girard's original perspective. Because his theory provides us, King affirms, with excellent tools to critically examine the insidious nature of all those institutions that owe their functionality to the exclusion of women and other minorities, this encounter is more than necessary. Furthermore, King shows that in perfect affinity with Girard's overall project, the notions of "sin" and "broken heartedness" advanced by some of these eminent authors – R.M. Radford, D. Williams. and Rita Nakashima Brock, among others – poignantly describe the painful and violent situation of our mimetic entanglements, but not without offering a redeeming exit from them.

Finally, Damiano Bondi closes this volume with a piece that offers first a historical account of how vegetarianism has found, through the ages, its most forceful formulations under the auspice of religion. Then, contrasting the sacrificial origins of archaic religiosity and its use of animals as substitute victims with this refusal to consume meat, Bondi underscores the weak link in arguments in favor of vegetarianism, which ultimately hide a gnostic disgust with the body and a spiritualist aspiration to leave behind all earthly concerns – an aspiration that has led to an equally concerning ecological disaster to that produced by the meat industry.

Sandor Goodhart[*]
"*Violence and the Sacred* at Fifty: Mimetic Desire, the Scapegoat Mechanism, and its Destructive Revelation"

Prologue

I am honored to be part of the celebration of René Girard's work and of *Violence and the Sacred* in particular and to contribute an essay to *Il Giornale di Filosofia* of Sapienza Università di Roma, edited by Tania Checchi and Marco Stucchi. I am especially honored because I was there at SUNY Buffalo as a graduate student in the academic year of 1972-1973 working for René Girard when he submitted the manuscript to the French press, Grasset, along with the preface that he wrote for the book that he ultimately retracted, a preface in which he forecasted a final chapter on Christianity that eventually became the basis for a subsequent book, *Des choses caches depuis la foundation du monde* (*Things Hidden Since the Foundation of the World*) and later *Le bouc émissaire* (*The Scapegoat*)[1].

I remember feeling at the time that here indeed was man of special abilities and insights – an individual akin to Albert Einstein, or Sigmund Freud, or Emile Durkheim, or Charles Darwin, or Friedrich Nietzsche – one who would change the way we think about the world around us and its inhabitants, a sense bountifully confirmed of course both within academia and without.

On a personal level, I stayed in touch with Girard the entirety of my academic life after graduate school – at first, through extended phone calls, then through visits to his office, his home, and his family, in addition of course to written communications, and finally, through attendance at most of the international conferences run in his honor. I was there when Jean-Michel Oughourlian and Guy Lefort arrived from France at his door one day in Aurora, New York, in the mid-seventies to work on *Des choses cachées*. I was there at Cerisy-la-Salle in France in 1983 when Paul Dumouchel and Jean-Pierre Dupuy brought together René's stu-

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[1] R. Girard 1978 and 1987. Girard 1982 and 1989.

dents (like myself), professional colleagues and friends from the University of Innsbruck, writers and journalists from France, Latin American, Japan, and elsewhere to celebrate his work. I was there at Provo, Utah, at the conference in the mid-1980s that Terry Butler organized, and at the Stanford conference in the late 1980s that Bob Hamerton-Kelley organized and that preceded formation of the Colloquium on Violence and Religion (or COV&R, as it came to be called). And I was there at most of the meetings of COV&R from the early 1990s through 2008 when Girard delivered his final lecture at the University of California at Riverside on the findings at the neolithic site of Çatahöyük in Turkey on which he had been working with Ian Hodder.

I rehearse this history for a reason. Because he was a "great man", and because I was there – "up close", so to speak – and offered by virtue of that proximity something of an inside view of his thinking, I find myself, in something of a unique position fifty years after these events, obligated to address what I see as some considerations I feel it is important to address if we want to "get him right". These considerations concern what I see as the centrality of *Violence and the Sacred* to the body of his work, and its constancy throughout his publishing career, despite some subsequent vocal opinions to the contrary. As his work continues to gain in appreciation internationally, it behooves us, I would suggest, to speak accurately of his writing, to appreciate with as much precision as possible what René Girard's work is saying to us along with what it is not – which strikes me in this circumstance as equally important. My concern here is that we not mis-understand or mis-recognize what he is saying, especially since such mis-recognition or *méconnaissance* turns out to be at the heart of his subject matter, and so, to do so would be to enact or perform the very behavior about which his work may constitute both a history (or archeology) and a kind of prophetic warning.

But what does that mean – to "get him right"? We are, of course, perfectly free to make of his work whatever we wish to make of it. If we want, for example, to read William Faulkner's short story "Dry September" – which is presumably about a lynching in a small town in the American South – as really about firefighting in Alaska, then we are certainly free to do so, although we should probably include at least an excursus on how "fighting fire with fire" echoes some of the oldest collective and sacrificial mechanisms of our culture. What sustains one reading over another here, Girard never tires of telling us, is not a measure of its correspondence with or failure to correspond with some posited external standard, but rather how comprehensive it remains in explaining or assisting us to understand a writer's thoughts, ideas, and expressions within the larger body of his work.

And that is what I will attempt do here. After sketching the corpus of writings that constitute what Girard calls his "système", I will outline

what I take to be some common misconceptions of his thinking, mis-understandings, or *méconnaissances*, that are, in my view, ironic since his work is already clearly about such sacrificial misrecognitions[2]. Thirdly, I will argue that as such to view Girardian thinking as a whole as an ethics or a version of social advocacy of some kind is complicated from his perspective since what he offers us, in his own words, is an "instrument" or critical diagnostic "tool" or set of tools that act as or may be characterized as prophetic thinking along with other examples of prophetic thinking mentioned above[3].

Finally, I will attempt to confirm what I say about the centrality and constancy of Girard's view with reference to two brief texts that have recently become available: 1) an English translation of an exchange that took place shortly after its French publication in 1973 at the journal *Esprit* that preceded Girard's meeting and subsequent engagement with Father Raymund Schwager of the University of Innsbruck in 1974; and 2) the brief introduction that Girard wrote in 2007 to the volume collecting the first four of his major books (and identifying in his view the entirety of his "système") in which he speaks specifically about the issue of sacrifice within the context of Christianity, and of the scientific and non-theological and non-transcendental nature of his critical enterprise. That volume was published the same year that he published *Achever Clausewitz* (2007) which was his last major book publication, and one that registered, as *Des choses cachées* did previously, some extended conversations in which he engaged this time with Benoît Chantre, a French writer and critic currently at work on his critical biography.[4]

Part One: Girardian Thinking

Girardian thinking begins with the emergence of hominid communities – which is to say, in effect, that for Girardian thinking, the human community we recognize today is the primate community that survived

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[2] R. Girard, *De la violence à la divinité*. Editions Grasset & Fasquelle, Paris 2007a, p. 27.
[3] Ivi, 7.
[4] R. Girard, *Discussion avec René Girard*, *Esprit* 11 (Novembre 1973), pp. 528-563, tr. ing. di Andrew J. McKenna as *Violence, the Sacred, and Things Hidden. A Discussion with René Girard at Esprit (1973)*. With a foreword by Andreas Wilmes. East Lansing: Michigan University Press 2022. For Girard's correspondence with Father Schwager see Girard, René, and Raymund Schwager, *Correspondence 1974-1991*, tr. ing. di Chris Fleming and Shelia Treflé Hidden, Bloomsbury, New York 2016. For Girard conversations with Benoît Chantre, *Achever Clausewitz. Entretiens avec Benoît Chantre*, Carnets Nord, Paris 2007, tr. ing. di Mary Baker as *Battling to the End. Conversations with Benoît Chantre*, Michigan State University Press, East Lansing 2010.

through the sacred technology of the mechanism of the surrogate victim. Put somewhat more succinctly, René Girard seems to have stumbled upon the origin of culture in the primitive and modern universe, an account of order and disorder in which human beings kill each other to put to rest their own persistent individual malaise, a collective substitute lynching of a surrogate victim designed to preserve peace and harmony in the relation of violence to the community bound or tied together by what is called today (from Latin *religio*) a religious order.

But Girard himself did not start there. His first book, *Romantic Lie and Novelistic Truth*, which appeared in 1961, recognized a common structure of borrowed desire and its conflictual consequences in five major novelists of the European tradition: Cervantes, Stendhal, Flaubert, Proust, and Dostoyevsky. The book was widely heralded as a breakthrough in understanding the literary commonality among such disparate settings, languages, and cultural milieus. Rather than deriving their desires from either subjects or objects, internal inspirations or external exigencies, these characters appropriated their desires from other individuals whom they took as their models or mediators and the closer those mediators were to their ongoing lives, the more likely the potential for obstacles, rivalries, and violence to kick in and spread. Don Quixote was never likely to encounter Amadis of Gaul in his daily adventures and so his triangular antics could appear alternately as comical, eccentric, or even heroic, while Dostoyevsky's Underground Man could in fact one day meet on the street the officer who so nonchalantly moved him aside one ordinary night in a tavern in St. Petersburg and to whom he has devoted some two years of intense mental energy contemplating the dramatic literary potentials of such a monumental interaction. And Girard places special emphasis upon the final moments of the major novelistic projects of these writers in which their author (who is often also the protagonist of these books) strikingly renounces the prison house of mimetic desire in which they had previously been living and embraces autocritically an unexpected religious orientation.

Afterwards, of course, Girard could readily have continued to ask whether other writers recounted such borrowed desire in the same way, and if not, why not – Shakespeare, for example, about whom he did later write extended accounts. But at the moment, he chose not to do that and instead to ask a different question. How did we get into this mess? How did we come to find ourselves in a situation in which such runaway imitated or mimetic desire dominated so much of our lives? And that inquiry led him in the mid-1960s to examine Greek tragedy, Sophocles' *Oedipus Tyrannus*, for example, or *Antigone*, and Euripides' *The Bacchae*. More specifically, his interest led him to turn to myth, ritual, and especially sacrifice, stories and institutions that had long been said by Aristotle (among

others) to underlie Greek tragedy. And in that context, he began to investigate not only Aristotle (for whom tragedy was famously a mimesis leading to a catharsis) but the so-called cultural "experts", those interested in the same texts in their work or their lives: Claude Lévi-Strauss and the French structuralists, Sigmund Freud and the English and European psychoanalysts, and Sir James Frazer and the so-called Cambridge anthropologists – Jane Ellen Harrison, Gilbert Murray, Francis Cornford, and others.

In the book that emerged from that inquiry, Girard set out to elaborate a highly nuanced four-pronged system in which he postulated that all archaic cultures participated in one fashion or another in a move from difference or distinction to the breakdown or crisis of difference, to a heightening and climactic moment of that breakdown in the exclusion of surrogate victim from the community, to a newly differentiated cultural and/or religious order, now founded upon sacrificial substitution and its regular commemoration.

The conceptualization of a governing *ur*-myth was hardly new. Lévi-Strauss had used it in analyzing myth in founding his own structural anthropology, in fact, in an analysis of Oedipus. The logic is that of a continuing hypothetical narrative structure nowhere in evidence in its entirety but evident in enough pieces to hint at the model's governing structure. Girard freely adopts the postulate employed by French ethnologists within the Durkheimian tradition that the fabric of culture is itself understood as differences or separations or boundaries that are independent of and prior to empirical considerations, an order of the social that gains the designation "symbolique" in the work of both Lévi-Strauss and psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan and is often linked in Durkheim to the sacred. "The order of the sacred is greater than the sum of its individual parts" is one way the idea is commonly put. Girard's strategy in that context is to understand the linkage of the cultural and/or religious order with violence. It is to understand the sacred (in contrast to the Frazerians for whom the scapegoat remained a product of superstition) with reference to "real social relations".

The strategy is a straightforward one for Girard. The two are one and the same. The sacred is violence that has been safely sequestered outside of the city where it can do no harm, and violence is the sacred that has entered the city and is circulating within it, doing its dirty work, so to speak. Thus, the two designations are categories rather than substantives, detailing the locus of this ongoing social process and its beneficial or deleterious effects upon the operative community. What Girard contributes to the discussion is how the change occurs, the making of the violent into the sacred, the making of the sacred into the violent, the process, in short, of sacrifice (to "make sacred", from Latin *facere* and *sacer*). How does

difference (separation, from Latin *fero*, "carrying away from the sacrificial altar") become "undifferentiation" (or "indifférentiation", Girard's French neo-logism) and then subsequently new differentiation? How does difference (which may be understood in this context as violence working well) become violence (understood here as difference working poorly, the good gone wrong, "la difference qui tourne mal", the difference that turns bad)?

Girard's answer is the four-part process. Differences are everywhere in cultural life. All of social and individual experience is governed by them. In this regard, Girard and the structuralists agree – although Girard would argue the structuralists fail to account for their breakdown. His goal in some sense is to show how that happens, the role that such a "crisis of differences" plays. Words, people, and things break down, he argues – in the elemental universe, the social order, the heads of individuals. And when that happens, crisis occurs. Differences that otherwise function normally are interrupted, and in their wake, are reasserted. But their repetition now fails to solve the problem they were intended to solve. The assertion of difference in the face of its inefficacy occasions only further breakdown and deterioration.

Girard names this stage the "sacrificial crisis", the moment when the assertion of difference (understood as instances of beneficial sacrificial violence) actually exacerbates the problem and leads to the felt need for its renewed assertion. What worked in other circumstances to resolve things now only compounds them further. And as individuals continue to assert their distinctions, they begin to resemble each other increasingly. Viewed from the outside, what we observe more and more – whatever distinctions they would make – is their identicality. Each has become in effect the enemy twin of the other in the assertion of difference and the uniqueness of individual concerns. In the extreme, the situation begins to resemble "the war of all against all" that the English political theorist Hobbes once described.

When things have reached this extreme of the collapse or crisis of differences, something unexpected may occur. The war of all against all may suddenly give way to "the war of all against one". The differences that occasion such a galvanizing change may be relatively insignificant. Hair color, skin color, hair length, physical stature or height, walking with an unexpected gait, physical deformity according to conventional standards, presence or absence – traits that would normally not occasion sustained notice – suddenly taken on extraordinary significance. And in these circumstances, a change may take place that reorders everything. Now suddenly, one individual may stand in for everyone as the opposing aggressing enemy that each imagines sacrificing. Girard identifies this stage as the paroxysm of the crisis, the third after differentiation and "undifferentiation".

Suddenly, an explosion happens. Someone is lynched. An individual is expelled, or stoned to death, or murdered in some other manner. And then perhaps the strangest development of all occurs. Some new observations are made and new conclusions reached. The first is the distinction between peace now and violence just a moment ago. A second is the continued identification of the victim of the expulsion or sacrifice as the guilty party but with the new recognition that this victim must have been "the god all along". A third is the considered development, in the wake of that newly perceived divine intervention, of a series of prohibitions designed to protect the community from such impending danger. A fourth is the development of regular (perhaps yearly) commemorations or representations intended to reproduce the original event (that seems to have ended the crisis) but only up to a point, so that its beneficial effects may be acquired without causing the war of all against all to break out again. Thus, the development of an elaborate system of story or myth and patterned ritual behavior designed to repeat the event to some extent and to protect the community by extending what happened this time.

Violence and the Sacred describes this four-stage process in the archaic universe, a process for which there is no direct evidence and yet which marshals extraordinary explanatory power across diverse institutions and cultural settings. Again, Girard could easily have stopped with that elaboration, or extended it within the human science of cultural anthropology. But again, instead, he asked a different question. How have we come to know about this archaic situation? How has it become possible for us to read it today without being victimized ourselves by it? In the archaic community, none of the sacrificers say we are arbitrarily substituting a scapegoat victim for the war of all against all. How has it become possible, Girard asks, for the sacrificers to know the victim is innocent of the crimes with which he or she is charged – namely, with responsibility for all the violence in the community – without that knowledge destroying them?

His answer, of course, is Christian scripture. And here perhaps the deathbed conversions of the writers he studied in the early sixties gave him a clue. The Gospel account of the Passion relates in his view the sacrificial process in full. The Christian Passion enacts the sacrificial in a way that undoes it, that generates not a new refreshed sacrificial system as happened in the archaic community, but something closer to the end of sacrifice. The account of the crucifixion, Girard now argues, is in effect a "sacrifice to end all sacrifices". Jesus reads the passage from Psalm 118 for example in which "the stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone" and becomes himself the stone, so to speak. He enacts or performs that passage in real life in order that it may be read, that the word may "become flesh". He becomes himself, as the apostle says, the

word incarnate. The Gospel texts read not with an eye to reestablishing ritual and mythic narrative but with an orientation toward the anti-sacrificial or non-sacrificial, toward undoing archaic sacrificial institutions and seeking alternative means of surviving.

Thus, Girard publishes in effect the final chapter initially imagined for *Violence and the Sacred* that he concluded was better left for a separate occasion. Oughourlian and Lefort arrive at his door and the three of them assemble the volume of *Things Hidden* in which the theory is completed. What led us to be able to write the European novel in which unsatisfied imitative desire reigns? How did we demystify sacrifice that had been so much a part of the primitive religious community and the ancient Western tragic cultural scene? The Hebrew Bible, Christian scripture, and Freudian psychology needs to be rethought from this perspective.

"Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees", Girard reads Jesus as saying to his co-religionists. You say that if you had been there, you would not have stoned the prophets. But don't you see that in saying as much, you are stoning the prophets once again? It is not matter of whether what you say is true or not true. Whether true or not, in saying as much you are performing the act in front of us. You are stoning the prophets yourself once again – in the very act of denying that you would do that. What's more, in time you will be stoning me for telling you this. And those who come after you will do the same to you, and they will do so, ironically enough, in my name, calling themselves "Christians" and you "Jews"[5]. Anti-Semitism Girard argues is not a matter of one more social group attacking another. It is rather for him a turning of one's back upon the Christian revelation itself.

Things Hidden and later *The Scapegoat*, in other words, complete for Girard the exposition of the theory, the set of tools or system by which one may read the mimetic theory in its entirety. Discussion of the European novel and its common peculiarities led us to Greek tragedy and the latter's embedding within myth and ritual led us to the archaic universe and sacrificial practices around the world, practices that continue in some measure today. *Romantic Lie and Novelistic Truth* described the novel. *Violence and the Sacred* laid out in full the hypothetical stages of the sacrificial process as reflected in the ancient world, its interpretations, and the primitive universe and its interpretations. *Things Hidden* gathers the results. Part One summarizes the way understanding mimetic desire and dynamics of the sacrificial in the real world offer a new hypothesis regarding the order of culture. Part Two carries the analysis forward, exposing the Biblical and Christian scriptural foundations that have ena-

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[5] R. Girard, *Things Hidden since the Foundation of the World*, tr. ing. di S. Bann and A. Meteer, Stanford University Press, Stanford 1987, pp. 158-167.

bled our understanding, first among the Jews, later among the Christians. And Part Three asks: what are the implications of these sacrificial mimetic scriptural dynamics for understanding contemporary psychological behavior independently of reigning interpretations in France and elsewhere. *The Scapegoat* updates these dynamics provisionally in the post scriptural European world as the practices of scapegoating continue in medieval history where the anti-Semitic myths and narratives of the practice of witchcraft abound.

Taken together, these four books for Girard lay out the mimetic sacrificial theory in its entirety[6]. But the history of the understanding of that theory he notes is a slow one. Two thousand years is a drop in the proverbial bucket. The fact that the arbitrariness of the scapegoat process, and the innocence of the victim of the crimes with which he or she is charged, is suddenly available, is no guarantee that the sacrificial practices will end, or not quickly become neo-sacrificial, acting as if the revelation was never given at all. Historical Christianity in Girard's view stumbles continuously back into neo-sacrificial behaviors much as any new insight that takes hold within a group acquires it only gradually and with much backsliding. We live in a perpetual "sacrificial crisis" in his view as we struggle to recognize the sacrificial behaviors that still work, to separate them from those that do not, and to seek out alternatives to the sacrificial practices that are not disguised repetitions of it. Two thousand years later, Christians are still assuring themselves in papal documents that the Jews are no longer to be condemned for the act of deicide.

Part Two: Méconnaissances

Fifty years after the publication of Girard's key ideas, the digesting of his insights remains a work in progress. And in that process, misunderstandings persist. What are they? In my view, at least four have taken hold.

For some reason, we do not yet get it that *Violence and the Sacred* is the central critical diagnostic text of his canon. A large number of readers have identified their "center of gravity" in *Romantic Lie*, or *Things Hidden*, or in some other book or essay of his. No doubt, there are three big separable ideas in his work: mimetic desire, the scapegoat mechanism, and the exposure of the system, the revelation of sacrificial substitution as violence in the scriptural narrative of the Passion. In the "Introduction" to *From Violence to Divinity*, for example, where the first four books of Girard are collected, Girard calls these three ideas "instruments of analy-

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[6] "Pour la première fois, tous les éléments qui s'articule dans la théorie mimétique se trouvent rassemblés en un seul volume". R. Girard, *De la violence à la divinité*, cit., p. 27.

sis" and appends descriptions to each of three separate books naming them "1) mimetic desire, 2) the scapegoat mechanism, and finally 3) the destructive revelation of this mechanism"[7].

But he includes all three ideas within a single volume – his original conception of *Violence and the Sacred*. After writing about "Sacrifice" and the "Sacrificial Crisis" in the "Table of Contents", he writes about "Oedipus", "myth and ritual", "Dionysus", "mimetic desire", "Freud", "Lévi-Strauss", "sacrificial substitution", and the "unity of all the rites". And Andreas Wilmes notes that the text that Girard reads at the session of *Esprit* in June 1973 on Christianity is later replaced in publication the following November by what was to be the final chapter of *Violence and the Sacred*, the one he retracted at the suggestion of his book publisher[8].

In some regards, Girard is a kind of intellectual archeologist, in the manner of Michel Foucault, first writing about the novel and its mimetic dynamics, then showing, that mimetic theory is as old as the archaic universe where it is linked to the sacrificial mechanism which is in turn made readable by Greek tragedy, the Hebrew Bible, and Christian scripture. But the dynamics of mimetic desire within the novel remain a separate topic. And in 2007, it is the three tools that he is thinking about and that constitute mimetic theory as a whole, even if they are expanded upon in four separate volumes. *Things Hidden* reveals what allows us to read the sacrificial dynamics at play in archaic culture (without being destroyed by it in our own context) and thereby serves as a bridge between archaic culture and the novel. *The Scapegoat* updates that connection. And the obsession in the novel with mimetic dynamics points to a crisis that only the sacrificial crisis of archaic culture will unravel for us. Like Oedipus, Girard solves the mystery of sacrificial enigma only in *Violence and the Sacred* for which *Romantic Lie* provides the preface and *Things Hidden* and *The Scapegoat* bring us up to date.

Secondly, we do not seem to get it that Girard's view never fundamentally changes from *Des choses cachées* in 1978 to *Achever Clausewitz* in 2007, and that in his readings of Christianity, or other topics within the Christian fold in the intervening years, he has never seriously strayed from the position argued already in *Violence and the Sacred* and completed in *Things Hidden* (whether on sacrifice, Satan, self-sacrifice, or whatever), and only further elaborated their implications. The core remains *Violence and the Sacred* from 1972 to 2007.

Minor changes of course accrue. The Book of Hebrews is now to be included along with others as anti-sacrificial rather than the one exceptional sacrificial text of the Christian canon. The counter sacrificial becomes now

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[7] *Ibid.*
[8] See A. Wilmes in *Violence, the Sacred and Things Hidden. A discussion with René Girard at Esprit (1973)*: Michigan State University Press, East Lansing 2022], pp. X-XI.

perhaps a better characterization of what is happening than the non-sacrificial. The word "sacrifice" itself can acquire alternative meanings from the archaic one. For Girard, the anti-sacrificial is now a gradual and relative movement (not an all or nothing proposition). If he were to condemn Christianity in his view, he would be doing the same thing he is identifying the text as exposing. The Passion remains for him the original deconstruction of the sacrificial and it is consistent as such from1973 to 2007.

Here for example is Girard on Christianity in the 1978 version of *Things Hidden*:

> It is not a question for us of bearing against Christianity the condemnation without nuances toward which we would seem to be led, above all, by the obligation to disengage the radical incompatibility between the sacrificial reading and the non-sacrificial reading.
>
> If we believed ourselves justified in condemning sacrificial Christianity, we would be repeating against it the same type of attitude to which it has itself succumbed. We would avail ourselves of the Gospel text, and of the non-sacrificial perspective it installs, in order to recommence the historic horror of anti-Semitism against Christianity in its entirety. We would cause to function once more the sacrificial and victimary machine in applying from it upon the text which, if it was really understood, would definitively put it out of use.[9]

And here then is the passage from a footnote on page 1001 in *From Violence to Divinity* to which he refers:

> The opposition between a thought designated as "sacrificial", one always unfaithful to the Gospel inspiration, and a "non-sacrificial thought", alone faithful to the contrary, to this same inspiration, reflects an ultimate humanist and "progressivist" illusion in its interpretation of Christianity.
>
> I did not disabuse myself of this illusion except after the original publication of the present book [*Things Hidden*]. To my eyes, henceforth, the true opposition between the Christian and the archaic must define itself as opposition between sacrifice of self and sacrifice of the other individual.
>
> This opposition defines perfectly the relation between archaic sacrifice founded upon the founding murder, that which reclaims from the ritual immolations and the sacrifice of Jesus in the Gospels, the gift of self within the crucifixion.
>
> The Christian meaning is always present, at least implicitly, in the meaning that is the most current of the word sacrifice in our days, that of a renunciation to the object desired, that of a privation that one imposes upon oneself, of a *mortification*, not strongly neurotic since it alone remains capable of putting an end without violence to rivalries.
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> … Such is my thought today on this capital subject[10].

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[9] R. Girard, *Des choses cachées*, cit., p. 268, my translation.
[10] Id., *De la violence à la divinité*, cit., p. 1001, my translation.

True, he "disabuses" himself of "a thought designated as 'sacrificial', one always unfaithful to the Gospel inspiration, and a 'non-sacrificial thought', alone faithful to the contrary, to this same inspiration' as a 'humanist' and 'progressivist' illusion". But in the main Christian text of forty-six years earlier, he does the same thing. He writes that he cannot condemn Christianity without falling into the trap of the Gospel itself which, as pointed out above, has Jesus noting that to condemn those who stone the prophets is to continue stoning the prophets. "If we believed ourselves justified in condemning sacrificial Christianity, we would be repeating against it the same type of attitude to which it has itself succumbed".

And so, in Girard's view, the development of an alternative practice is understandable, one he finds in the opposition between sacrifice of self and sacrifice of the other individual, an ethical choice Girard points out in the Solomon story.

This last definition [regarding sacrifice and self-sacrifice] corresponds perfectly, in the judgement of Solomon, to the opposition between the bad prostitute, the one who accepts the murder of the child in order to appease her mimetic passion, and the good prostitute, who sacrifices even her maternal love and sacrifices herself as a consequence, for the survival of this same child. The good prostitute sacrifice herself *in order that the child may live* and her sacrifice corresponds admirably to that of Christ who sacrifices his own life in order to do the will of the Father and save humanity, not only in dying for us but in clarifying for us by the same stroke regarding our own violence[11].

It is a response not unlike the articulation of the sabbath in Genesis 1 with its endorsement of a practice of ceasing or resting, which is also of course what Jesus does in John 8 when they would accuse him of not adhering faithfully to the law. He bends down to avoid their "stones" and stirs the sand on the beach, a locus comprised of the future of stoning and a reference to one of the three covenantal formulas, as well as the destination to which such accusations inevitably lead.

Which lead us to another potential misunderstanding of Girard's ideas.

As in the case of the centrality of the scapegoat mechanism and the constancy of its articulation through its deconstruction in the Gospel account of the Passion, we similarly do not yet get it that Girardian thinking is not an ethics or advocacy of some kind – of social justice, for example – but a form of knowledge and understanding, including (and especially) regarding its own limitations. Girardian thinking is offered as a way of knowing, a diagnostic tool, a critical methodology, an

[11] *Ibid.*

instrument designed to generate increased understanding of certain aspects of our cultural and individual lives. It is not a prescription but a description, not an ethical, or religious, or literary, or literary critical, or anthropological, or archeological, or philosophical or any other kind of advocacy, although any individual who employs it as knowledge may of course also be committed to one or another such orientation. The fact that Girard identified himself as an "ordinary Christian" does not in any way challenge this idea. If Girardian thinking borrows from philosophic or literary or anthropological or religious or cultural studies, it does so in pursuit of what Girard names its explicitly "scientific" aim which is to understand the order of culture in its relation to violence or breakdown, to understand human community and hominization from the perspective of the technology in whose context it appears to have emerged, namely, a unique sacrificial scapegoat mechanism endemic to this emergent primate community, and critical to its prospects for the future in context of its exposure by the so-called "revealed" religions, and the great literary texts of the ancient world. "It is a question", Girard writes, "of violence in its relation with the religious"[12].

As a result, the search for a so-called "positive mimesis" in Girardian studies is necessarily complicated – if what is meant by positive mimesis is a unique trans-contextual view. There is, we may say, as a colleague of Girard's at Johns Hopkins, Stanley Fish, often did, always a positive mimesis, but it's never the same one. Positive or negative here are categorical responses, not a substance or quality or content determination, a measure of the outcome in this or that situation and not an account of its being or essence. In fact, in so far as we do seek out a mimetic perspective that is "transcendentally unique", we border on reproducing ourselves the very sacrificial situation we have entered this inquiry to avoid, namely, the "sacrificial crisis", the one in which no sacrificial solution would appear to work, and any and all such sacrificial implementations lead only (by virtue of the looped and "möbian" logical structure of the sacrificial itself) to a compounding of the initial problem and increased demand for its resolution.

Once again, the alleged cure may only exacerbate the given disease, a process that turns out in fact to be at the heart of what the so-called revealed religious structures themselves are describing. The problem of the modern world, for Girard, which is to say, the world in which the anti-sacrificial is a given by its scriptural foundations, is precisely to learn how to avoid the neo-sacrificial, how to avoid the law of the anti-sacrificial becoming only the newest form of the sacrificial, the hardest problem to

[12] Ivi, p. 8.

deal with perhaps since it has all the devices and mechanisms of the sacrificial at its disposal. In that regard, the scriptural writings associated with the five so-called revealed religious traditions may be little more than the compendium of cultural circumstances in which the same problem arises, how in this or that specific circumstance the ethical may issue in justice, to use the language of a thinker like Emmanuel Levinas.

And finally, the question of the genre in which Girard works. We do not yet get it that Girard is a prophetic thinker and that he is operating with the field or discipline within which an entire range of thinkers have operated – perhaps starting with the protagonist of Christian apostolic scripture himself. Girard is not primarily an archivist, a literary critic, an anthropologist, a theologian, a philosopher, although he has written extensively on texts in all of these fields and his writing reflects a passion and enthusiasm for them to the extent that the mimetic and sacrificial dynamics remain in them at play. Nor is he an "essayist" in the French tradition of the term. Girard continues to insist he is none of these[13]. He maintains explicitly he is systematic thinker. Not unlike the Greek tragic writers he reads, or the scriptural figures whose apostles declare their testimony, he seeks out and demystifies the origins, strategies, and violent consequences of the behaviors he observes – which may be why he once termed those writers the "tragic-prophetic".

Why do such potential misconceptions matter? They do not, of course, ultimately. We can choose to read Girard (or not read him) in any manner we wish. But getting him right from his own perspective may help clarify *for ourselves* what we are really seeking in turning to his work in the first place, and where we may find what it is we want if we are not finding it where we expect it.

Epilogue

Girardian studies will no doubt continue to flourish for some time to come. It may even constitute a veritable cornerstone text for several new fields of studies, with all the implications such a pivotal status implies within his work. Much like the work of Einstein in the physical sciences, or Nietzsche in philosophy, or Darwin in the evolutionary sciences, or Durkheim in sociology and anthropology, or Freud in psychology, Girard's work I suggest may prove a foundation text for future scientific discussion in all fields in which the origins of human community and its relation to violence within the larger ecosphere are critically examined. It

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[13] *Ibid.*

behooves us to get him right and identify an independent ethical practice or advocacy compatible with it but not a substitute for it. Our survival might depend upon such a gesture.

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Paul Dumouchel[*]
"Sacrifice and the Sacred"

Violence and the Sacred (1972)[1] the book where the literary critic suddenly transforms himself into an anthropologist and a theoretician of religion and culture is certainly the most academic of all of Girard's book. "Academic" in the sense that in that book more than in any other Girard agrees to follow the rules of the game of social sciences. The book is well and clearly documented, references and footnotes abound and it contains an important bibliography. In short it is a book that is primarily addressed to academics, anthropologists, sociologist, psychoanalysts, philosophers, historians of religion and others rather than to the general public. As such it played an important role in the subsequent reception of his work. At first it was enthusiastically received but soon became the object of severe critics on the part of anthropologists, psychoanalysts and philosophers. His later books which were seen as lighter essays addressed to a more general public were mostly disregarded by academics. Following *Things Hidden since the Foundation of World* (1987) the discussion moved and became centred on his interpretation of Christianity. To some extent Girard failed his entrance exam into the academic world of the social sciences and even today, fifty years later, many academics still consider that, though he may have had interesting and important insights, he is not really a scientific author.

In this paper I want to review, to analyze and to reject two interpretations and criticisms of *Violence and the Sacred* that were first made soon after the book originally came out in French. One is that the book's objective is to present a new theory of sacrifice which like that found in Hubert and Mauss famous essay views sacrifice as the primordial ritual from which all religious phenomena emerge. This rests on a fundamental misinterpretation of the place and role of sacrifice in *Violence and the*

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[1] 1972 is the date of the original French book *La Violence et le sacré* published by Grasset. The English translation only came out six years later.

Sacred.[2] The second reproach addressed to the book is that Girard proposes an extremely deterministic and mechanistic explanation of culture. This criticism rests, I will argue, on a misunderstanding of his project. If Girard failed his entrance exam into the academic world of the social sciences, it is not because what he submitted was insufficient, but because his would be examiners failed to understand what he was doing. His conception of science was far beyond what was common among social scientists at the time, and for the most part even today.

Sacrifice and Violence

Sacrifice occupies in *Violence and the Sacred* a very important even central place and many critics interpreted the book as claiming that sacrifice is the first and most fundamental of all rituals. More precisely they argued that Girard's theory requires sacrifice to be both universal and primordial. Given this, it was relatively easy to show that sacrifice in the strict sense of the word is not found in all societies and to claim that the theory is false or at least has excessive ambitions, that it lacks rigour and knowledge of the facts it pretends to explain. In short that it is unscientific. I will come back later on the importance of the "in the strict sense of the word" proviso in this critique. However, I think that there is here a kind of optical illusion that grants sacrifice a priority which it does not have in the economy of the theory. An optical illusion somewhat similar to that which brings some analyst of *Deceit, Desire and the Novel* (1966) to reify triangular desire, to understand it as a special type of desire, something which exists 'in itself' rather that to see the figure of the triangle as a pedagogical explanatory tool and a criticism of the classic conception of desire as a straight line, a binary relation between subject and object.

The first chapter of *Violence and the Sacred* is entitled 'Sacrifice' and begins on its first page with a criticism of Hubert and Mauss, more precisely of the use of the term 'ambivalence' to account for the "dual aspect of ritual sacrifice – the legitimate and the illegitimate, the public and the all but covert"[3]. Girard does not accuse the term of being false or inappropriate, but rather of having little or no explanatory value. To say that

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[2] H. Hubert, M. Mauss, *Essai sur la nature et la fonction du sacrifice*, in "Année sociologique", II:29-138, 1899.

[3] R., Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*, cit., p. 1. (Professor Dumouchel used the recent Bloomsbury Academic edition which is a reprint to the 1978 Patrick Gregory translation published by The Johns Hopkins University Press. Nevertheless, we provide the page numbers in which his quotes appear according to the latter's reprint).

something is ambivalent does not of itself tell why it is so. It is in the relation of sacrifice to violence that Girard will seek the cause and explanation of why sacrifice appears at time as a sacred obligation that cannot be neglected and at other nearly as a criminal act. This first chapter presents a series of anthropological examples and of examples taken from ancient literature or the Bible which illustrate how often criminal violence is presented in religious and sacrificial terms and how frequently the violence of ritual escapes from the bounds of sacrifice, invades the city or destroys those who are close to the ones sacrificing the victim. The ambivalence of sacrifice argues Girard is rooted in its violence.

There is here a particular and important methodological choice. Most authors view sacrifice essentially as an offering or oblation, that is as a gift made to the gods or to the ancestors. Girard analyzes it in its relation to violence, rather than seeing its violence as secondary and only required as a means in view of the supposed function of sacrifice. Since the objective would be to give up something and to offer it to the gods, the death and destruction of the victim seems like an appropriate means to satisfy that goal, the best way to transport it to the 'other side' where the gods are thought to reside. Violence in such a conception of sacrifice is exterior to the institution. It is only a means to an end, a way of doing that which constitutes the essential: making an offering to the gods. According to Girard, to the opposite, it is violence that is first and the relationship to the gods is second and secondary. He even claims that the relation to god does not add anything to our understanding of sacrifice or its function. Throughout the analyses found in this chapter, the gods are either absent or very distant.

What constitutes the heart of his analysis is violence and the tenuousness of the line that separates the legitimate violence of sacrifice from the illegitimate violence that threatens the community and how easy it to travel, to slide or to slip from one side to the other. The relation to or the belief in the gods, rather than an element of the explanation – sacrifice is a gift that men make to the gods, and therefore no gods, or at least no belief in god and no sacrifice – appears here as an enigma and, as Girard often repeats, as an obstacle to our understanding of the institution. The important place which the gods occupy in the classic conceptions of sacrifice is, according to him, a later theological development, one which does not correspond to the original state of affairs. Therefore the questions that we need to answer are: Why is violence so often done in the name of the gods? Why is there such a thing as sacred violence? What explains the proximity between this sacred, saintly violence characteristic of sacrifice and the evil, atrocious violence that rips apart cities and families?

In fact, Girard in a sense remains true to the project of Hubert and Mauss, at least as it is defined in the title of their essay "on the nature

and function of sacrifice". Essentially, his reproach is that they did not keep their promise, and that they relegated the institution of sacrifice in its entirety to the realm of the imagination[4]. Once an explanation makes of a false belief in the gods, or as more modern authors tend to say, of a cognitive mistake,[5] the foundation of the institution it becomes difficult to attribute to sacrifice any real function. Research on the nature and function of sacrifice tends in consequence to be replaced by reflections on its meaning or symbolic dimension. What Girard reproaches nearly all scholars who addressed the question of sacrifice before him is that they see it as a purely imaginary phenomena. Or even, as claimed by Levi-Strauss, one that we should not hesitate to qualify as false or meaningless. False and meaningless because sacrifice aims to do something which is by definition impossible, to make an offering to gods that do not exist. Such a gross mistake cannot serve any useful purpose, it cannot have any particular function.

As we will see in greater details later on, according to Girard mistakes and misunderstandings can have, and often do play, a very positive role. That the gods to whom peoples sacrifice do not exist does not entail that the institution does not have any function. Unlike those who banish it to the realm of the imaginary, Girard, already in this first chapter, will on the basis of his analysis of the relations between sacrifice and violence define its function as "to quell violence within the community and to prevent conflicts from erupting"[6]. Or, to put it differently, "sacrifice serves to protect the whole community from *its own* violence; it prompts the community to choose victims outside itself"[7]. This last point is fundamental, one of Girard's goals is to evidence that we are not simply dealing here with a psychological mechanism, but with a social phenomenon. Sacrifice has a real function and to fulfill that function various social requirements need to be satisfied. Protecting a community against its own violence is not something that merely takes place in the heads of agents. It requires that the violence of members aimed against each other be diverted towards "others" who are either exterior to the community or individuals who are dispensable, that the community is, in other words, ready to sacrifice. In consequence, it can be claimed that the institution also has a "nature" which is to be violent. This violence however aims at peace. This is why the violence of sacrifice is viewed as saintly or sacred. Thus we begin to

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[4] R. Girard, *op. cit.*, p. 6.
[5] For example, P. Boyer, *Religion Explained*, Basic Books, New York 2001; R. Dawkins, *The God Delusion*, Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, Boston 2006; D. Dennett, *Breaking the Spell: Religion as a Natural Phenomenon*, Vinking Press, New York 2006.
[6] R. Girard, *op. cit.*, p. 14.
[7] Ivi*,* p. 8.

understand better the ambivalence of sacrifice. What grounds and supports the legitimacy of sacrificial violence is that peace is its goal. If sacrifice at times seems to be just the opposite – illegitimate, criminal – it is because it is a form of violence. One that is dangerously close to the violence it seeks to divert and to deflect. Its ambivalence is rooted in the tension between its nature which is to be violent and its function which is to bring peace to the community.

Taken alone, by itself, the first chapter of *Violence and the Sacred* seem to adopt a 'functionalist' approach and this has sometimes been reproached to Girard. Functionalism in social science is an approach that was once popular but that has been discredited and is today abandoned. It considers that institutions fulfill various social functions and that these functions are what explain the existence of the institutions which we encounter in different societies. For example, the army and the police provide protection, law facilitates the settlement of conflicts, hospital provides health services, schools and universities education, and so on. The evident criticism that was addressed to functionalism and that brought about its downfall is simple. It is not because a social need arises that the appropriate institution will necessarily appear to satisfy that need. In other words, if the function which an institution fulfills may help to explain why it is stable and maintains itself, clearly it cannot explain the origin of the institution. There are no reason to believe that an appropriate institution, whatever it may be, will arise simply because it would be useful to have it.

However, in *Violence and the Sacred* it is not the function of sacrifice that explain its origin but its origin that explains its function. There is nonetheless an important functionalist dimension in Girard's approach. Sacrifice has a function which is to solve (or more precisely to help resolve) a fundamental problem that is common to all human societies. A problem that already arises therefore at a biological level, but which the book mainly present as a problem for societies which do not have a judicial system[8]. That problem is what in the book Girard calls *essential* violence, violence which is interior to the community. According to me, the recognition of this problem and its conceptualization, first in relation to societies which do not have a judicial system and then in relation to all human societies constitutes perhaps the most fundamental contribution of Girard. He identified a problem which in a way was there for everyone to see, but to which most did not pay any attention. He showed that it

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[8] Girard makes it clear that he is aware of the biological dimension of this problem and actually rests his argument on the fact that this problem presents itself in a very different way in societies which have a judicial system. On this last issue see also P. Dumouchel, *Girard et le politique,* in "Cités, Philosophie, Politique, Histoire", 53, 2013, pp. 17-31.

was the first and most fundamental problem that every society has to face and that its solution conditions all of human history. Human culture he argues was born out of an effort to resolve this problem, but because – like the problem of feeding humans– it is a problem that can never be definitively solved, it is always with us. It permanently threatens us and constrains our choices. The problem always arises again, differently in each different situation, but it is nonetheless always the same problem and its solution though different is also always in a way the 'same', since it consists in managing our own violence. A management of violence that is always a more or less violent process. We can never, so to speak, step outside of the problem. It can never be solved once and for all.

Throughout *Violence and the Sacred*, sacrifice constitutes the guiding thread or leitmotif until the last chapter entitled "The Unity of all Rites". It seems therefore to hold in this book and in Girard thought a privileged position as the first and most fundamental of all rituals. This, as mentioned earlier has often been reproached to Girard, because not all societies or religions have sacrifices. That objection however depends on how we understand sacrifice and how we view its place in Girard's work. For Girard, sacrifice is the paradigmatic ritual in the sense that it is the one that most resembles the foundational event, the collective murder of the surrogate victim that puts an end to the mimetic crisis of violence and reconciles (at least momentarily) the divided community. Sacrifice tries to re-enact this original event in a way that reproduces the beneficial effect of the victim's death without calling back the orgy of destructive violence that preceded it.

However this resemblance does not mean that it is the first ritual, from which all others derive, nor does entail that it is universal, that we should find it in every culture. What is first, according to Girard, the event from which all rituals and not only sacrifice derive is the violent mimetic crisis and the self-regulating violent mechanism that puts an end to it. This original first foundational event nonetheless is not unique, in the sense that it did not happen only once. To the contrary it was repeated numerous times and these multiple foundations are what explains the diversity of myths and rituals and the multiplicity of gods. Contingent, accidental aspects of the event or how it impressed participants in different location or at different times lead to different rituals and images of the sacred. These rituals can all be called sacrificial, not because they necessarily include a sacrifice proper, but because they serve the same function as sacrifice: to protect the community against its own violence. They are also sacrificial in that they resemble sacrifice[9] and fulfill their function

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[9] See P. Dumouchel, *Il sacrificio e la caccia alle teste*, in U. Cocconi, M. P. Gritti (a cura di), *La pietra dello scandalo*, Transeuropa, Massa 2013, pp. 361-372.

violently by diverting violence towards dispensable individuals or at least towards individuals against who violence can be exerted without fear of revenge or retaliation.

Understood in this way, the priority of sacrifice is epistemic and pedagogical. The reason why sacrifice is the guiding thread of *Violence and the Sacred* is because it is in the analysis of ritual sacrifices that traces of the original crisis and of its resolution are more easily discovered and recognized[10]. Beginning with the analysis of sacrifice can in consequence help us understand and decipher other rites and rituals, which seem quite different and distant, like ritual incest, the exposure of twins, or masks, or the particularities of various religious festivals. Nonetheless, like all other religious institutions sacrifice is second in relation to the violent expulsion of the surrogate victim. Hubert and Mauss, writes Girard, "present sacrifice as engendering all religious phenomena" and he adds that "this means, of course, that we cannot expect to learn anything about the origin of sacrifice from Hubert and Mauss"[11]. To the opposite, *Violence and the Sacred* proposes a theory of the origin of sacrifice as one among other religious phenomena.

Contingency

It is interesting that few of the original readers of *Violence and the Sacred* paid much attention to the important place that contingency, accidents and arbitrary decisions occupy in Girard's explanation. Most of his early readers, including this one, failed to understand what was involved[12]. This lead to somewhat confused discussions concerning freedom and determinism as well as the place of novelty in human affairs.[13] In fact, contingency plays, according to Girard, a fundamental role in the development of human knowledge and culture. The importance of contingency is already evident in the first chapter of *Violence and the Sacred*, but as the book develops it becomes more and more clear that Girard recognizes an important role to random, arbitrary events and as well as

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[10] Or perhaps because that is how Girard first discovered and recognized them.

[11] R. Girard, *op. cit.*, p. 89. I slightly modified the translation to keep it closer to the original French.

[12] To my knowledge only J.-P. Dupuy who in 'Le signe et l'envie' (in P. Dumouchel, J.-P. Dupuy, *L'Enfer des choses. René Girard et la logique de l'économie*, Seuil, Paris 1979) defined mimetic theory as a morphogenetic theory really grasped the importance of random, contingent events in Girard's explanations.

[13] See for example P. Dumouchel, J.-P. Dupuy (a cura di), *L'auto-organisation de la physique au politique*, Seuil, Paris 1981, especially the discussion between Girard and Castoriadis.

to serendipity, chance discoveries. He does not use any of those terms – apart from the adjective "arbitrary' – but from a conceptual point of view it is clear that what is involved is how contingent events participate in his explanations and in the development of religious institutions and rituals.

What Girard criticizes in traditional approaches to sacrifice conceived as an exchange with or a gift to the gods is not only that it transforms it into a senseless purely imaginary institution. It is also the cognitive imperialism and arrogance of such explanations. Arrogance and imperialism which consist in thinking that we know better than those who take part in it the meaning of the institution. Because the premises of the institution are false we conclude that it cannot have any role or function. By condemning the institution of sacrifice to meaninglessness in this way, we imply that our own intellectual life is characterized by perfect transparency and that only an exact knowledge of the world leads to useful effects. Such presumptions, insists Girard, are false, something which he shows by observing how ritual prescriptions that aim at protecting the community from the contagion of violence can also succeed in protecting it against contagious diseases. Such happy accidents only gain their significance and become useful, he shows, on the background of ritual practices that absorb them after accidentally stumbling upon them in the dark. That is why he claims that "ritual empiricism" constitutes the original foundation of all knowledge. (2013:40-42)[14].

There are two aspects to this conception of the role of contingency. One is that we need to recognize that what agents (and we) do not know and cannot predict can play a fundamental and positive role. In other words that perfect mastery or complete knowledge is not an ideal. The second is that the function which is served by sacrifice, its usefulness, does not require men to know or be aware of what that function is. Otherwise, as we will see, the birth of sacrificial institutions would be impossible. There is according to Girard, an accidental dimension to the growth of knowledge and to the development of culture that cannot be eliminated. An accidental contingent dimension that is ultimately linked to the fact that, according to him, practice comes before knowledge.

At the origin of sacrifice, of human culture and of symbolic thought is, according to Girard, foundational violence, the collective murder of the surrogate victim that puts an end to violence and brings peace to the community. Here also, contingency plays an essential role in at least three different ways. Foundational violence is a self-regulating mechanism of violence. A collective process of reciprocal violence through which violence spontaneously brings the violent conflict to an end and without which

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[14] R. Girard, *op. cit.*, p. 29

the entire community would be destroyed. A first form of contingency is simply that this result was neither planned nor aimed at by anyone. For the mimetic doubles engaged in the pursuit of their own violent enterprise this "happy end" is a perfect accident. Something that could neither be foreseen nor anticipated. Peace comes to them as an incomprehensible gift, something for which they do not feel responsible. It is an event that happened, that was suddenly there, but which they did not make.

How does it actually take place according to Girard? His hypothesis rests on the observation that violence is contagious, mimetic. In the absence of institutional barriers, in a small group violence can rapidly contaminate the whole community. Violence, according to Girard, does not only destroy persons and material objects, houses, orchards, fields, factories, buildings and bridges; it also destroys social and moral differences between agents. This should be understood in a real sense. The American philosopher Quine once wrote that 'a difference that does not make any difference is not a difference' or to put it otherwise, a difference that does not have any consequences does not constitute a difference, it does not exist as a difference. This is precisely what happens in a conflict as violence becomes more and more intense. As violence grows, the agents opposed in the conflict do not anymore take into account the differences which in normal times distinguish between individuals. Women, men, children, older persons, hospital patients or healthy individuals, whether they are submissive or aggressive, asking for mercy or shouting insults to the enemy, it does not make any difference anymore. All are "legitimate" targets. Violence has destroyed these differences, rendering them without meaning or consequences. In such conditions, it is possible for one individual to become, so to speak, the enemy of all. That is to say, through a process of imitation the violence of everyone can become polarized against a unique person. All liberating themselves of their violent hatred by exerting it simultaneously against the same enemy, appeasing their reciprocal anger by diverting it upon to the same surrogate victim.

Who however is this victim? Since all differences between individuals have now disappeared it can be anyone. No one in particular is destined to play that role. The choice of the surrogate victim is arbitrary, contingent. There is no reason to it. It is thus according to the theory a contingent accident that brings peace back to the divided community.

A third form of contingency concerns whether this beneficial resolution necessarily takes place in every sacrificial crisis. If nothing requires or determines that it necessarily is this individual rather than that person who becomes the surrogate victim, is it at least necessary that every mimetic crisis should end in this way? Girard's answer, which he repeats in *Things Hidden since the Foundation of the World* is unambiguous. Many communities in the clutch of violent mimetic crisis may have been de-

stroyed without this self-regulating mechanism of violence ever 'kicking in' so to speak. Randomness, uncertainty and contingency play an important role here. We do not know what minute event may bring about the resolution of the crisis rather than the destruction of the community. There is no perfect simple determinism in this process. Sometimes it works, sometimes it doesn't.

Comparison with natural selection in which random events have a fundamental place may be useful at this point. Mutations in the genetic code that give rise to modifications which are sometimes useful, sometimes neutral and sometimes lethal are random. This does not entail that the process through which they arise is not deterministic, but simply that this process is unrelated to the environmental and systemic features that determine the adaptive value of the mutation. To put it otherwise the process responsible for the mutation is blind relative to the environmental conditions of the organism. The same applies here. There is nothing random or non-deterministic about the fact that an individual who survived small pox is now immune from the disease. However, the functioning of the immune system is perfectly random relative to the ritual process that elect such individual as priest in charge of those who suffer from the disease. Two completely independent causal chains meet here to create this happy coincidence. Just as in biology, though most mutations are either deleterious or neutral natural selection provides a way of capitalizing and taking advantage of the few good mutations, here the self-regulating mechanism of violence can profit from rare accidents that bring about a polarization of violence against a unique victim. Many groups may have destroyed themselves to their last member in an endless orgy of violence, but we (necessarily) are the descendants of groups where this positive outcome took place and that is why we have the cultures that we have.

The effect of this spontaneous self-regulating mechanism of violence however do not last forever. As time goes by new occasions of conflict arise and violence sooner or later will not only break out between members of the community but become uncontrollable. This entails that this origin, foundational violence, as mentioned earlier does not correspond to a unique event that took place once and for all in the distant pass. Rather this origin is always nearby. It can repeat itself and we have good reasons to think that it has done so numerous times in the past. This is a fundamental difference relative to the theory of natural selection, more precisely of descent through modification by natural selection. Its central hypothesis is that we are all related. There is only one origin of life and bifurcations through innumerable chance events over the ages lead to the incredible diversity of living creatures which we now encounter and to all those which once existed and are today extinct. Mimetic theory posits that the origin happened many times. Therefore resemblances between

cultures and institutions do not necessarily (though they sometimes may) come from a relation of 'descent' between them, but from the fact that the same mimetic mechanism of increasing violence and sudden polarization is at the origin of all. All human institutions according to Girard grew out of this spontaneous self-regulating mechanism of violence and they can be understood as attempts to reactivate the positive effects of the crisis and its resolution without falling prey to its destructive dynamism. The goal is to protect the community from the return of essential violence.

According to Girard sacrifice and other rituals arise out of this spontaneous mechanism. However, their development is not spontaneous though it is to a large extent blind. It comes from the efforts of the community to reproduce this extraordinary event, to reactivate its beneficial effects. This repetition takes place behind a veil of misrecognition, that is in the context of very imperfect knowledge and understanding of how it happened and even of what happened. Those involved necessarily misunderstand how and why the most extreme violence suddenly gave way to calm and peace. In consequence, argues Girard, all sacrifices will have characteristics that correspond to different aspects of the foundational event and mechanism, but they will not all have the same in view of various contingent accidents. There will often be a victim that will be destroyed and its destruction, sacrifice, will be understood as beneficial to the community. While other rituals may be non-violent and have no victim, they will nonetheless keep some trace of the original event.

Conclusion

Soon after the original French publication of *Violence and the Sacred* (1972) there came out in the newspaper *Le Monde* a full page article signed by Georges-Hubert de Radkowski which claimed that Girard had proposed the first *atheist theory of religion. Things Hidden since the Foundation of the World* was yet to be written and Girard's deep commitment to Christianity at that time was not public knowledge, but it was certainly known by de Radkowski.[15] Furthermore, some have claimed that though the article was officially signed by de Radkowski, it had actually been written by Girard himself. However that may be, Girard's theory developed in *Violence and the Sacred* still remains, I believe, the only atheist, purely naturalist theory of religion.

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[15] Georges-Hubert de Radkowski (1924-1986) was a French philosopher and anthropologist of Polish origin who taught in the Institut des études urbaines de Paris. He was a friend of Girard and was also the director of the collection "A la recherche de l'infini" where Girard first published his book on Dostoevsky.

Most early historians of religions and anthropologists, like Rudolph Otto or Frazer, understood the belief in gods and the sacred as a kind of displacement of the awe of primitive men confronted with violent natural phenomena: thunder, storms, earthquakes. Or they simply thought that it was rooted in their admiration and fear of a mysterious and incomprehensible nature or in the fear of death. Religion, belief in the gods, and the sacred were thus viewed as more complex elaborations of these primitive feelings and they were destined to disappear as science progressively replaced these irrational beliefs with sound explanations. Later anthropologists were less interested in the issue and recent approaches that consider religion to be a form of cognitive mistake ultimately simply are more complex versions of this same conceptual scheme which grounds religion in a mixture of ignorance and emotions. What could be a more atheistic understanding of religion than this?

From Girard's point of view such explanations of religion fail because they give to themselves what they want to explain. They explain the fear of the gods as a transposition of the fear of natural phenomena and in that sense they explain the sacred in function of itself (of what they say it really is). However, a good scientific explanation should avoid such circularity. It should explain one thing in function of another, in function of what it is not. Because of their circularity these different explanations remain enclosed within the domain open by religious belief. Like Hobbes, they posit that the original seeds of religious beliefs are eternal (or to be found in nature) and that mankind has only elaborated on them. In consequence such explanations cannot tell us anything about these 'original seeds' or beginnings of religion. That is the limit of their claim to be atheistic.

Girard is much more radical. According to him there is no proto or pre-religious meaning or emotion out of which people evolved complex creeds and strange rituals. At the origin of religion there is *no meaning at all*. There is only violence which suddenly ends with the collective, unanimous minus one, murder of a unique victim, a blind meaningless self-regulating mechanism of violence. At the source of religion or the sacred is the fear of the recurrence of this incomprehensible event and the desire to reactivate its beneficial effects. Religious feelings and meanings are born out of rather than they give rise to rituals, prohibitions and prescriptions. That is why it is a purely atheist theory of religion, because it does not postulate that what it wants to explain in some way already exists. To the opposite mimetic theory explains the emergence of belief in the sacred out of what it is not, a blind self-regulating mechanism of violence. In *Violence and the Sacred* there is no room for any kind of original religious disposition in primitive humans. It is not out of our fear of the unknown or awe of the mystery of nature that religion and the sacred are

born, but out of a blind meaningless natural event we were born simultaneously religious and symbolic animals. Girard in *Violence and the Sacred* proposed an atheist, purely naturalist non-reductionist theory of religion and of culture. No one understood how radical his claims were, no one really understood what he was doing.

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Giuseppe Fornari
"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[1]. The work was such that it officially transformed the brilliant literary critic of *Mensonge romantique et vérité romanesque* (1961)[2] 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

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[1] 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.

[2] 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 19th and 20th 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[3]. 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.[4]

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,

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[3] R. Girard, *Des choses cachées depuis la fondation du monde. Recherches avec Jean-Michel Oughourlian et Guy Lefort*, Grasset, Paris 1978.
[4] 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.[5]

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

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[5] 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.[6]

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-

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[6] 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*)[7], 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

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[7] 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 5th 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.[8]

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:

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[8] 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*.[9]

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.[10]

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-

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[9] Ivi, p. 130 (revised); *La violence et le sacré*, cit., p. 195.
[10] *Ibid*. (revised); *La violence et le sacré*, cit., pp. 195-196.

ses of Freud's anthropological thought. It is not an accident that a po-lemic 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 cho-rus, 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 reparaît. 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*].[11]

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

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[11] Ivi, p. 203 (greatly revised); *La violence et le sacré*, cit., pp. 297-98 (in this case my inter-vention 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"[12]. 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"[13]. 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.

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[12] Ivi, p. 220 (Freud's quote made by Girard from the Standard Edition of Freud's works).
[13] 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 19th century, still clearly active in Freud's *Totem and Taboo*, with an anthropomorphic and rationalistic simplification that dates back to the theory of Euhemerus (4th-3rd 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[14], and I believe it constitutes the veritable heritage of Girard's seminal work, *Violence and the Sacred.*

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Jeremiah Alberg[*]
What the Text Omits: Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* and *Violence and the Sacred*

> To examine a text from the perspective of the surrogate
> victim
> and its attendant mechanism,
> to consider "literature" in terms of collective violence,
> is to ask oneself about what the work omits
> as much and even more than what it includes"[1].

Introduction

This paper is part of larger project that seeks to show that Kant's transcendental philosophy points toward the expelled victim as the one who confers unity on the self, the cosmos and the divinity. Kant begins the *Critique of Pure Reason* by isolating both sensuous intuition and the understanding from desire[2]. This allows for the theoretical equivalent to Rousseau's state of pure nature and gives us a standard by which to judge our knowing. But Kant is aware that this is a very partial view that simply avoids the problems associated with our knowing. The second great division of the Doctrine of Elements, the Transcendental Dialectic, deals with these problems. The "hinge" concepts upon which the work turns from the Transcendental Analytic to the Transcendental Dialectic are the "ideas" of reason. He derives these ideas from the different forms of syl-

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[1] R. Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*, Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore 1977, p. 207.
[2] All citations of the *Critique of Pure Reason* will be parenthetically included in the text, following the standard practice of giving, where possible, both the first (A) and the second (B) edition page number. In those sections that occur in only one of the editions, that edition and page number are given. For the English translation I have used (I. Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, tr. eng. di P. Guyer and A.W. Wood, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1998).

logisms: three syllogisms, the categorical, the hypothetical, and the disjunctive, yield the three ideas of the thinking subject, the world, and god.

Reason gets to these ideas because it is seeking the absolute, the totality of conditions to a given conditioned thing: a subject that is no longer a predicate, a series of conditions that is complete, a whole that includes all the parts. These ideas are of interest to the reader of *Violence and the Sacred*, because there Girard – in the context of his discussion of structuralism but the implications extend more widely – states that "we must first pause to consider the doubtful significations, those that imply both too little and too much: twins, illnesses, all forms of contaminations and contagions, inexplicable reversals of meaning, unexpected growths and shrinkages, strange excrescences and deformations, and all forms of the monstrous and the bizarre"[3]. The "ideas" of Kant always imply either too much or too little. He says: "By the idea of a necessary concept of reason, I understand one to which no congruent object can be given in the senses. Thus the pure concepts of reason we have just examined are transcendental ideas. […] Finally, they are also transcendent concepts, and exceed the bounds of all experience, in which no object adequate to the transcendental idea can ever occur" (A 327; B 382-4). We should also note that ideas reverse their meaning in the sense that they are harmful when used constitutively and beneficial when used in a regulative manner.

In this paper I will pursue one part of this larger argument – that concerning the rational idea of the self and what it reveals about the possible expulsion of the victim.

In so doing, I wish to remain as much as possible within the limits Kant sets for a transcendental investigation. Kant never states and his position would not allow him to state what has brought about our present form of consciousness. Kant is clear that what makes our experience possible is not part of our experience and therefore cannot be known. At the same time, he is exploring the necessary conditions for the possibility of this knowing and these can be established. I am going to be pointing to aspects of these necessary conditions in relation to the possibility of the idea of a self.

I argue as follows: by explicating Kant's position that knowledge of one's self is limited to being able to grasp one's self only insofar as one's 'I' is like everyone else's 'I', it becomes clear that for Kant this involves the notion of substitutability and hence a lack of differentiation. Second, I bring to the fore the fact that our lack of knowledge of ourselves is not simply a lack. That is, we are able to know *that* we do not know, and so are able to indicate it, somewhat akin to writing "Unknown Territory" on

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[3] R. Girard, *op. cit*, p. 242.

a map. Finally, borrowing freely from the research of Rolf-Peter Horst-mann, I subscribe to the view that the difference between the A and the B version of the section on the Paralogisms is rooted in Kant's deepened understanding that the self is to be understood as a spontaneous act. Putting these three points together, I am arguing that according to Kant we are able to cognize an identical spontaneous act of human beings that results in a gap in our knowledge. This is as far as the *Critique of Pure Reason* can take us. It forbids us to take the next step and to speculate that this act that creates such a gap is an act of expulsion and that what gets expelled when all humans act spontaneously together is one of their own.

Preliminaries: The Ideas of Reason and their *Ansehen*

At the beginning of his "Introduction" to the "Transcendental Dialectic" Kant informs his readers that he and they suffer from a transcendental illusion that "influences principles whose use is not ever meant for experience" (A 295; B 352). The influence of the illusion is such that it "carries us away beyond the empirical use of the categories, and holds out to us the semblance of extending the *pure understanding*" to knowledge of things in themselves (A 295; B 352). The principles that are so influenced are called "transcendent". The influence of the illusion is contagious in such way that these principles influence us. They "incite us to tear down all those boundary posts and to lay claim to a wholly new territory that recognizes no demarcations anywhere" (A 296; B 352). They demand that we overstep limits and lead to what Girard would call a crisis of the loss of distinctions or the loss of differentiation.

Looking at the way reason logically proceeds through syllogisms, Kant finds "the proper principle of reason in general (in its logical use) is to find the unconditioned for the conditioned cognitions of the understanding" (A 307; B 364). This searching is done for the sake of completing the unity of the understanding. Logically speaking this is unobjectionable.

Kant goes on to argue that for this logical maximum to become a principle for reason not merely in its logical use but in its "real" use requires that "we assume that when the conditioned is given, then so is the whole series of conditions subordinated one to the other, which is in itself unconditioned, also given (i.e., contained in the object and its connection)" (A 307-8; B 364). Together the logical principle and this assumption yield the "supreme principle of pure reason" (A 308; B 365). This principle of pure reason is synthetic in that it relates the conditioned not to its conditions but to the unconditioned and this unconditioned "if it actually occurs, is particularly to be considered according to all the determinations that distinguish it from everything conditioned" (A 308; B 365).

The critical questions these transcendent principles raise are the questions that Kant is concerned with in the "Transcendental Dialectic". The source of that dialectic is "hidden deep in human reason" (A 309; B 366). Kant worries that a "need of reason" to "bring the highest possible unity of reason to our cognition" has been misunderstood as a "transcendental principle of reason", which would entail postulating an unlimited completeness in the series of conditions in the object themselves (A 309; B 366). A need of reason would be simply a "logical prescription in the ascent to ever higher conditions to approach completeness in them and thus to bring the highest possible unity of reason into our cognition" (A 309; B 366). What compels reason to go beyond the logical prescription in the sense of mistaking it for a real prescription? We can answer: the illusion that these principles contain, but that only puts the further question: what is the source of the illusion?

Kant gives us one answer in the first section of the "Introduction" to the Transcendental Dialectic. Using the example "the illusion in the proposition: 'The world must have a beginning in time'", he holds that the cause of this illusion is that our reason contains "fundamental rules and maxims for its use, which look entirely like objective principles [*das Ansehen objektiver Grundsätze haben*], and through which it comes about that the subjective necessity of a certain connection of our concepts on behalf of the understanding is taken for an objective necessity, the determination of things in themselves" (A 297; B 353 translation modified). The important point to note here is that it is due to the *Ansehen* of the principles that they get taken as having objective necessity or as reaching to the things in themselves, instead of being properly taken as having merely subjective necessity. One might think that Kant has simply switched words, saying that the "illusion" [*Schein*] is due to their "appearance" [*Ansehen*], but "*Ansehen*" means more to Kant than simply an aspect or an appearance and provides us with an important clue to the origin of the dialectic.

The word *Ansehen* means to have authority or enjoy a reputation in the eyes of others. If we look at Kant's usage in other passages, we find that, while the word sometimes means simply "appearance" or "look" (A 757; B 784), it more often means an appearance that causes or influences something else. For instance, towards the end of the *First Critique*, Kant writes that metaphysics in its negative function prevents errors, and this "does no damage to its value, but rather gives it all the more dignity and authority [*Ansehen*] through its office as censor" (A 851; B 879). Here the negative function of metaphysics has an *Ansehen* that secures "order and unity, indeed the well-being of the scientific community" (A 851; B 879), while transcendent principles of metaphysics have an *Ansehen* that causes disorder.

A possible translation for "*Ansehen*", would also be "kudos". Benveniste has several suggestive pages on *kudos* in his *Indo-European Language and Society*, which Girard refers to in *Violence and the Sacred*. For Benveniste "the gift of *kudos* ensures the triumph of the man who receives it: in combat the holder of *kudos* is invariably victorious"[4]. Rivals know better than to compete with the man who has received *kudos*. Girard sees it as "the fascination of superior violence. […] Kudos passes to the man who strikes the hardest. […] It belongs to the man who manages to convince others, and who believes himself, that his violence is completely irresistible"[5].

The meaning of *Ansehen* as *kudos* is not as far away from its use in the *Critique of Pure Reason* as one might think. To make a claim that one's title is an objective fact is precisely the kind of claim that the *Critique of Pure Reason* is meant to substantiate or to refute, and a claim that *looks like* an objective claim but was not, could undermine the whole project.

Transcendent concepts can never be the object of experience because they exceed the bounds of all experience (A 327; B 384). *They lead us on toward something that is beyond us because they are that from which experience originates.* Kant talks about this in terms of a lack of a "congruent object" being able to be given in experience (A 327; B 383). He also speaks about it in terms of the principles "containing" the unconditioned so that "they deal with something under which all experience belongs, but that is never itself an object of experience" (A 311; B 367). According to Kant, the speculative use of reason aims for an object that is congruent to its concept. Lacking that congruent object is the same as ultimately lacking the concept and thus it is about these kind of concepts that one says, "it is *only* an idea" (A 328; B 384). The absolute whole of appearances is a "problem" for us.

Step One: Substitutability

Turning to the Paralogisms of pure reason, we are concerned with "the *rational* doctrine of the soul" (A 342; B 400). Kant makes clear that a concern with "cognition of the empirical in general" and the "the investigation of the possibility of every experience" is transcendental (A 343; B 401). Kant's problem with the supposed doctrine of the soul is that its ground is "the wholly empty representation *I*", which is merely consciousness. Kant holds that "through this I, or He, or It (the thing),

[4] E. Benveniste, J. Lallot, *Indo-European Language and Society*, Faber and Faber, London 1973, p. 348.
[5] Ivi, p. 152.

which thinks, nothing further is represented than a transcendental subject of thought = *x*, which is recognized only through the thoughts that are its predicates, and about which, in abstraction, we can never have the least concept" (A 346; B 404).

The general principle under which the paralogisms operate is that "the condition under which I think in general and which is therefore merely a property of my subject, is at the same time to be valid for everything that thinks, and that on an empirical-seeming proposition we can presume to ground an apodictic and universal judgment, namely, that everything that thinks is constituted as the claim of self-consciousness asserts of me" (A 346; B 404). Kant holds that we cannot have any representation of a thinking being through an external experience. "Thus such objects are nothing further than the transference of this consciousness of mine to other things, which can be represented as thinking beings only in this way" (A 347; B 405). This validity for everything that thinks and this transference of my consciousness to other things is the substitution that lies at the heart of the paralogisms. My consciousness is not simply mine.

We can develop this further by looking at the second paralogism, which brings us near to the kind of concerns we find in *Violence and the Sacred* because it is the most polemical of the paralogisms. Here Kant battles the "Achilles of all dialectical inferences" (A 351). It is an inference that "seems to withstand even the sharpest testing and greatest scruples of inquiry" (A 351).

The paralogism itself is:

> That thing whose action can never be regarded as the concurrence of many acting things, is simple.
> Now the soul, or the thinking I is such a thing.
> Thus, etc. (A 351)

According to Kant the "*nervous probandi*" of the argument is the claim that "that many representations have to be contained in the absolute unity of the thinking subject in order to constitute one thought" (A 352). The problem is that one cannot "prove this proposition from *concepts*" (A 352). He then goes on to show that neither is the proposition analytic and, of course, any proof based on experience would yield no necessity. So, the real question for Kant and for us is, from where or how did we get this proposition?

His answer is that we get it through a double substitution. First, we substitute our own subject for the object we want to consider (thus presuming what one wants to prove) and then we demand the subject of a thought has to be absolutely unified "because otherwise it could not be said: 'I think' (the manifold in a representation)" (A 354). The thought

can be divided up and distributed among many subjects but the subjective *I* cannot be divided or distributed, and this is what we presuppose in all thinking. But this is only possible by substituting my own consciousness to others.

What is substituted is simply "the form of apperception, on which every experience depends and which precedes it" (A354). Kant is able through his transcendental analysis to say something about that which precedes experience and out of which experience comes. Still this form of apperception "must nevertheless always be regarded [*angesehen*] only in regard to a possible cognition in general, as its merely subjective condition, which we unjustly make into a condition of the possibility of the cognition of objects" (A 354). That is, although it has the *Ansehen* of objectivity, through which we "unjustly" make it into a condition of the possibility of the cognition of objects, we must only allow it the *Ansehen* of a subjective condition. Kant argues that we do this *because* the only way we can represent this being is by "positing ourselves along with the formula of our consciousness, in the place of every other intelligent being" (A 354). At the root of this problem is this second substitution.

This is critical to my argument because it means that our form of apperception requires that we represent ourselves as the double of the every other intelligent being. My self, my grasp of subjectivity and my substantiality is only possible by admitting a substitutability of myself with everyone else. I cognize nothing of myself beyond its complete likeness to every other subject. I know myself and others only as "a Something in general (a transcendental subject), the representation of which must of course be simple, just because one determines nothing at all about it; for certainly nothing can be represented as more simple than that which is represented through the concept of a mere Something" (A 355).

Kant's conclusion is that human self-consciousness is a representation of the condition of all unity, that is, it comes before the unity itself and it itself is unconditioned. But in this it is a form – a general form which means that precisely when we get a general notion of self-consciousness we are putting ourselves in the place of the other to get a sense of ourselves. The other constitutes the self, but we see the self as self-contained. I cannot cognize as an object that which I must presuppose in order to cognize an object.

Although Kant emphasizes that I put myself in the place of everyone, the result is that it is myself which I do not know. I think I am grasping the most particular part of myself and in fact I am grasping precisely that which is completely interchangeable with everyone else. The drive behind the paralogisms is the drive for immortality, identity, integration, to be a self. But the very grasping for these things in this way ensures that all I find is a self that is identical to everyone else. While there is no

real knowledge of the self, there is knowledge that I am substitutable everyone else. On the epistemological level this is the crisis of a lack of differentiation, the crisis of distinction. It may appear that this crisis is reached without any conflict, but we need to ask what stands behind the paralogisms, what stands behind the need to have such a grasp of the self. We can only understand that need as coming from being situated in a conflictual world.

Step Two, Part One: Knowing What We Cannot Know

We used as our epigraph Girard's statement to the effect that in order to get the true perspective on a text one has to look for what has been omitted or expelled from a text. He goes to admit that the "task may seem futile", because one can argue that that an infinite number of things have been omitted from the text. Proving that something was, consciously or unconsciously, omitted is an extremely difficult task. With Kant we are in luck because he himself tells us that something has been omitted.

In the section titled "Considerations of the Paralogism of Pure Reason" Kant examines the the fundamental question, "how in a thinking subject outer intuition, namely, that of space with its filling-in of shape and motion, is possible" (A 393). Apparently it all comes down to this one question, once one has left out the "fictious" (A 393). His reply is unsurprising.

> This is question which no man can possibly answer. This gap in our knowledge can never be filled; all that can be done is to indicate it through the ascription of outer appearances to that transcendental object which is the cause of this species of representations, but of which we can have no knowledge whatsoever and of which we shall never acquire any concept. (A 393)

Kant is correct. We cannot answer the question of why we are constituted precisely the way that we are. Further, it is correct that we have no cognition nor can we form a concept of the transcendental object, which "is the cause of this species of representations". By ascribing these outer appearances to this unknown object we indicate a gap; we gesture towards it, as it might be worded today. As a gap it has a certain form, even if we cannot know its concept. Its non-appearance is a form of appearance.

Kant goes on to say that in our everyday experience we treat these appearances "as objects in themselves without troubling ourselves about the primary ground of the possibility or appearances". The only way to advance beyond the limits of our present knowledge would be by gaining a concept of the self, but that is quite impossible because the self is

a rational idea, not a concept. Nevertheless, perhaps now is the time to trouble ourselves. Not in the hope that we shall come to know this primary ground, that is quite impossible, but that non-knowing may take on a more concrete shape.

We do not wish to be granted special knowledge of the self, nor do we wish to fill the gap with idols, with paralogisms that treat our thoughts as things and hypostatises them (A 395). In this idolatry Kant finds the origins of "an imaginary science" in which both those who affirm and deny "treat their own representations as objects, and so revolve around in a perpetual circle of ambiguities and contradictions" (A 395).

Kant's concern is to warn the reader against a way of thinking that is alluring. It seems to promise "felicity" but in fact leads to a "bondage" to theories and to systems – again a form of idolatry. As we saw above, Kant spells out the causal link: "all the controversy in regard to the thinking being and its connection with the corporeal world is merely a result of filling the gap where knowledge is wholly lacking to us with paralogisms of reason" (A 395). Thus, first we have the illicit attempts to fill the gap and then the controversy, the imaginary science with its affirmers and deniers.

But here is where I wish to challenge Kant's account. According to Girard, the most fundamental shift we have to make is to see that violence precedes whatever object the violence is putatively about. Violence endows the object with value. So rather than it being first an attempt to fill some gap, followed by controversy, controversy itself is the starting point and out of the controversy emerge the various attempts to fill the gap in our knowledge.

The Paralogism allows us to say two different things about what is missing. Based on the first edition version we can say that the transcendental subject/object is trying to come to know itself, to establish its unique identity but that it can only do this at the price of making itself like everyone else. Kant is insistent on this point. The form of the self is such that it can be and is posited in the place of everyone else. For this to happen the other has to be removed from their place. Substitution means displacement. Displacement creates gaps. We deal with the second aspect of what is missing when we deal with the second edition (B) version of the paralogisms.

Step Two, Part Two: The Gap

Pure categories ground the paralogism. They, in turn, find their ground in apperception. Apperception is the synthesis of the of manifold of intuition. This general self-consciousness exists; it represents the condition of all unity. That is, it presents again that which was expelled that allowed

everything to come together around it. It presents it as, on the one hand, a unified manifold and, on the other, as a gap. How does one unify the manifold in apperception? The same way one unifies any manifold – by setting it against one thing. The synthesis of the manifold of the intuition is the primal act of judgment: An act that designates one thing as not everything else and everything else as united in not being the one thing.

We, like Kant, want to leave the gap empty; we do not want to fill it with anything, not the victim and not violence. Let it stand as a representation of expulsion. The expulsion is unconditioned in that sense that it was unanimous and absolutely final – it was death.

In this way the soul, the human comes to know everything through itself without being able to cognize itself through the categories.

Kant tells us correctly that it is illuminating that I cannot cognize as an object itself that which I must presuppose in order to cognize an object at all. If expulsion is what allows me to cognize an object then I can never cognize that expulsion as an object. All I can know is the gap. Kant was thinking that the determining Subject is that which has to be presupposed and therefore cannot be known. This is true, but the X, which is used to fill the gap and which only became X when the gap was created is equally presupposed. This also cannot be cognized as an object because we need it to cognize an object.

Kant warns us that it is seductive to forget that the X was there and to assign the unity it bestows on everything, including one's own self, as somehow already belonging to, or being a characteristic of the self. One could call it the "subreption of hypostatized consciousness (apperceptionis substantialis)" (A 402).

The one single representation, "I am", governs all the universal concepts of a thinking nature in general. This thinking nature in general says "I am" and in so doing expresses what is formal and so "proclaims itself as a universal proposition, valid for every thinking being, and which, since it is individual in all respects, brings with it the illusion of being an absolute unity of conditions of thought in general" (A 405). Again, this seems to insure my own identity and unity, when in fact, it only tells me how I am exactly the same as everyone else.

Step Three: Self as An Act

A possible objection to the position presented thus far would be that when Kant completely rewrote his treatment of the paralogisms of pure reason for the second edition of the *Critique of Pure Reason*, he dropped all references to the transcendental object. Kemp-Smith goes so far as to claim that this concept was a holdover from Kant's pre-critical thinking

that disappears after 1781. So, the building of any argument on the un-known transcendental object was precisely what Kant thought was mis-leading his readers and we would be wise in following Kant's example and dropping it. Against this one can first say that Kant is clear that his revisions did not touch on anything essential. Thus, if the evidence for my argument that the transcendental object indicates an object that is missing, leaving a gap in our knowledge that we cannot fill but can at least indicate, is taken away, other evidence and another related argument should present itself. I indeed hold that Kant's rewriting, while remov-ing some of the evidence I have used, provides us with other compelling evidence for a complementary interpretation. In fact, the B-version fills in an element missing in the first edition. I follow Rolf-Peter Horstmann's research on the shift in the presentation from the first to the second edi-tion, because I think that he gets it exactly right, although I draw conclu-sions that he might not find welcome[6].

Horstmann begins by noting that after reading the first edition treat-ment of Kant's critique of rational psychology, the reader desires more precision concerning the unknowable substrate of the I-representation. We desire to know more about the shape of the gap. Horstmann notes that this is not at all what one finds in the second edition. Rather than making anything more precise, Kant simply argues against rational psy-chology on a totally different basis. The thesis concerning the "unknow-able substrate of the I-representation is simply given up and in its place is the clearly expressed contention that the I cannot be thought of as thing, but must be thought of as an activity, as act"[7].

Horstmann summarizes Kant's revised argument in three points. 1) All cognition of objects is bound to the conditions under which something can become an object for us – without a representation of an object then in a trivial manner one must say there is no cognition of an object; 2) in the case of the I-representation none of the necessary conditions are giv-en which must be fulfilled in order to interpret this representation as the representation of an object; 3) from 1) and 2) it follows that there can be no cognition that relates to the I-representation as its object, because that to which the I-representation may relate itself to cannot be interpreted as an object[8]. Horstmann then quotes Kant:

> I do not cognize any object merely by the fact that I think, but rather
> I can cognize any object only by determining a given intuition with regard

[6] R. Horstmann, *Baustein kritischer Theorie: Arbeiten zu Kant*, Phil Verlaggesellschaft, Bodenheim bei Mainz 1977, pp. 79-107.
[7] Ivi, p. 98.
[8] Cfr., ivi, p. 99.

to the unity of consciousness, in which all thinking consists. Thus I cognize myself not by being conscious of myself as thinking, but only if I am conscious to myself of the intuition of myself as determined in regard to the function of thought. All *modi* of self-consciousness in thinking are therefore not yet themselves concepts of the understanding of objects (categories), but mere functions, which provide thought with no object at all, and hence also do not present my self as an object to be cognized. It is not the consciousness of the determining self, but only that of the determinable self, i.e. of my inner intuition … that is the object (B 406-7).[9]

This position gets repeated and emphasized throughout the rewritten text. As Horstmann states, the thesis that grounds the critique of rational psychology in the second edition of the *Critique of Pure Reason* is clearly that the I cannot be represented in any thinkable sense as an object[10].

For Horstmann Kant's change in his thesis is due to a fully changed way of looking at the problem of the assumptions of rational psychology. Horstmann accepts the earlier research of L. Gabe, which made the point that the second edition is concerned with a critique of method of the science, whereas the first edition had been more concerned with a critique of the system.[11] Horstmann goes further in explicating the motivation of the move from system critique to methodological critique. Namely, that it is enough to refute rational psychology's claim to knowledge by showing that any possible method of gaining cognition, be it analytic or synthesis, is unsuitable to make anything out about the I.

If the I cannot be represented as an object, then what remains to be said about it? This leads to the second part of the thesis of the B-edition: the I must be thought of as something that is to be described as an activity, as an act. Horstmann admits that Kant does not work this out in any detail. One can provide a partial explanation for this in that Kant is deeply invested in the transcendental deduction that showed that the representation of the 'I think' as referring to pure apperception had to be conceived as an "act of spontaneity" (B 132). Secondly, Kant is here concerned with deconstructing rational psychology, not constructing a theory of the I. The direction clearly moves from an object-related interpretation to an act-related constitution of the I-representation. Kant's understanding of the representation of the I in the footnote to B 422 is such that an act of thought analytically implies that it realizes itself not as that which could be thought of as something, "as an (objective) *is*, but as that which *occurs* in thinking"[12].

[9] Quoted by Horstmann, ivi, pp. 99-100.
[10] Cfr. ivi, p. 100.
[11] Cfr. ivi, p. 102
[12] Ivi, p. 105.

For our purposes this can only serve to strengthen the position outlined above that the I comes to itself in an act that it shares with all other I's. Kant does not and cannot tell us the nature of this act, but he does tell us that it leaves the "gap" of not being able to answer the question why I am constituted the way I am. This act is made in a simultaneous and unanimous way such that it keeps destroying itself in constituting itself, because it denies what it affirms: we are all one, except the one who has been expelled.

Conclusion

> We are left with no model or guide; we are engaged in a cultural activity that remains undefined, and we can have recourse to no known critical discipline. What we are about to do is as novel to tragedy or literary criticism as it is to psychology or ethnology.[13]

This quote could have also served as the epigraph of this paper. After fifty years are we any closer to having developed a vocabulary that grasps what we are doing? I am willing to admit some progress, but I think one of the obstacles to developing clear conception of "what we are about to do" in *Violence and the Sacred* comes out from some basic misunderstandings among its most ardent practitioners. Girard himself is not totally blameless in this controversy either.

I am referring to an ongoing discussion as to the status of mimetic theory as either a scientific hypothesis or a theological project, or at least a project that cannot get started without explicit acknowledgment of its roots in faith. While I do not want to deny its deep relationship with Christian faith, I do think that there is a moment in it, in which the project itself asserts its proper independence from faith. One does not need to be a Christian to read, to understand, and to use *Violence and the Sacred*. My experience in Japan has given me ample personal evidence for this fact.

Girard's own comments on this are sometimes less than helpful in that they imply that it was simply external circumstances that prevented him from including his views on Christianity in the work when it was published. Even if that is historically correct, Girard would not have published *Violence and the Sacred* in its present form, if it represented a fundamental distortion of his thought. He allowed it to be published as it is because there is in orthodox Christianity not only space for, but even the requirement that human reason distinguish what has been given to it through supernatural revelation and strive to use its own resources, such as they are, to explore the truth.

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[13] R. Girard, *op. cit*, p. 74.

Girard showed in this part of his project that in a vast range of human thought there is a missing piece and that when that piece is found, it "fits" in so many varied contexts and constellations, that one is filled with the same enthusiasm that filled Girard as he made his discovery.

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*Stéphane Vinolo**
Le statut du réalisme dans La violence et le sacré *de René Girard*

"Il faut résister à la tentation d'interpréter […]" [1].

Introduction

Dans le champ de la philosophie, le vingtième siècle fut en grande partie celui de la phénoménologie et de la philosophie analytique; le vingt et unième, quant à lui, est celui des réalismes. Nous sommes les témoins d'une véritable "ruée vers le réel" [2]. Certes, elle prend des formes différentes, et nous ne comptons plus les diverses modalités de réalismes qui prétendent, par différents chemins, atteindre quelque chose se donnant hors de la corrélation avec le langage ou avec la conscience: un "grand dehors" qui ne se limite plus au simple "dehors claustral" [3] des phénomènes constitués "pour" et "par" une conscience. Que nous parlions du réalisme ordinaire de Stanley Cavell, du réalisme contextualiste pragmatique de Jocelyn Benoist, du réalisme phénoménologique de Claude Romano ou du réalisme spéculatif de Quentin Meillassoux, de nombreux penseurs contemporains souhaitent être réalistes. À tel point que nous pouvons parler d'une véritable "constellation conceptuelle" [4] réaliste.

Toutefois, le réalisme n'était pas absent du vingtième siècle. Nous en trouvions déjà trace chez Jean-Paul Sartre – dont les relations mimétiques avec René Girard sont riches de sens [5] –, qui inscrivit sa phénomé-

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[1] R. Girard, *La violence et le sacré*, in *De la violence à la divinité*, Grasset, Paris 2007, p. 347.
[2] I. Thomas-Fogiel, *La ruée vers le réel*, in E. Alloa, É. During (a cura di), *Choses en soi. Métaphysique du réalisme*, PUF, Paris 2018, p. 27.
[3] Q. Meillassoux, *Après la finitude. Essai sur la nécessité de la contingence*, Seuil, Paris 2006, p. 21.
[4] I. Thomas-Fogiel, *op. cit.*, p. 27
[5] S. Vinolo, *Critique de la raison mimétique: Girard lecteur de Sartre*, in C. Ramond (a cura di), *René Girard. La théorie mimétique de l'apprentissage à l'apocalypse*, PUF, Paris 2010, pp. 59-104.

nologie dans un néoréalisme absolu[6]. Mais ce fut aussi le cas chez René Girard qui porta le réalisme au cœur de la théorie mimétique. Cela est particulièrement saillant dans son premier livre de 1961 – *Mensonge romantique et vérité romanesque* –, dans lequel il faisait l'éloge d'un certain réalisme[7] contre toutes les formes esthétiques qui ont occulté le caractère relationnel des flux du désir. Mais nous retrouvons aussi et surtout ce réalisme dans *La violence et le sacré*, puisque Girard se heurte sans cesse au manque de réalisme des auteurs contre lesquels il avance sa thèse. Là où ceux-ci, que ce soit Freud, Lévi-Strauss ou Derrida, ont symbolisé la violence et l'ont fait jouer au niveau des signifiants, Girard prétend retrouver derrière les textes "quelque chose de réel"[8]. Il y aurait donc, chez Girard, dès 1972, un réalisme ontologique qui trouve, derrière les textes et les rituels, un événement anthropologique réel qui ne dépend pas des différentes interprétations que nous pouvons en donner. Les représentations textuelles ou rituelles font toujours déjà référence à un non-représenté ou à un non-symbolique qui leur est extérieur.

Mais ce réalisme ontologique se couple d'une difficulté quant à l'herméneutique qui l'accompagne, ce qui questionne à la fois la possibilité d'accéder au réel tout comme sa réalité même. Encore que l'événement vers lequel font signe les textes et les rituels soit réel, ceux-ci ne doivent pas être interprétés de façon naïve parce qu'ils ne se contentent pas de le représenter; ses traces doivent être révélées selon la logique du palimpseste. Or, la difficulté du réalisme girardien est que ce déplacement n'est pas dû à une mauvaise intention des auteurs mais à l'essence même de l'événement réel. Les textes non seulement cachent le réel mais se doivent en plus de le faire afin qu'il puisse jouer son rôle culturel: "Les traces de la violence collective peuvent et doivent s'effacer"[9]. Une révélation immédiate du réel le rendrait inopérant parce que sa structure même est de demeurer caché. Le réalisme girardien présente donc un paradoxe: comment voir le caractère réel de quelque chose dont la structure même est d'être cachée, comment révéler un réel dont la mise dans la lumière le détruirait en tant que tel?

Afin de mettre au jour ce paradoxe, nous analyserons d'abord le réalisme ontologique de l'événement fondateur. Contre le symbolisme et le

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[6] "[…] j'ai écrit un peu sur la métaphysique je crois vraiment que c'est assez bien, ce que je fais. Je retrouve le dogmatisme en passant par la phénoménologie, je garde tout Husserl, l'être-dans-le-monde et pourtant j'arrive à un néoréalisme absolu (où j'intègre la Gestalt-théorie)". J-P. Sartre, *Lettre à Simone de Beauvoir du 26 janvier 1640*, in *Lettres au Castor et à quelques autres, 1940-1963*, Gallimard, Paris 1983, p. 56.

[7] "Le romancier n'est pas un réaliste de l'objet mais il est un réaliste du désir". R. Girard, *Mensonge romantique et vérité romanesque*, in *De la violence à la divinité*, cit., p. 97.

[8] Id., *La violence et le sacré*, cit., p. 341.

[9] Ivi, p. 399.

formalisme, il y a un réel derrière les textes. Puis, nous montrerons que ce réel a échappé à des auteurs qui avaient tous les instruments pour le voir, raison pour laquelle le réalisme ontologique girardien se construit contre Derrida, Freud et Lévi-Strauss. Enfin, nous analyserons les méthodes d'interprétation qui permettent à Girard de mettre au jour l'événement réel et toute la logique paradoxale de la preuve de l'existence de quelque chose dont l'essence même est celle de ne pas se montrer.

Le signe hors-texte

Le réalisme girardien apparaît dès la deuxième page de *La violence et le sacré*. Le chapitre premier reproche aux auteurs de donner des lectures excessivement symboliques du sacrifice, ce qui leur permet de trouver en lui tout ce qu'eux-mêmes ont commencé par y mettre: "Une fois qu'on a décidé de faire du sacrifice une institution 'essentiellement', sinon même 'purement' symbolique, on peut dire à peu près n'importe quoi"[10]. Le réalisme est donc l'une des thèses les plus anciennes de Girard puisqu'elle se donne comme réponse à tous ceux qui ont essayé de voir dans la violence du sacrifice quelque chose de symbolique. D'ailleurs, en 2003, Régis Debray reprochait encore à Girard son excès de réalisme et son manque de sensibilité au caractère symbolique de la violence sacrificielle. Trente ans après la publication de *La violence et le sacré*, il reprochait à Girard de ne pas voir que, loin d'être un processus de gestion de la violence intestine des communautés, le sacrifice est avant tout un processus cosmologique visant à "[…] alimenter le soleil en énergie par des flots de sang humain, sans quoi il s'arrêterait, le cosmos étant à tout instant menacé d'exténuation"[11]. Le réalisme girardien est donc un des points les plus contestés de la théorie mimétique.

Le caractère symbolique du sacrifice dans nombre de ses interprétations est compréhensible puisque celui-ci est toujours apparu comme quelque chose présentant deux caractéristiques non seulement différentes, mais en plus contraires[12]: "Il est criminel de tuer la victime… mais la victime ne serait pas sacrée si on ne la tuait pas"[13]. Or, pour refléter ce double sens, les anthropologues l'ont pensé à l'aune du concept d'"am-

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[10] Ivi, p. 298.
[11] R. Debray, *Le Feu sacré. Fonctions du religieux*, Gallimard, Paris 2005, p. 442.
[12] "Dans de nombreux rituels, le sacrifice se présente de deux façons opposées, tantôt comme une 'chose très sainte' dont on ne saurait s'abstenir sans négligence grave, tantôt au contraire comme une espèce de crime qu'on ne saurait commettre sans s'exposer à des risques également très graves". R. Girard, *La violence et le sacré*, cit., p. 297.
[13] *Ibid*.

bivalence"[14], raison pour laquelle ils l'ont porté du côté du symbolique puisqu'il existe un lien ténu entre l'ambivalence et le symbolique. Que les signes puissent être ambivalents, voilà qui est compréhensible puisqu'ils se donnent pour autre chose qu'eux-mêmes, comme les lieu-tenant linguistiques de certaines choses; en revanche, il serait difficile de penser que des choses en tant que telles puissent l'être. L'ambivalence renvoie toujours au champ sémantique du sens et de la signification, et donc au langage, à l'interprétation marquée dans le *valere* de l'ambivalence.

Pour arracher l'ambivalence au symbolique et la placer au cœur d'un événement réel, Girard a opéré deux sauts interprétatifs. D'abord, il a trouvé une fonction réelle à la violence sacrificielle, qui ne se limite pas à un jeu de langage[15]. Deuxièmement, il a montré comment un événement réel pouvait se faire le vecteur d'une ambivalence, d'un double sens et d'une double valoration, et donc comment la logique du lieu-tenant ou du "valoir pour autre chose que soi" ne se limitait pas à une logique linguistique mais s'incarnait hors du champ du symbolique.

Contre ceux qui souhaitent mettre en évidence la fonction symbolique de la violence sacrificielle, Girard montre que la fonction symbolique ne peut être interprétée en tant que symbolique qu'à la seule condition qu'elle puisse avoir une efficacité réelle. Certes, les hommes se trompent quant à l'interprétation théologique et symbolique du sacrifice, mais ils persistent dans leur erreur parce que, dans l'ombre, un mécanisme réel se met en place sur lequel les interprétations symboliques ne font que se greffer[16]. Le sacrifice offert aux dieux est, de fait, efficace, parce que le désordre social qu'il apaise troublait réellement la communauté et empêchait son développement. Certes, le sacrifice ne fait pas pleuvoir, mais il ramène une certaine paix qui favorise le travail des champs: "Quand les hommes ne s'entendent plus entre eux, le soleil brille et la pluie tombe comme à l'accoutumée, c'est bien vrai, mais les champs sont moins bien cultivés, et les récoltes s'en ressentent"[17]. Sans cette efficacité sociale réelle quoique méconnue par ceux qui le pratiquent, le sacrifice ne se serait pas maintenu dans l'histoire aussi longtemps. C'est cette "fonction sociale" que Girard désigne comme "réelle"[18].

Cela permet de comprendre le deuxième point mis en place par Girard afin de penser un réalisme du sacrifice. Il peut fonctionner comme quelque chose d'ambivalent, comme un signe, parce que sa violence

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[14] *Ibid.*
[15] Nous ne revenons pas ici sur le fait que le symbolique a bien entendu un impact réel sur le monde, nous nous limitons dans ce premier moment à penser le réalisme de Girard en tant que "hors symbolique".
[16] "L'élément proprement mythologique a un caractère superflu, surajouté". Ivi, p. 347.
[17] Ivi, p. 306.
[18] "Le sacrifice, ici, a une fonction réelle". Ivi, p. 305.

met fin à une autre violence. C'est une violence de plus, et dans son caractère supplémentaire, elle met fin à la violence: "Le sacrifice n'est qu'une violence de plus, une violence qui s'ajoute à d'autres violences, mais c'est la dernière violence, c'est le dernier mot de la violence"[19]. Ce faisant, il tient lieu d'une violence tout en étant différent de la violence à laquelle il met fin. Nous retrouvons là la logique derridienne du supplément dans son lien avec le signe puisque le supplément est à la fois ce qui s'ajoute à quelque chose mais aussi ce qui se substitue à lui: tout supplément est à la fois un suppléant[20]. Si la violence sacrificielle est un supplément dans ce double sens du terme, elle peut devenir un lieu-tenant: "[…] le supplément supplée. Il ne s'ajoute que pour remplacer. Il intervient ou s'insinue *à-la-place-de*; s'il comble, c'est comme on comble un vide. […] le supplément est un adjoint, une instance subalterne qui *tient-lieu*"[21]. Girard peut donc dépasser la logique des interprétations symboliques parce qu'il trouve, dans le réel, un objet – la violence – qui, fonctionnant selon la logique du signe, peut porter l'ambivalence[22] au cœur même du réel.

Ce caractère ambivalent d'un élément réel tisse une relation complexe entre Girard et Derrida[23]. Dès 1972, Girard reconnut à Derrida d'avoir parfaitement perçu, dans *La pharmacie de Platon*, que le *pharmakon* occupait dans la philosophie de Platon, le lieu même de l'ambivalence: à la fois poison et remède. D'ailleurs, la quasi-totalité de la philosophie de Derrida fonctionne selon cette logique de l'ambivalence[24], de l'indécidabilité, et de l'impossibilité de tracer des frontières claires et distinctes comme souhaiterait le faire Platon dans sa conception du philosophe en tant que boucher[25]. Derrida a donc vu que se jouait dans le *pharmakon* le geste même de la déconstruction. Il a même pu montrer que le seul mot du champ sémantique du *pharmakon* occulté par les textes de Platon est le *pharmakos*, c'est-à-dire l'incarnation réelle de la logique du *pharmakon* dans un individu. Or, cela n'est pas un hasard puisque ce n'est que parce que cette logique demeure cachée qu'elle peut être efficace.

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[19] Ivi, p. 732.
[20] "Car le concept de supplément, […], abrite en lui deux significations dont la cohabitation est aussi étrange que nécessaire". J. Derrida, *De la grammatologie*, Éditions de minuit, Paris 1967, p. 208.
[21] *Ibid.*
[22] Nous retrouvons là le double sens du verbe contenir dont avec lequel joue Jean-Pierre Dupuy: "L'ordre social contient la panique au sens où il en prévient le déclenchement, mais aussi au sens où la panique est en lui". J-P. Dupuy, *La panique*, Les Empêcheurs de penser en rond, Paris 2003, p. 10.
[23] S. Vinolo, *René Girard: du mimétisme à l'hominisation. La "violence différante"*, L'Harmattan, Paris 2005, pp. 188-206.
[24] C. Ramond, *Derrida. Une philosophie de l'écriture*, Ellipses, Paris 2018.
[25] Platon, *Phèdre*, in *Œuvres complètes*, Flammarion, Paris 2008, 265e, p. 1282.

Nous comprenons donc l'opposition réaliste de Girard à Derrida. Elle tient dans le problème même de l'émergence du signe. Là où Derrida pense la logique du signe afin de l'appliquer, dans un deuxième moment, à des choses, Girard affirme que la logique de l'ambivalence propre au signe précède l'invention du langage. Nous la trouvons dans la violence du sacrifice en tant qu'elle tient lieu de la violence originaire. Derrida a donc raison. Il faut, afin de penser la logique du signe, une différence originaire qui se donne comme la matrice de toutes les oppositions[26]. Néanmoins, là où l'origine de cette ambivalence ou de ce "tenir lieu de" est purement textuelle chez Derrida, elle trouve un ancrage dans un événement réel chez Girard. Parce que la violence est, dans le processus du bouc émissaire, à la fois le problème et la solution, elle peut porter la logique du signe. Le premier lieu-tenant qui fonde la logique du signe est donc celui du bouc émissaire qui se répète dans la logique sacrificielle: chez Girard, le *pharmakos* précède et permet le *pharmakon*, il en est le signifiant transcendantal et réel[27].

Nous trouvons donc chez Girard un véritable réalisme du sacré en ce que le sacré marque à la fois une double différence (entre le sacré et le profane, et entre le bénéfique et le maléfique au cœur même du sacré), mais aussi une coexistence de ces différences dans un seul et même être. C'est là la logique de l'ambivalence des signes qui fait du sacré l'archi-signe au double sens du signe premier mais aussi de la mise en évidence de la structure paradigmatique du signe. Or, c'est bien dans un événement réel que Girard trouve cette logique de la signification.

L'absence de réalisme de Freud et de Lévi-Strauss

Le problème de la genèse de la pensée symbolique est au cœur de la pensée de Lévi-Strauss, et nous retrouvons tout naturellement dans les analyses du structuralisme que propose Girard, cette prégnance du réalisme en opposition à une vision trop logique des signes: "Lévi-Strauss conçoit toujours la production du sens comme un problème purement logique, une médiation symbolique"[28]. Les analyses des mythes que pro-

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[26] "Pour que ces valeurs contraires (bien/mal, vrai/faux, essence/apparence, dedans/dehors, etc.) puissent s'opposer, il faut que chacun des termes soit simplement extérieur à l'autre, c'est-à-dire que l'une des oppositions (dedans/dehors) soit déjà accréditée comme la matrice de toute opposition possible. Il faut que l'un des éléments du système (ou de la série) vaille aussi comme possibilité générale de la systématicité ou de la sérialité". J. Derrida, *La pharmacie de Platon*, in *La dissémination*, Seuil, Paris 1972, p. 128.
[27] R. Girard, *Des choses cachées depuis la fondation du monde*, in *De la violence à la divinité*, cit., p. 818.
[28] Id., *La violence et le sacré*, cit., p. 596.

pose Lévi-Strauss font état de contradictions qui ressemblent "[…] à celles qu'ont découvertes les premiers philosophes qui se sont intéressés au langage […]"[29]. Le mythe sert donc à faire coexister ces contraires dans une seule entité et permet le surgissement de la pensée symbolique par une mise en scène ou une incarnation de la fonction symbolique[30].

Afin que la pensée symbolique puisse commencer à jouer, les éléments dont elle est grosse doivent pouvoir bouger puisqu'ils ne signifient que par rapport à une certaine place qu'ils occupent dans la totalité[31]. La pensée symbolique telle que la pense le structuralisme ne fonctionne que par la mise en place d'une case vide[32] qui instaure du jeu entre les éléments, jeu dont l'indécidabilité permet la signification. Or, c'est sur cette case vide que nous retrouvons le réalisme de Girard puisqu'il s'agit de savoir si la création de cet espace vide est le fruit d'une élimination symbolique ou réelle.

Dans *Des choses cachées depuis la fondation du monde*, Girard donne un exemple du symbolisme excessif de la case vide. Dans *Le Totémisme aujourd'hui*, Lévi-Strauss analyse et rapproche deux mythes provenant de deux sociétés éloignées: les Indiens Ojibwa et les Tikopia[33]. Ces deux mythes mettent en place la "pensée sauvage" en ouvrant l'espace à un système de significations, surgissant à partir de deux invariants. D'abord, chacun des mythes fait montre d'une "[…] opposition entre une conduite individuelle et une conduite collective […]"[34]. Deuxièmement, ces deux conduites ne sont pas axiologiquement équivalentes: "[…] la première [est] qualifiée négativement, et la seconde positivement, par rapport au totémisme"[35]. Dans les deux mythes, les conduites collectives créent les totems en répondant à deux conduites individuelles malfaisantes (un vol et un meurtre). Or, le caractère suppressif de l'action collective permet l'introduction d'une case vide afin que le système de significations se mette en place:

> Dans les deux cas, le totémisme, en tant que système, est introduit comme *ce qui reste* d'une totalité appauvrie, ce qui peut être une façon d'exprimer que les termes du système ne valent que s'ils sont *écartés* les uns des autres, puisqu'ils demeurent seuls pour meubler un champ sémantique primitivement mieux rempli, et où la discontinuité s'est introduite.[36]

[29] C. Lévi-Strauss, *La structure des mythes*, in *Anthropologie structurale*, Plon, Paris 1958, p. 239.
[30] Ivi, pp. 260-261.
[31] "Si les mythes ont un sens, celui-ci ne peut tenir aux éléments isolés qui entrent dans leur composition, mais à la manière dont ces éléments se trouvent combinés". Ivi, p. 240.
[32] G. Deleuze, *À quoi reconnaît-on le structuralisme?*, in *L'île déserte et autres textes. Textes et entretiens 1953-1974*, Les Éditions de Minuit, Paris 2002, pp. 238-269.
[33] C. Lévi-Strauss, *Le Totémisme aujourd'hui*, in *Œuvres*, Gallimard, Paris 2008, pp. 466-479.
[34] Ivi, p. 473.
[35] *Ibid.*
[36] *Ibid.* Lévi-Strauss souligne dans les deux cas.

Le totémisme se définit donc comme "la totalité moins un", ou la totalité dans laquelle est introduite une case vide qui permet aux éléments de jouer entre eux et de signifier: "[…] la seule réalité du système consiste dans un réseau d'écarts différentiels entre des termes posés comme discontinus"[37].

Or, cette naissance de la pensée symbolique pose un problème de réalisme. Pour Girard, l'interprétation structuraliste ne résout pas trois problèmes qu'une interprétation réaliste explique. D'abord, si le mythe visait à mettre en place l'élimination logique d'un de ses éléments, pourquoi cette élimination prendrait-elle systématiquement la forme spécifique d'un meurtre? Laïos aurait laissé la même case vide en mourant de vieillesse ou de maladie qu'en étant tué de la main d'Œdipe. Logiquement ou symboliquement, le meurtre n'est pas plus créateur d'espace que ne le sont le suicide ou l'accident. Deuxièmement, le structuralisme ne peut pas expliquer pourquoi l'élément éliminé fait l'objet d'accusations de la part de la communauté? Logiquement, la mise à mort de n'importe quel habitant de Thèbes aurait laissé une case vide. Pourquoi donc expulser quelqu'un qui est d'abord accusé de crimes, et de crimes mettant en cause les structures différenciatrices qui fondent les sociétés humaines? L'élément éliminé n'est jamais socialement neutre, alors que selon une logique symbolique, il pourrait l'être[38]. Enfin, le statut d'intériorité ou d'extériorité de l'élément éliminé eu égard à la communauté, sa brouille des frontières, pose problème. En un sens, il appartient à la totalité, en un autre sens, il lui est extérieur. Œdipe, originaire de Thèbes y revient en tant qu'étranger.

Il faut donc distinguer deux points de vue sur les mythes: le point de vue de l'observateur externe qui voit, comme Lévi-Strauss, les conséquences des actions des individus, et le point de vue des acteurs du mythe qui obéissent à une tout autre logique. Or, seul le point de vue interne, girardien et réaliste, permet de comprendre le moteur de l'action. Pourquoi la communauté accuse-t-elle la victime de certains crimes? Pourquoi les victimes portent-elles des signes particuliers? Pourquoi sont-elles intérieures et extérieures à la communauté? Finalement, pourquoi sont-elles éliminées de façon violente? Le réalisme girardien explique le moteur de l'action du point de vue des intentions des acteurs du mythe, là où le symbolique structuraliste met au jour les conséquences bénéfiques et non-intentionnelles de ces actions réelles[39].

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[37] Id., *La pensée sauvage*, in *Œuvres*, Gallimard, Paris 2008, p. 797.
[38] "L'action 'négativement qualifiée' consiste en fait en une prétendue menace ou un prétendu crime que le meurtre collectif est destiné à écarter ou à punir". Id., *Le Totémisme aujourd'hui*, cit., p. 38.
[39] S. Vinolo, *Penser la foule: Freud, Sartre, Negri, Girard. La transparence est l'obstacle*, II, L'Harmattan, Paris 2018.

Lévi-Strauss pense la différence[40] mais, faute de réalisme, il ne peut penser le processus morphogénétique qui la met en place.

Ce même problème se retrouve dans l'anthropologie psychanalytique. Comme pour Lévi-Strauss, Girard commence par lui reconnaître un mérite fondamental: "Le meurtre collectif, lui, appartient vraiment à Freud"[41]. Or, ce meurtre vise à mettre en place les différences structurantes des sociétés humaines, tout particulièrement par l'interdit de l'inceste. Pourtant, ce meurtre collectif, si important dans la logique de la théorie mimétique, ne protège pas Freud des critiques girardiennes: "Le meurtre et bien là mais il ne sert à rien, tout au moins sur le plan où l'on suppose qu'il doit servir"[42]. Freud commence par l'hypothèse de la horde darwinienne[43]. Au commencement, les hommes vivaient dans des groupes dirigés par un mâle se réservant la jouissance des femelles et en interdisant l'accès aux fils[44]. Selon Darwin, le mâle aurait expulsé les fils de la horde, permettant que chacun puisse recréer une horde de son côté, favorisant l'exogamie: "Chacun de ces évincés pouvait fonder une horde semblable, dans laquelle avait cours le même interdit du commerce sexué […]"[45]. Freud accepte le point de départ de Darwin mais rejette ses conclusions. Entre la horde et l'exogamie, il manque le meurtre collectif: "Un jour, les frères expulsés se groupèrent, abattirent et consommèrent le père et mirent un terme à la horde paternelle"[46]. Néanmoins, cette mise à mort ne résolut pas le problème et ne fit que le déplacer. Une fois le père disparu, les frères entrèrent en lutte les uns contre les autres pour la possession des femmes: "S'il est vrai que les frères s'étaient ligués pour terrasser le père, chacun était donc le rival de l'autre auprès des femmes"[47]. D'où la nécessité, à cause de cette nouvelle

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[40] "Si je parle de ces livres comme des œuvres d'art, ce n'est pas pour en déprécier le contenu, bien entendu. Leur auteur [Lévi-Strauss] m'a enseigné à penser en termes de *différence*, en un sens qui s'est beaucoup répandu depuis mais qui est d'abord le sien". R. Girard, *Celui par qui le scandale arrive. Entretiens avec Maria Stella Barberi*, Desclée de Brouwer, Paris 2001, p. 156.

[41] Id., *La violence et le sacré*, cit., p. 531.

[42] Ivi, pp. 530-531.

[43] "Cette tentative se rattache à une hypothèse de Ch. Darwin sur l'état social originaire de l'être humain". S. Freud, *Totem et tabou*, in *Œuvres complètes, XI, 1911-1913*, PUF, Paris 1998, p. 341. Les études darwiniennes ont déjà montré que "[…] la thèse freudienne n'est pas 'darwinienne'" (P. Tort, *Théorie du sacrifice. Sélection naturelle et naissance de la morale*, Belin, Paris 2017, p. 206), en ce que Freud aurait dû prendre l'exemple des chimpanzés plutôt que des gorilles, mais cela ne change rien aux objections girardiennes.

[44] "Darwin concluait des habitudes de vie des singes supérieurs que l'être humain lui aussi avait vécu en assez petites hordes, à l'intérieur desquelles la jalousie du mâle le plus vieux et le plus fort empêchait la promiscuité sexuelle". S. Freud, *Totem et tabou*, cit., p. 341.

[45] Ivi, p. 342.

[46] Ivi, pp. 359-360.

[47] Ivi, p. 363.

rivalité horizontale faisant suite à la rivalité verticale avec le père, d'établir de nouvelles règles: "[…] il ne resta plus aux frères, s'ils voulaient vivre ensemble, qu'à ériger – peut-être après avoir surmonté de graves incidents – l'interdit de l'inceste par lequel ils renonçaient tous à la fois aux femmes désirées par eux, à cause desquelles ils avaient pourtant éliminé le père en premier lieu"[48].

Dans un premier temps, Girard adresse à Freud un reproche que nous trouvons déjà chez Lévi-Strauss[49]: "Freud se donne à l'avance tout ce dont le livre a pour objet de rendre compte"[50]. Il y a chez Freud un problème quant au surgissement de la différence puisque la prohibition de l'inceste était déjà imposée dans la horde originaire. Certes, Freud fait passer les hommes d'un interdit physique imposé par la force du père à un interdit culturel qu'est celui de l'inceste et qui pèse psychologiquement sur les individus, mais l'interdiction de l'accès aux femmes est bien donnée dès les prémisses du raisonnement.

Deuxièmement, il y a chez Freud deux différences culturelles posées avant que le processus de différenciation culturelle ne se mette en place. D'un côté, la signification paternelle. Pourquoi les fils ont-ils identifié le mâle leur bloquant l'accès aux femmes en tant que "père"? Parce que le désir est avant tout un désir objectal de la mère. Les femelles de la horde ne sont pas quelconques, ce sont des mères, ce qui explique que le mâle sur le chemin des fils soit un père. C'est un désir autonome de la mère[51] qui fait du père un rival, avant même les relations mimétiques d'identification avec celui-ci. Or, cette signification rend irréaliste la thèse freudienne puisque la différence existe avant la différence:

> L'obstacle majeur, c'est avant tout la signification paternelle qui vient contaminer la découverte essentielle, et qui transforme le meurtre collectif en parricide, fournissant ainsi aux adversaires psychanalytiques et autres l'argument qui permet de discréditer la thèse.[52]

Il y a là une signification, et donc une différence, qui ne provient pas du surgissement de la Culture, ce qui l'annule en tant que processus

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[48] *Ibid*.
[49] "On a dit et redit ce qui rend Totem et tabou irrecevable, comme interprétation de la prohibition de l'inceste et de ses origines: gratuité de l'hypothèse des mâles et du meurtre primitif, cercle vicieux qui fait naître l'état social de démarches qui le supposent". C. Lévi-Strauss, *Les structures élémentaires de la parenté*, EHESS, Paris 1949, p. 563.
[50] R. Girard, *La violence et le sacré*, cit., p. 530.
[51] "Simultanément à cette identification avec le père, peut-être même antérieurement à elle, le garçon a commencé à effectuer un véritable investissement d'objet de la mère […]". S. Freud, *Psychologie des masses et analyse du moi*, in *Œuvres complètes, XVI, 1921-1923*, PUF, Paris 1991, p. 43.
[52] R. Girard, *La violence et le sacré*, cit., pp. 551-552.

différenciant et culturalisant[53]. De façon irréaliste, la signification existe avant le processus signifiant.

La deuxième différence est celle des frères. Leur reconnaissance entre eux provient d'une différence avec des non-frères. Ce n'est donc pas la violence qui les unit et les relie entre eux, mais c'est parce qu'ils sont déjà frères qu'ils se trouvent engagés dans le même combat. Ainsi, le meurtre n'est pas différenciant puisque ce sont des individus déjà différenciés qui se lancent dans un meurtre collectif. L'homicide est immédiatement signifié comme parricide parce que les frères sont toujours déjà des frères, avant même le meurtre collectif.

Ces deux différences font donc obstacle au surgissement du système de différenciation par le meurtre collectif. Le meurtre est bien là mais, comme le signale Girard, culturellement et du point de vue du surgissement du système de significations, il ne sert à rien. Parce qu'il demeure enfermé dans une conception objectale du désir qui le pense comme désir autonome d'une personne originairement différenciée en tant que "mère", Freud ne se donne pas les moyens de remonter au moment lors duquel le système de signification et de différenciation n'existait pas. Au contraire, en remontant à un stade pré-culturel de l'humanité, Girard peut montrer comment toutes les significations proviennent d'un meurtre réel originaire[54]. L'ordre culturel, en tant que système de différences, provient du meurtre collectif fondateur[55] qui doit donc pouvoir, en tant qu'il se joue avant la différence, s'abattre sur n'importe qui[56]. Ainsi, Freud et Lévi-Strauss, prisonniers de systèmes excessivement symboliques, n'arrivent pas à penser leurs surgissements réels.

Herméneutiques du réel

Ce réalisme girardien présente toutefois un paradoxe: il ne relève pas d'un réalisme naïf qui ferait du réel un simple donné qui pourrait se lire

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[53] "Si Freud renonçait aux raisons et aux significations qui viennent avant le meurtre et qui cherchent à le motiver, s'il faisait table rase du sens, même et surtout psychanalytique, il verrait que la violence est sans raison, il verrait qu'il n'est rien, en fait de signification, qui ne sorte du meurtre lui-même". Ivi, p. 556.

[54] "Achever le mouvement amorcé par Freud, ce n'est pas renoncer au meurtre, qui reste absolument nécessaire puisqu'il est appelé par une asse énorme de matériaux ethnologiques, c'est renoncer au père, c'est échapper au cadre familial et aux significations de la psychanalyse". Ivi, p. 555.

[55] "Cet ordre culturel, en effet, n'est rien d'autre qu'un système organisé de différences; ce sont les écarts différentiels qui donnent aux individus leur 'identité', qui leur permet de se situer les uns par rapport aux autres". Ivi, p. 355.

[56] "[...] la métamorphose de la violence réciproque en violence fondatrice grâce à un meurtre qui est celui de *n'importe qui* et non plus d'un personnage déterminé". Ivi, p. 560.

directement dans les textes. Il provient d'un travail d'herméneutique qui opère sur de nombreux textes présentant une grande diversité quant à la géographie, à l'Histoire et aux types de documents, ce qui fixe deux points de l'herméneutique girardienne. D'abord, si nous trouvons une même structure dans des textes de cultures qui n'ont pas été en contact, ces structures doivent renvoyer à quelque chose "hors texte". Deuxièmement, si nous trouvons dans une même culture, des textes présentant une même histoire présentée depuis deux points de vue différents – comme c'est le cas entre le mythe d'Œdipe et la tragédie d'Œdipe, ou dans les différentes interprétations de l'*Exode*[57] –, le deuxième texte nous donne une interprétation du premier.

Le premier point marque clairement le réalisme de Girard. Au long de ses textes, il met en relation des textes provenant de zones géographiques très différentes (de l'Amérique latine à la Grèce, en passant par la Polynésie ou l'Afrique), de moments historiques divers et variés (les tragédies grecques, les textes de persécution du Moyen Âge ou les récits ethnologiques de la fin du dix-neuvième siècle) et dont le style est divergent (tragédies, récits anthropologiques, textes sacrés, romans). Ces croisements ont valu à Girard des critiques sévères puisque nous pourrions voir dans ceux-ci un abus herméneutique[58]. La tragédie n'est-elle pas une forme esthétique dont le but est bien éloigné de celui des récits ethnologiques[59]? Peut-on vraiment mettre en parallèle les paraboles bibliques avec les textes de persécution du Moyen Âge? N'y a-t-il pas là des sauts qualitatifs dont Girard ne mesure pas l'importance? Pourtant, non seulement Girard est conscient de ces sauts mais les assume pleinement: "La mise en rapport des deux scènes, celle de la *Genèse* et celle de l'*Odyssée*, rend plus vraisemblable l'interprétation sacrificielle de l'une comme de l'autre"[60]. Du point de vue du réalisme, cette mise en rapport est révélatrice, elle est le secret du vecteur du "hors-texte": "Le nombre extraordinaire de commémorations rituelles qui consistent en une mise à mort donne à penser que l'événement originel est normalement un meurtre"[61]. Puisque nous retrouvons dans de nombreuses cultures humaines la séquence "indifférenciation – faute individuelle – violence collective – différenciation

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[57] A. Bartlett, *Seven Stories: how to study and teach the nonviolent Bible*, Hopetime Press, New York 2017.

[58] "Les hellénistes sont toujours prompts à crier au blasphème dès qu'on suggère le moindre point de contact entre la Grèce antique et les sociétés primitives". R. Girard, *La violence et le sacré*, cit., p. 363.

[59] "Ce sont là des possibilités que nous pouvons formuler en quelque sorte *a priori*, à partir de nos premières conclusions. Nous pouvons aussi les *vérifier* sur des textes littéraires sur des adaptations tragiques des mythes grecs, celui d'Héraklès, en particulier". Ivi, p. 344.

[60] Ivi, p. 303.

[61] Ivi, p. 408.

– retour à la paix", elle doit exister réellement et avoir été décrite diversement selon les cultures. Si de nombreuses manifestations culturelles font état d'une origine selon cette séquence: "[…] *la première fois, les choses se sont passées ainsi*"[62]. Ainsi, une "méthode comparative"[63] entre des textes permet de faire signe vers du "hors-texte".

Toutefois, afin de mettre au jour cet événement réel, il ne suffit pas de le lire dans les textes puisque sa structure est de ne pas apparaître: "On ne peut atteindre ces faits qu'au travers des textes et ces textes eux-mêmes ne fournissent que des témoignages indirects, mutilés, déformés"[64]. Cela est d'autant plus difficile que les textes cachent nécessairement cet événement réel en en présentant la lecture selon le point de vue de ceux qui y ont participé[65]. Les acteurs de l'action pensaient vraiment que la victime était différenciée par des signes, qu'elle avait commis une faute, et que la meilleure preuve de cette faute est que sa mise à mort a ramené la paix. Sans cette erreur d'interprétation, le mécanisme ne fonctionnerait pas. Si nous savions que le bouc émissaire est un bouc émissaire, il ne pourrait plus l'être. Comment donc Girard peut-il révéler un événement dont la réalité l'empêche de se montrer?

Il a fallu à Girard articuler différents types de textes qui présentent un même événement selon différents points de vue, en assumant qu'aux deux extrêmes, c'est-à-dire dans les mythes auto-sacrificiels d'un côté, et dans les *Évangiles* de l'autre, les points de vue sont non seulement différents mais en plus contraires. Entre ces deux extrêmes se trouvent de nombreux textes qui sont autant d'étapes qui mènent de l'un à l'autre des extrêmes herméneutiques. L'herméneutique girardienne ne prend donc pas pour argent comptant ce que disent les textes mais arrive à retracer tous les déplacements textuels qu'a subi l'événement originaire grâce à l'établissement de toute une chaîne interprétative menant des mythes auto-sacrificiels aux *Évangiles*. Sur une même structure, les déplacements herméneutiques sont notables. D'abord, les mythes auto-sacrificiels représentent le partage total de la culpabilité de la victime expulsée. Même celle-ci se pense coupable, d'où le fait qu'elle s'auto-expulse de la communauté. Deuxièmement, les mythes sacrificiels opèrent une première rupture. La communauté dans son ensemble pense la victime coupable, mais la victime clame son innocence. Il s'agit là d'une première brèche dans l'unanimité accusatoire. Troisièmement, la tragédie fait montre

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[62] Ivi, p. 646.
[63] Ivi, p. 681.
[64] Ivi, p. 680.
[65] "Le caractère inaccessible de l'événement fondateur n'y fait pas figure seulement de nécessité incontournable, dénuée de valeur positive, stérile sur le plan de la théorie: c'est une dimension essentielle de cette théorie. Pour retenir sa vertu structurante, la violence fondatrice ne doit pas apparaître". Ivi, p. 681.

d'une deuxième avancée. Au départ, le héros tragique fait partie de la foule et entre dans la lutte entre les doubles. Toutefois, petit à petit, la tragédie opte pour la solution mythique et en fait un coupable, même si sa faute est détachée de ses intentions. Une mécanique divine et externe à sa volonté individuelle est source de sa faute, d'où le fait que nous le pensions à la fois comme coupable et néanmoins comme un peu innocent. Œdipe est coupable, mais de façon involontaire: il ne savait pas ce que qu'il faisait. L'Ancien Testament, quant à lui, poursuit le processus de déconstruction. La victime est cette fois clairement montrée comme une victime de la violence de la communauté. L'accent n'est plus tellement mis sur la violence de la faute de la victime, que sur la violence de la communauté dans son ensemble. À différence d'Œdipe, Joseph est innocent des accusations d'inceste qu'il subit. Enfin, le Nouveau Testament achève le mouvement en ce que non seulement le Christ est innocent mais en plus, la violence de la communauté qui s'abat sur lui est une violence sans raison, et signalée depuis toujours en tant que telle[66]. Ainsi, chaque déplacement herméneutique permet de comprendre le moment qui le précède.

Conclusion

Le réalisme ontologique de Girard que nous trouvons dans le caractère réel d'un événement premier se couple donc d'une herméneutique qui ne relève pas du réalisme naïf. Le réel doit être cherché derrière des textes qu'il faut savoir interpréter. Le réalisme ontologique ne joue donc pas au même niveau que le réalisme herméneutique. De son côté, le réalisme ontologique se fonde sur une méthode comparative qui postule qu'une même structure se trouvant dans des textes provenant de cultures différentes et ne s'étant pas influencées l'une l'autre doit faire signe vers un élément extra-textuel que nombre de penseurs n'ont pas voulu voir[67]:

> Même s'il existe mille formes intermédiaires entre la violence spontanée et ses imitations religieuses, même si on ne peut jamais observer directement que ces dernières, il faut affirmer l'existence réelle de l'événement fondateur. Il ne faut pas diluer sa spécificité extra-rituelle et extra-textuelle.[68]

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[66] S. Vinolo, *René Girard: épistémologie du sacré*, L'Harmattan, Paris 2007, p. 200.
[67] "Il en est de *pharmakon* dans Platon comme de *katharsis* dans Aristote. Quelle que soit la pensée exacte des deux philosophes, leur intuition d'écrivains les dirige infailliblement vers des termes qui leur paraissent suggestifs mais simplement métaphoriques". R. Girard, *La violence et le sacré*, cit., p. 663.
[68] Ivi, p. 680.

Au contraire, le réalisme herméneutique relève d'une méthode reposant sur deux piliers. D'abord, une interprétation réaliste montre sa supériorité par le fait, comme pour ce qu'il en est des théories scientifiques, qu'elle permet d'expliquer plus d'éléments textuels. Ainsi par exemple des signes victimaires, du caractère indifférenciant des fautes commises par les victimes, ou de la forme pyramidale des tombes. La méthode d'interprétation est validée par le nombre supérieur d'éléments qu'elle permet d'intégrer:

> La valeur de l'hypothèse se vérifie à l'abondance des matériaux mythologiques, rituels, philosophiques, littéraires, etc., qu'elle sera capable d'interpréter, aussi bien qu'à la qualité des interprétations, à la cohérence qu'elle instaure entre des phénomènes qui sont restés jusqu'à ce jour indéchiffrables et dispersés.[69]

Deuxièmement, la méthode d'interprétation est validée par le fait qu'elle permet d'établir une évolution logique entre différents types de textes qui, relatant une même structure, la dévoile petit à petit et de façon segmentée. En prenant au sérieux les textes, Girard montre que l'évolution du point de vue sur la structure qu'ils présentent n'est pas le fait du hasard mais fait partie de l'être même de l'événement qu'ils relatent. Cet événement devant par essence demeuré caché, sa mise au jour progressive dans les textes va de la main avec sa mise en cause dans le réel. Ainsi, le réalisme ontologique girardien ne va pas sans la déréalisation de l'événement réel dans son herméneutique.

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Silvio Morigi[*]

Λέγειν / Κρίνειν
The violent origins of *logos* and a paradox in the writing of the Gospels

> *Christianity is not a "religion of the book"*
> *the way Islam and Judaism are*
> René Girard

> *Scriptura crescit cum legente*
> Gregory the Great

If Girard stands out, as M. Treguer says, within contemporary thought as a "scandalous", "monstrous foreign body", it is certainly also for his uncompromising epistemological realism. He believes that language is capable of accessing the truth of reality. This in the face of a "rejection of reality", as the "number one dogma of our times", which equates the referent of every assertion to a sort of residual "precipitate" (to use a chemical metaphor) of the ever changing, arbitrary syntactic configurations of language. If J. Derrida proclaims: *il n'y a pas de hors-texte,* Girard denounces in this a "textual nihilism" for which "there is nothing but language, and language always works in vain because it can only refer to itself"[1].

For about twenty years we have been told that the referent in a text is practically inaccessible. On the other hand, it matters little whether or not we are able to access it: the naive concern for the referent can only hinder, it seems, the modern study of textuality. Now only the always-equivocal and slippery relationships of language with itself matter[2].

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[1] R. Girard, *Quand ces choses commenceront*, Arlea, Paris 1994, p. 7; Id., *Je vois Satan tomber comme l'éclair*, Grasset, Paris 1999, p. 113. Id., *Des choses cachées depuis la fondation du monde*, Grasset, Paris 1978, pp. 138-139. The quotes in the footnotes refer to Girard's original French texts, translated, while taking into account their English translations, in a way that is often different from them.
[2] Id., *Le bouc émissaire*, Grasset/Fasquelle, Paris 1982, p.17.

A cultural climate, at which Girard points a finger, of which a verse by T.S. Eliot in *Choruses from "The Rock"* could appear incisively emblematic: "A thousand policemen directing the traffic cannot tell you why you come or where you go".

The peremptory semiological assertion of the gesture of the policeman who regulates traffic in the *city* would seem to provide reassuring coordinates that give a precise meaning to the movement of each individual within the urban labyrinth. But this meaning is purely "syntactic" and its geometries are always changing. It can do nothing but ignore and totally evade the sense that every single man, within that "lonely crowd" of which D. Riesman speaks, always has to give to his path, the assertive decision, in its primary semantic value, which motivates him to take it.

It is precisely this epistemological realism (like listening to a *voix méconnue du réel*) that leads Girard to highlight an alienating, nihilistic detachment from reality in the two essential human phenomena that he investigates: "mimetic desire" and "scapegoat mechanism". Girardian "mimetic theory is a realistic theory of why humans are not able to be realists"[3].

Early Girard already implicitly demystifies the primacy of the syntactic, by emphasizing how the structure of every existential world is based on the concreteness of *mimesis* that is equivalent to the prevailing attitude of man. But it is precisely this *rootedness* in it that produces an *uprooting* from reality: singularly analogous to the way in which today's cultural *koiné* considers linguistic textualities of all kinds as "solipsistic structures", "structures floating in the void"[4]. An uprooting that is equivalent to a distortion, which Girard calls "metaphysical", of the concreteness of *physis*. He equates it to an "ontological sickness" for which "in desire, as the role of the *metaphysical* grows greater, that of the *physical* diminishes", and "the object is emptied of its concrete value"[5]. In fact, the role played by mimetic (or "triangular") desire is relevant in the configuration of every existential world. Within that, there is a sense of "*lack of being*" that produces the mimetic "impulse" of the subject towards a claimed "superiority", "plenitude of being" (*plénitude d'être*) that he attributes to a "model"[6]. The subject then becomes his or her "disciple", leading him to mimetically pursue the same objects (or people in the erotic triangles) that the model, "mediator" of desire, desires or possesses. These objects, whatever their real value is, are considered only as his "relics" (*reliques*),

[3] Id., *Le désir mimétique dans le souterrain* (1997), in *La voix méconnue du réel,* Grasset, Paris 2002, p. 207.
[4] Id., *Differenciation et reciprocité* (1977), in *La voix méconnue du réel,* cit., pp. 98-99.
[5] Id., *Mensonge romantique et vérité romanesque*, Grasset, Paris 1965, pp. 93, 92.
[6] Ivi, pp. 19, 99; Id., *La violence et le sacré* (1972), Hachette/Pluriel, Paris 1998, p. 217.

the acquisition of which is experienced as participation in a sort of sacredness recognized in the model-idol[7].

Early Girard criticizes too a conception, which he calls "romantic", of the imagination, understood as an unconditioned, springing and transfiguring act. This criticism is explicitly directed against symbolist poetics. But it is not wrong to also detect an implicit reference to Sartre. In fact, in Sartre's first works (*L'Imagination* and *L'Imaginaire*) an essential role is attributed to imagination in the creation of an existential world. It prefigures that which in *L'Être et le Néant* is the self-transcending of *pour soi* towards ever new existential projects, horizons of meaning. But for Girard, the imaginative production should not be assimilated to a virginal "parthenogenesis". For its "conception, a masculine and a feminine element are necessary": the "female imagination remains sterile until it is fertilized" by the former[8]. In triangular desire, this "masculine element" is the model. In fact, it is the *mimesis* of the model that causes the subject, inasmuch as it configures his own world as a horizon of meaning, to *imaginatively* transfigure the objects within it as "relics" of the model.

For Sartre, an existential world (analogous to Heidegger's *Welt* opened in *Sein und Zeit* by *Dasein*) is equivalent to an organic structure in which each entity has meaning only by virtue of its connection (which could be called "syntactic") to the other entities of that world. But no *center* can be found within it, no privileged entity from which the web of meanings radiates. For Girard, on the contrary, in the world of the subject dominated by triangular desire, this *center* exists and corresponds to the *model*. It is from it that "a mysterious ray descends" which makes "objects shine" with a presumed "brilliance". "All the elements" in the "existence of the disciple are as if they were attracted by the mediator" of his desire, "their hierarchy is derived from him" as well as their "meaning"[9]. If the *transcendance* in Sartre, the *Transzendenz* in early Heidegger, which is constitutive of human existence, is *immediately* facing a world opened up as a horizon of meaning, for Girard, contrarily, this self-transcendence corresponds *primarily* to the mimetic "impulse" (*élan*) towards the model by the disciple, and it is that which establishes his existential world. Therefore this does not correspond only to a syntactic stucture of meanings but is always rooted in a precise and objective reality: the disciple's model and his *mimesis*.

Sartre's notion of the existential world is intimately connected to the theme of *nothingness*. The *pour soi*, as one of the two phenomenal

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[7] Id., *Mensonge romantique et vérité romanesque*, cit. pp. 11-13, 89.
[8] Ivi, p. 25.
[9] Ivi, pp. 26, 95.

poles, together with the *en soi*, of a "transphenomenal" *être,* causes this "being" to be corroded by the "worm" of nothingness. Not only because every world that the *pour soi* is planning is always a "nullification" (*néantisation*) of other previous or alternative worlds, but mostly because the *pour soi*, in its "facticity", is equivalent to a contingency that is established by nothing.

For early Girard too the world of the disciple takes on a nihilistic character. But if Sartrian nihilism is equivalent to a stoic observation that every existential world has no root in any reality (because *no reality is given beyond it*), the nihilism of the world founded by mimetic desire lies instead in its *uprooting of itself from objective reality*. If for the disciple every being is a "relic" of the model, this becomes a "fake sun" which projects upon reality, concealing it, a "fallacious brilliance"[10]. For early Girard, it is the novelistic truth contained in certain works of literature which above all reveals this. Don Quixote, because he considers himself the foremost disciple of Amadis de Gaula, the prince of the errant knights, mistakes windmills for giants, and a barber's basin for Mambrino's magical helmet (and Girard notes, in this respect, that the difference between Don Quixote and contemporary man dominated by media models is not so great). Madame Bovary, a mimetically obsessed by literary romantic heroines, mistakes Rodolphe and Leon (despite their human mediocrity, which Flaubert well highlights) for enchanting lovers. And for the Proust of the *Recherche*, in the "peace of Combray" (a microcosm held tightly in the cult of bourgeois values embodied by Aunt Leonie as a model-idol) the "fallacious brilliance" radiated upon things by that "fake sun" has as its "primary symbol" the magic lantern that brightens domestic evenings; "whose images take on the shape of the objects on which they are projected, and are returned in the same way to us by the wall of the room, the lamp shades, and the doorknobs", thus blurring the lines, the concrete contours of the objects. This phantasmagoria of colors and reflections, apparently harmless on the surface of things, is a metaphor for the "abyss" that already "at the level of perception" is dug between Combray and the outside world. A fallacious order "is superimposed on reality and becomes indistinguishable from it", a fact that traslates into an "implacable censorship" of the concreteness of reality[11].

In the development of Girardian thought this nihilistic outcome of mimetic desire is reasserted in the "scapegoat mechanism", as a crucial junction of the "cycle of mimetic violence"[12]. Regarding violence, in contrast with a line of thought that goes from Heraclitus to Hegel and Marx,

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[10] Ivi, p. 26.
[11] Ivi, p. 197.
[12] Id., *Je vois Satan tomber comme l'éclair*, cit., pp. 41 and ss.

whereby violence arises from differences that conflict with each other, Girard establishes an essential link of mutual implication between violence and undifferentiation: just as violence produces undifferentiation, undifferentiation produces violence. For early Girard, conflict emerges when the mimetic desire develops from an initial "external mediation" (in which its own *mimesis* is recognized by the subject who "openly venerates the model by declaring himself to be its disciple") to an "internal mediation" where such *mimesis* is misunderstood. The model is perceived only as an "obstacle" to one's own desire which one claims to be spontaneous and preceding that of the other. This causes the model to become an imitator of the disciple too, intensifying his desire or his will to maintain possession of the desired object, triggering thus a conflict marked by a "double mediation"[13].

Later, Girard will speak of a "mimesis of appropriation" which is typical of the initial phase of a conflict. As it unravels, and despite its being detonated by recipocal *mimesis*, the conflict is geared from the disputed possession of a coveted object, upon which the conflict firstly was polarized, towards a direct conflict with the model. A "mimesis of rivalry" thus takes over. Henceforth the object (or even the antithetical motivations at the root of the conflict) loses its relevance: the real stake becomes only that of embodying in oneself a "triumphant violence" against the other. When one of the two contenders, dominating the other, embodies it momentarily, what the other yearns for is only to recreate it, mimetically, in himself, and if he succeeds, this conversely elicits identical *mimesis* of the other within the first contender. The paradox of this is that the more each of the rivals yearns to affirm their own difference, as violent supremacy over the other, the more they become undifferentiated "doubles" by virtue of a mutual "negative imitation": "the more desire aspires to difference, the more it generates sameness"[14].

Furthermore, within a sociologically undifferentiated context (such as the current globalized world) any rise in the claim of one's own identity through difference is immediately interpreted by others as a desire for supremacy, which therefore excites in them a mimetic desire to counter-differentiate, unleashing conflictual dynamics; struggles determined more and more not by actual differences, but by the search of a "triumphant violence" which finds its pretexts in such differences. This is why "current conflicts are rooted in undifferentiation much more than in differences". Therefore, in today's globalized world, the violence that

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[13] Id., *Mensonge romantique et vérité romanesque*, cit., pp. 18, 19-20, 104-105.
[14] Id., *Des choses cachées depuis la fondation du monde*, cit., pp. 15-19; Id., *La violence et le sacré*, cit., p. 224; Id., *Mensonge romantique et vérité romanesque*, p. 105; Id., *Système du délire* (1972), in Id., *Critiques dans un souterrain*, cit., p. 216.

explodes must not be interpreted as alleged wars of religion, conflicts of civilizations, secessions intended to safeguard specific ethnic, religious, and cultural roots. "Today's conflicts of allegiances" must not be understood as their "strengthening", because, on the contrary, conflicts "can worsen precisely because of their weakening". "The weakening of allegiances in our world" translates into "a strengthening of rivalries"; and this is because "violence is fed not by strength, but by the weakness of allegiances"[15].

For Girard, the scapegoat mechanism is equivalent to the intrinsic logic of an event which in the mists of time, within various areas of the planet, was decisive for the process of hominization and for the rise of human cultures. Before this, an undifferentiated "essential violence" spread among the hominids (Girard speaks of "a magma of undifferentiated crowds, in the abyss of the foundation of every human world")[16]. If man could survive the self-destructiveness of this permanent conflict, it was because (in a similar way, in Darwinian terms, to the emergence of a organ or an ethological behavior that determined the survival of an animal species) a "game of violence" (*jeu de la violence*) arose that led to a transition from the "all against all" of an undifferentiated "violent reciprocity" to the "violent unanimity" of an "all against one", by virtue of which the violence subsided at the expense of a single victim. This mostly occurred in conjunction with natural disasters (epidemics, earthquakes, floods, famines) which made the violent chaos, of which the victim was accused, even more paroxysmal. The victim was subsequently made sacred because he was held responsible for both the aforementioned violent chaos and the peace that followed it. He became a supernatural being, at the same time *tremendum et fascinans*: terrifying in his mysterious visitation to the human world, beneficial in his equally mysterious withdrawal from it[17]. This religious transcendence was the original matrix of all subsequent transcendences (socio-political, juridical, philosophical) which provided unity and cohesion to every human culture. The scapegoat mechanism is thus based on a "misunderstanding" (*méconaissance*)[18] essential to its functioning. In fact, in attributing the responsibility of rampant violence to the victim alone, the fact that, in this kind of conflict, the responsibility is indivisible within the group, is put out of sight. Likewise, the sacralization of the victim fails to recognize that the resulting peace comes solely from the violent unanimity that has been welded against it.

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[15] Id., *In principio era il capro*, in "Il Sole 24 ore", 5 maggio 1995, p.8.
[16] Id., *La violence et le sacré*, cit., p. 49; Id., *Achever Clausewitz,* CarnetsNord, Paris 2007, p. 301.
[17] Cfr. Id., *La violence et le sacré*, cit., pp. 145, 109-134.
[18] Ivi, p. 58.

In outlining the aforementioned cycle of mimetic violence upon which human cultures are founded, Girard originally reinterprets a central theme in contemporary French philosophy (from Lévi-Strauss to Derrida and G. Deleuze): that of "difference" (*différence*). Within the chaos of violent undifferentiation, the "all against one" of the "scapegoat mechanism" determines a primal "*differential caesura*"(*écart différentiel*): that between victim and victimizers, which Girard calls also "original difference": a "decisive" difference in the constitution of every differential human order (which also implies a primal perception, in the hominid, of the "fundamental difference" between the "bad violence" of "violent reciprocity" and the "good violence" of "violent unanimity"). This "original difference", reasserted and reinforced by the transcendence of the sacred victim compared to the ordinary human, was the archetypal matrix of those "systems of differences" which originally structured human cultures[19].

In primitive and archaic societies, this structuring differentiation corresponds to their hierarchical stratification, that is to that *degree* that Ulysses in the Shakespearean *Troilus and Cressida* exalts because without it, he says, "*each thing meets in mere oppugnancy*". Each social level maintains a mimetic relationship of "external mediation" with the higher one, a guarantee of peace and stability. But this stratification also implies an exclusiveness of the higher levels compared to the lower ones, which is equivalent to a crystallized violence which is the signature of the foundation of every social degree on the violence of the ancestral scapegoat mechanism[20].

But in the rise of human cultures, the "original difference" generated not only their *social structure*, but also *symbolic thought*, namely the *pensée sauvage* explored by Lévi-Strauss. Girard welcomes the Lévi-Straussian conception of the primitive symbolic, according to which every cultural *parole* (matrimonial and economic exchanges, cooking, magic, myths, religion) is based on an unconscious *langue*: consisting of semiological codes, as structures that are characterized essentially by their syntactic permutability. For Girard, Lévi-Strauss's notion that every code within the *langue* is structured as a "system of differences" which is a system of "binary oppositions" (e.g.cooked/raw, salty/sweet, fresh/putrid) holds true. But for him what is relevant is that, just as in the *social* mechanism a stabilizing *degree* is equivalent to a difference that implies a *no* that

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[19] Ivi, pp. 77, 375; Id., *La route antique des hommes pervers*, Grasset/Fasquelle, Paris 1985, p. 122; Id., *Le sacrifice*, Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Paris 2003, p. 21.
[20] Cfr. Id., *La violence et le sacré*, cit., p. 80; Id., *Origine della cultura e fine della storia*, Raffaello Cortina, Milano 203, p. 62 (this italian edition of the book is cited in cut sentences within the subsequent French edition).

excludes those subordinated to it, likewise, in the system of binary oppositions of symbolic thought, the oppositional difference between the single elements is equivalent to a reciprocal expulsive *no* which determines them as such. According to Lévi-Strauss, it is futile to seek an origin of the symbolic. What he calls *langue*, equivalent to an unconscious *cogitatum* without *cogito*, in spite of generating all of human cultures, is in turn not generated by any reality. Indeed, every cultural reality emerges only as a semantic "precipitate" of the syntactic permutations of *langue*. Instead, for Girard, the oppositional *no* that structures the codes of *langue* is an eloquent trace of its original rootedness in an archetypal expulsive *no,* that of victim violence, which established "original difference", the bloody matrix of every subsequent logical differentiation.

Lévi-Strauss, unlike Lévy-Bruhl for whom the "primitive mentality" has a radical specificity, places a substantial continuity between the primitive symbolic and the thought of civilized man (the "thought of engineers", as he calls it), defining that as a "thought not of savages, but of the savage state". Girard agrees with this, but in the sense that the "mechanisms of discrimination and exclusion" that already structure the symbolic thought are "the mechanisms of all orders of thought"[21].

This holds also true of Western *logos*: in whose *legein*, since its origins, transpires a differentiating *krinein*, which, in its apparent mere logic, is actually a hidden signature of primal exclusionary violence.

Girard speaks of four "stereotypes" found in every victimization, which he summarizes in four words: *crisis, crime, criteria, criticism.* The "crisis" is the violent reciprocity from which the scapegoat mechanism springs. The "crime" is what is blamed on the victim. The "criteria" refers to specific "signs of victim selection" (e.g. deformity, physical or mental impairment, social marginalization, belonging to ethnic and religious minorities). Finally, the "criticism" is the differentiating victimizing violence that puts an end to the violent undifferentiation of the initial "crisis". Girard notes that these "stereotypes", in their lexical expression, are "indissociable, and most languages, notably, do not dissociate them", as it happens in Greek and Latin and therefore in French and Italian, where the terms that express these events "all go back to the same root, to the same Greek verb *krino* which means not only to judge, to distinguish, to differentiate, but also to accuse and condemn a victim". "This", concludes Girard, "suggests a still hidden relationship between collective persecutions and the *cultural* as a whole". Moreover, every differentiation is "decided". In this regard, Girard, recalling the etymological connection of the verb *to decide* with the Latin *caedes* ("killing"), highlights the

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[21] Id., *La violence et le sacré*, cit., p. 347.

violent expulsion that is hidden in every decision. In fact, the first meaning of the Latin verb *decido* is "to cut off", "truncate"", in the sense of sacrificing something. Furthermore, the differentiating decision always translates into an assertion which, in its apparent merely apophantic function, also conceals the expulsive *krinein*. In this, Girard agrees with Derrida for whom the presumed mere ascertainment of the present indicative of the third person is actually always performative, or linked to an act of decision marked by a violence that expels[22].

If the misunderstanding inherent to the original and foundational cycle of mimetic violence generates fictitious differences (victim/victimizers, sacred/human), this uprooting from reality recurs in the oppositional differentiality that already structures the primitive symbolic and then contaminates all of human thought.

Girard defines the original victim as a "transcendental signifier" that generates any subsequent meaning. But he immediately specifies that it is not "true" (for it is born from an exclusionary violence), but that it is "only what men need as a transcendental signifier"[23]. The symbolic, inasmuch as it arises from the scapegoat mechanism's misunderstanding, is vitiated by an "original sin", becauses of which it "establishes displacements (*décalages*) where perfect symmetry reigned, establishes fictitious differences within the identical". The symbolic is therefore born as a "mythical" realm with "no relationship to reality", which "plays false" (*joue à faux*), producing "a superabundance of differences", "a formidable mass of the *arbitrary*" to be reconnected to the "founding *arbitration*" of the scapegoat mechanism. So, because of this, "men are incapable of recognizing the arbitrary nature of the significations produced by this misunderstood mechanism" and they "can no longer read anything directly in the 'great book of nature', whose lines are now completely confused"[24].

Thus, as early Girard traced the structure of an existential world to a structuring center, the model, as a "fake sun" which projects a nihilistic "fallacious brilliance" onto reality, similarly (here in contrast to Derrida for whom "the structures are always decentralized") he brings the structure of symbolic thought back to a "center of meaning", an ancestral "focal center": the scapegoat. The result of this, also in this case, is that the symbolic, arising from the scapegoat mechanism's misunderstanding, is born uprooted from reality[25].

[22] Id., *Le bouc émissaire*, cit., pp. 35-36, 169. See also in this regard: P. Antonello*, Oltre il pensiero critico? Serres, Girard, Latour*, in "Riga", 35, 2014, pp. 426-438.
[23] Id., *Des choses cachées depuis la fondation du monde*, cit., pp. 111-112.
[24] Id., *La violence et le sacré*, cit., pp. 342, 346-348, 335.
[25] Id., *Les origines de la culture*, Desclées du Brouwer, Paris 2004, pp. 155, 156, 158.

Two questions arise from this. Firstly: are the differences that human thought poses really all, constitutively, even if covertly, oppositional, and therefore daughters of primeval violence? *Do non-oppositional differences that can be* analyzed by a *ratio* capable of freeing itself from its bloody origins exist? And second: if the human *legein* is placed in continuity with a *symbolic* realm that "plays false", how can we explain the material survival of man, possible only if he accesses the effective order of nature? In particular, how can the dizzying scientific/technological development within Western civilization be explained?

The first question could be answered as follows: understood as a *category* (in a Kantian sense) of thought and language, it is very doubtful that any *thought and spoken* difference is not understood, albeit covertly, as an oppositional *no*. It is no coincidence that structuralist linguistics highlights a constitutive oppositional differentiality inherent in language already at the phonological level. N. Trubeckoj writes: "the concept of differentiation presupposes the concept of contrast, opposition"; a thing can be distinguished, differentiated from another thing only in so far as they "*are pitted against each other*"[26]. This also recalls the Spinozian *omnis determinatio est negatio.* Furthermore: the existence of *real* differences between the things that we interpret as oppositional differences is certainly admissible. But does our categorizing them within a thought structured by the ancestral transcendental signifier manage to draw on their *real, objective* nature? Is it not that this remains for us "noumenal" (in a sense, again, Kantian)? In our *thinking and naming* these differences, are we allowed to escape (to paraphrase Wittgenstein) from the "bars" of the "cage" of a "language" constitutively marked by its bloody origins?

As for the survival and cultural development of man, Girard notes that in symbolic thought, regardless of its admitting a "formidable mass" of what is empirically "false" and "arbitrary", embryonic acquisitions about the effective natural order emerged (protected by the symbolic as the "cocoon" protects the "larva"). "A seed of truth lay hidden under the avalanche of the arbitrary". The arbitrariness of the symbolic, while preventing direct access to nature, did not totally cancel it. This developed indirectly, in dowsing forms, similar to a sort of *bricolage*, marked by randomness that nevertheless allowed the chance emergence of congruences between the syntax of the symbolic and natural objectivity: such as "favorable conjunctures" (*bons hasards*) to a slow evolution, here, of technological kind. The scapegoat mechanism itself, misunderstood in its logic, but experienced as an expulsive catharsis, became a sort of exploratory "metaphor" of nature: in some cases it was effective, insofar

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[26] N. Trubeckoj, *Grundzüge der Phonologie*, in "Travaux du Cercle Linguistique de Prague", 7, 1939, p. 41.

as there are (Girard recognizes) phenomena that can be interpreted in terms of evacuation, purgation. Nonetheless, the exploration of nature guided by this metaphor and therefore mediated by a culture that mainly plays "against nature", is unable to separate "the arbitrary from the non-arbitrary", "the useful from the useless" "the fruitful from the insignificant". Furthermore, the more the metaphor is generalized, the more it proves incapable of "closely grasping" the phenomena in their singularity, "whose essence" remains "out of reach"[27].

In this slow and bumpy evolutionary process of human cultures, ritual played an essential role in orienting the symbolic in congruity with the natural order. Ritual basically consists in the reproduction of the scapegoat mechanism: after an initial stage, where the disappearance of prohibitions recreates violent ancestral undifferentiation, the polarization of the entire community against a sacrificial victim follows, which restores and strengthens an always-fragile and precarious social order, protecting the community from a relapse into unstoppable violence. In this way, rites contained "somewhat orderly disorder and somewhat disordered order", allowing for mixtures of things that prohibitions forbade, a situation that indirectly supported empirical practices of exploration and manipulation. Furthermore, given that ritual reproduction ignored the logic of what it reproduced, the evolution of ritual determined a differentiating selection in the reproduction of the "origin", accentuating certain phases of the original rite over others until the latter disappeared. Nevertheless, it was precisely this tortuous, polymorphic, and variegated evolution of ritual, antithetical to the paralyzing rigidity of prohibitions, that transformed it into an empirical "machine of exploration and knowledge". In the "ritual space", the "manipulation of objects and signs acquires an exploratory value". Ritual was like a "bricklayer" who built the various "institutions" functional to cultural development with the "bricks" of a dowsing reproduction of the "origin". E.g. the domestication of animals derived from ritual in that the sacrificial victim, no longer a man, but a wild beast, had to coexist for a certain time within society as a substitute for the ancestral victim, who was internal to the primordial group[28].

But on the threshold of the Christian era, this "creative power"[29] of ritual had been withering away. It was the Cross of Christ that marked, for Girard, an epochal event in the history of man: an event with significant repercussions also at a cognitive, scientific, and technological level, which

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[27] R. Girard, *La violence et le sacré*, cit., pp. 348, 342, 330, 433-434; Id., *Celui par qui le scandale arrive*, Desclée du Brouwer, Paris 2001, p. 136.

[28] Id., *Quand ces choses commenceront*, cit., p. 81; Id., *Origine della cultura e fine della storia*, cit., pp. 93-94; Id., *Les origines de la culture*, cit., p. 221.

[29] Id., *Quand ces choses commenceront*, cit., p. 81.

helped to free man from mythical-ritual forms of thought that originate from founding violence. If already with his words Christ had denounced the misunderstood violence of the scapegoat mechanism, on the Cross he made his own innocence as a scapegoat evident, a fact later testified by the Gospels. This deconstructive force of the Cross regarding the scapegoat mechanisms generated a progressive "concerning for scapegoats" in the West (for instance, the shelters for the poor and the sick already founded in Medieval times) that has no parallel in any other civilization. Albeit in an unconscious and underground way, it also affected the Western *ratio*, which in its development took on an increasingly critical and demystifying imprint, progressively eroding ways of thinking and socio-political structures based on victimizing differences. The same progressive secularization of Western culture conceals for Girard a remote Christian ancestry because true Christianity "deprives men of the religious", being "equivalent to its true demystification ": since every religious cult is hardly free from a sacred that maintains unmistakable traits of the primitive and archaic sacred (including certain historical forms of Christianity when they obscure the Christocentric character of the Christian faith). Therefore "it is human religion as a whole that the Gospels destroy, as well as the cultures that derive from it". Up to the point that "God's death is a Christian phenomenon; in its modern meaning, atheism is a Christian invention "[30]. Already early Girard displayed his intolerance towards the "unbearable chatter", the "nauseating and nihilistic nonsense" of alleged "Christian values" (that very often appear not as the object of true faith, but merely brandished against others in a struggle for supremacy[31]). And claiming a primal prophetic dimension of the Christian faith, he affirms that it

> is by no means a regression, a fearful retreat into "traditional values", in the face of the audacity of the subversive criticism operated by the "masters of suspicion" of the modern universe: to be able to return to the Christian text, on the contrary, this criticism must be radicalized.[32]

The same seventeenth-century scientific revolution in the West was supported by an erosion of the scapegoat mechanism's misunderstanding:

> men did not stop hunting witches because they invented science, but they invented science because they stopped hunting witches. The scientific spirit is a by-product of the action exercised in depth by the Gospel text in the West.[33]

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[30] Id., *La violence et le sacré*, cit., pp. 249-261; Id., *Achever Clausewitz*, cit., pp. 334, 19; Id., *Le bouc émissaire*, cit., p. 153; Id., *Origine della cultura e fine della storia*, cit., p. 205.
[31] Id., *Dostoïevski, du double à l'unité* (1963), in *Critiques dans un souterrain*, cit., p. 131.
[32] Id., *La route antique des hommes pervers*, cit., p. 188.
[33] Id., *Le bouc émissaire*, cit., p. 300.

Therefore the Western *ratio*, in its deconstruction of the idols generated by violence, has a very peculiar status within human history.

And yet, precisely in its essentially *critical* existence, how can it escape the violence that is hidden in that *krinein* that contaminates every human *logos*? Isn't there a "violent revelation of violence" here?

For Girard "in human language" there is no "privileged place" of access to the truth, because "the Word that affirms itself as absolutely true", that of Christ, "speaks only from the position of the scapegoat".

> Christ did not write anything but identifies himself with his word. It is the Word, the true *Logos*. He dies for the reasons that cause him to speak, he speaks for the reasons that cause him to die […] Writing and speech are conditioned by our violent and sacrificial origins and are therefore marked by a fundamental insufficiency. Only Christ's death is perfect. All the writings that revive it are imperfect in principle compared to it. This lack of any transmission and communication justifies the multiplication of writings, the existence not of one, but of four different canonical Gospels, whose drafters insist moreover continuously upon their own inability to comprehend. Christianity is not a "religion of the book" the way Islam and Judaism are[34].

Yet the "true *Logos*" that Christ incarnates under a theological profile is also translated into his earthly *speech,* the truth of which is testified by the Gospels *writing.* But this speech and this writing, how can they escape that *krinein*, in its hidden violence, which characterizes all human expression? Girard responds to this through an original exegesis of the parabolic language of Christ and of the relevant link between that and the Gospel's demonology[35].

In the Gospels the parables are not so much distinguished by their narrative register, as by the fact that in them Christ "adopts the language of his universe". The essence of the parable "is Jesus' voluntary

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[34] Id., *Quand ces choses commenceront*, cit., pp. 169, 170-172.

[35] However, it should be noted that what is summarized below is only a line of thought (which culminates in the affirmation of a "demonic" inherent to the symbolic for its violent origins, Id., *Le bouc émissaire*, cit., p. 281), alongside which Girard develops another hardly compatible with that. As when, for example, he writes that language has the capacity to "transgress one's own differential interdictions" (Id., *Presentation* in *Critiques dans un souterrain*, cit., p. 14), and as when he says that "the Gospels must not be reduced to parables","in them there is also a large amount of direct teaching" in those pages (" theoretical ", he calls them to distinguish them from the "narrative" ones where the editorial contribution of the evangelists prevails) in which the words of Christ are directly reported (Id., *Quand ces choses commenceront*, cit., p. 171; Id., *Le bouc émissaire*, cit., p. 241). See in this regard: S. Morigi, *Un essere "vuoto di essere", "morale e risolutamente manicheo". Il demoniaco e la demonologia evangelica come "sapere paradossale" in René Girard*, in Bubbio P.D., Morigi S. (a cura di), *Male e Redenzione. Sofferenza e trascendenza in René Girard*, Camilliane, Torino 2008, pp. 205-246.

confinement" in the language of expulsion and violence ("which, more-over, is often the language of the Gospels themselves"), "for the benefit of people who cannot understand anything else as they are locked up there themselves". He does this precisely to break the walls of their prison, because the parable "taken literally strengthens the walls" of this "prison". But the "parabolic" language is not just the parable. It is nothing other than human language: "there is no speech" of man "that is not a parable" in the aforementioned sense, and therefore also the redaction of the Gospels, as human, in certain aspects, while bearing witness to the truth of the Cross, can do it only in a "parabolic" mode. For this Girard calls the "incomparable knowledge" inscribed in the Gospels also a "paradoxical knowledge", of which Gospel demonology is particularly emblematic[36].

The scapegoat mechanism can also be defined as a *demonization* of the victim. Even Gospel demonology, *in its very attribution to the devil of being such, demonizes him*, which is equivalent to recreating in it-self the "being against" of the scapegoat mechanism. But the devil is demonized here because as the "accuser", "father of lies", "murderer from the beginning": attributes that make him *a constitutively victimizing, and therefore demonizing, being*. So here *the exorcism is turned against the archetypal exorcist,* here *the devil* could paradoxically be defined as the *being who hurls himself against the devil.* By demonizing the devil, the Gospels thus reveal and denounce the essence of all victimization.

Gospel demonology could therefore be equated with a language in which a meta-language that deconstructs it is simultaneously inscribed. It could also be compared to tautegoric symbolism, in the Schellingian sense, that is characterized by an inextricability of meaning in respect to the symbol, where, unlike allegory, meaning can only transpire through a certain symbol that expresses it. However, this is a peculiar tautegory because here, to the inextricability between symbol and meaning, an antithetical, conflictual relationship is also added. Here, in fact, meaning is intended to erode its symbol, which is the only medium through which, nevertheless, it can reveal itself and erode the latter. In fact, Girard writes that even in the most archaic Gospel texts "the belief in demons that still seems to flourish tends incessantly to cancel itself ", but "in a process of annulment that escapes us because it is expressed in the contradictory language of expelled expulsion and of the outcasted demon". Gospel demonology is revealing precisely because it "unhinges itself ": through an incessant friction between what it immediately ex-

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[36] Id., *Le bouc émissaire*, cit., pp. 274, 284.

presses and what it deeply reveals. A friction that, if it were to totally erode the symbol which contradicts its deep meaning, would cancel, at the same time, the possibility of revealing that meaning through that symbol, rather than bringing about its full revelation[37].

But if the Gospels can demystify violence only through a parabolic or demonological language, which remains tributary to it, this, all the more so, would apply to Girard's mimetic theory. In his advanced thought he shows himself to be fully aware of it: if it is true that "what marks our various form of discourse (even those that appear the most playful and benevolent, or those that like to think of themselves as hardly significant at all) is their radically polemic character"[38]. So in all our speech an expulsive violence is hidden in the concealed presumption of our demystifying difference towards others. Therefore, even in the "being against" of the mimetic theory that demystifies violence and its idols, the "being against" of violence itself can only be repeated: that "*no* that many modern philosophers assimilate to freedom and life" and which instead "is the herald of slavery and death"[39].

The outcome of this, for the Christian faith, certainly cannot be a paralyzing aphasia, because, *in statu viae*, its deconstructive *logos* of the scapegoat mechanism is historically indispensable. Even if it only takes on a *purgatorial* value, so to speak. It could also be compared to the Wittgensteinian ladder of the *Tractatus* to be thrown away behind you after climbing it. The later Girard will write: "for a long time I tried to think of Christianity as a perspective from above and I had to give it up. I am now convinced that it is within the mimetism itself that we are forced to think"[40].

When Michel Serres spoke of the need to go beyond all critical *logos*, dominated by *polemos*, Girard replied: "I do not agree with Serres. If one does not discriminate, one cannot distinguish, and in order to think one must know how to distinguish" differences; "we are forced to inhabit this limit. The end of criticism is inherent to a totally redeemed world"[41].

Waiting for this *eschaton*, the deepest figure of present Christian authenticity remains the *silent, agapic* kiss of Christ to the Dostoyevskian Grand Inquisitor.

Girard highlights a paradoxical similarity between violence and Christian *agape* in the fact that both are undifferentiating: one propagates the

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[37] Ivi, pp. 284, 281.
[38] Id., *Des choses cachées depuis la fondation du monde*, cit., p. 462.
[39] Id., *Mensonge romantique et vérité romanesque*, cit., p. 233.
[40] Id., *Achever Clausewitz*, cit., p. 153.
[41] Id., *Origine della cultura e fine della storia*, cit., p. 117.

undifferentiating reciprocity of violent doubles, the other propitiates agapic doubles[42]. Nonetheless, agapic undifferentiation, as a reciprocal opening to the other that illuminates in me and in the other the *irreducible singularity of a human face*, is the only human act that brings out *ontologically true differences* in comparison with the fictious *differences* generated by violence: "forms of diversity that today we struggle to imagine", "diversity in unity", "diversity of which we cannot even get an idea from our old world", and that the *eschaton* of the Resurrection will manifest in their full splendor[43].

Here the connection between *differences/undifferentiation* seems to outline a sort of chiasmus: for which, *as untrue differences generate an objective undifferentiation, an objective undifferentiation generates true differences*. In reality, the chiasmus is only apparent. If it were effective, the term "undifferentiation" on which it is based would have the same semantic value. Instead, here the apparent lexical continuity of the chiasmus centered on this term hides within itself a radical semantic break, in which the *lie* yields to the *truth* and the darkness of *polemos* is overwhelmed by the light of *agape*.

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[42] Cfr. Id., *Des choses cachées depuis la fondation du monde*, cit., p. 239.
[43] Id., *Quand ces choses commenceront*, cit., pp. 91, 92.

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Gianfranco Mormino
"The system truly comes first".
Culture and biology in Girard's analysis of kinship

transl. by Arabella Soroldoni

§ 1. Lévi-Strauss's critique of Radcliffe-Brown

In the ninth chapter of *Violence and the Sacred*, entitled "Lévi-Strauss, Structuralism, and Marriage Laws", Girard addresses the issue of the natural vs. cultural origin of the nuclear family and, subsequently, of kinship laws. The starting point is a page of *Structural Analysis in Linguistics and Anthropology*, published in 1945, where Lévi-Strauss claims that in social anthropology there is no more dangerous idea than thinking "that the biological family constitutes the point of departure from which all societies elaborate their kinship systems"[1]; the socio-cultural character of kinship "is not what it retains from nature, but, rather, the essential way in which it diverges from nature"[2]. According to Radcliffe-Brown, the relationships "between parent and child, […] between children of the same parents (siblings), and […] between husband and wife"[3] represent the natural fact which is at the basis of any kinship relationship. On the contrary, Lévi-Strauss observes, "a kinship system does not consist in the objective ties of descent or consanguinity between individuals" but it is given only "in human consciousness; it is an arbitrary system of representations, not the spontaneous development of a real situation"[4]. In other words, the French anthropologist denies that the elementary family, as biological bond originated from the only possible way of human

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[1] C. Lévi-Strauss, *Structural Anthropology*, tr. Claire Jacobson – Brooke Grundfest Schoepf, Basic Books, New York 1963, p. 50.
[2] *Ibid.*
[3] G. Radcliffe-Brown, *The Study of Kinship Systems*, in "The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland", LXXI (1941-2), pp. 1-18 (p. 2). By "elementary family", Radcliffe-Brown means a man, a woman and their children, "whether they are living together or not"; a childless couple, in this sense, *is not* a family. It should be remarked that, for Radcliffe-Brown, children can be acquired "by adoption as well as by birth" (*ibidem*); this seems to be purposely neglected by Lévi-Strauss, who equates the elementary and the biological family.
[4] C. Lévi-Strauss, *Structural Anthropology*, cit., p. 50.

reproduction, can be distinguished from any broader kinship relation-ships: as well as the latter, which anthropologists know to be culturally constructed and, for this reason, subject to wide differences from group to group, it depends on culture. For Lévi-Strauss even the closest blood relations can exist only within a system, just like those that give rise to more complex ones: all social institutions are symbolic, i.e., they all be-long to the structure.

According to Radcliffe-Brown, the natural family – consisting of a fa-ther, a mother and their children – is universal because sexual intercourse between a man and a woman is the only way for humans to procreate. The three primary relationships derive from it: the one between parents, the one between parents and children, and lastly the one between sib-lings. Starting from this objective fact, every cultural system elaborates structures of extended kinship, a process in which each group can take different paths. Lévi-Strauss states that, in order for there to be a hus-band and a wife, first there must be rules of exchange of males and fe-males between already formed groups. The nuclear family can exist only through certain forms of marriage, which are defined by positive rules of exchange of individuals among groups (exogamic rules). Before the establishment of the mother-father-child relationship, each group must *already* have defined who can marry whom and who cannot; the cultural rules that allow the existence of marriage, therefore, precede the elemen-tary family, rather than being founded on it. One could certainly think of a state of total promiscuity, in which exogamic rules are absent; but in such situation there would not even be the stable and objective bonds that Radcliffe-Brown claims to be primary, that is, there would be no family at all. Therefore, Lévi-Strauss concludes, the elementary family can exist only within the system and obeys its grammar.

§ 2. The problem of origin

For Lévi-Strauss the laws that impose exogamy are therefore the found-ing aspect of any social institution; but what is their origin? In his opinion, there can be no answer to this question; its very formulation is actually not even epistemologically admissible. Girard's critique dwells precisely on this *epoché*: the ninth chapter of *Violence and the Sacred* aims to pose with renewed energy the question of the origin of symbolic thought and, consequently, of human society. Girard reproaches structural anthro-pologists for having stifled such an investigation, arbitrarily and hastily describing it as meaningless: there is no possible scientific answer to the question of the origin of the "system", they say, because no one can place themselves outside of society and explain how it came into existence. In

Le totémisme aujourd'hui Lévi-Strauss had stated: "we do not know, and never shall know, anything about the first origin of beliefs and customs the roots of which plunge into a distant past"[5]; the main reason of this assessment lies in his refusal to give psychology a role in the explanation of social structures and of human behaviour: "men do not act, as members of a group, in accordance with what each feels as an individual; each man feels as a function of the way in which he is permitted or obliged to act"[6]. For this reason he also rejects Durkheim's theory of the origin of sacred from collective effervescence: "Durkheim's theory of the collective origin of the sacred […] rests on a *petitio principii*: it is not present emotions, felt at gatherings or ceremonies, which engender or perpetuate the rites, but ritual activity which arouses the emotions"[7]. Even though Durkheim thought that it makes no sense to think of a "state of nature" prior to society[8] and had restricted the scope of his research to the *relative* beginning of religion[9], his theory was for Lévi-Strauss too naive.

Girard blames Lévi-Strauss, and especially his disciples, of having issued a ban on the origin, cutting thus off the most relevant question in the research on human beings. The fearfulness of the contemporary thought consists in being content to provide a description, albeit elegant, of the state of things that represents the extreme horizon of knowledge; such self-censorship, he writes, cannot be found in Freud though, who dares to think about the origin and whose *Totem and Taboo* is therefore looked at as an embarrassing reverie (a "Just-So Story", as Freud himself ironically wrote[10]). In reality, according to Girard, the silence of the anthropologists does not stem from methodological rigor but, rather, from the fear of looking into the abyss of mimesis and violence, which shows us a very unrewarding image of humanity.

[5] C. Lévi-Strauss, *Totemism* (1962), tr. Rodney Needham, Merlin Press, London 1962, p. 70.
[6] *Ibid*.
[7] Ivi, p. 71. No wonder Lévi-Strauss never talks about Girard's work, which follows a strict logical thread going from psychology to anthropology.
[8] See É. Durkheim, *Le "contrat social" de Rousseau* (1918), ed. Jean-Marie Tremblay, Electronic Resource.
[9] "The study which we are undertaking is therefore a way of taking up again, *but under new conditions*, the old problem of the origin of religion. To be sure, if by origin we are to understand the very first beginning, the question has nothing scientific about it, and should be resolutely discarded. There was no given moment when religion began to exist, and there is consequently no need of finding a means of transporting ourselves thither in thought. Like every human institution, religion did not commence anywhere" (É. Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life* (1912), tr. Joseph Ward Swain, George Allen & Unwin, London 1915, p. 8).
[10] See S. Freud, *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego. The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, XVIII, reprint Vintage Books, New York 1999, p. 122.

The blow struck by Girard to the social sciences of his century is, in my opinion, harder than he actually meant it to be: in *Violence and the Sacred* he denies that the elementary family is a natural formation, revealing instead its reliance on a *real* historical event that happened in the distant past in different ways from group to group. Taking Lévi-Strauss's thesis about the social character of kinship to its logical consequences, Girard radicalizes it, just as he did with other thinkers, whom he considered insufficiently courageous: think for example of the theories of primary identification in *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego* or of the original murder in *Totem and Taboo*, pushed far beyond Freud's intentions. Going beyond and against Lévi-Strauss, Girard displays a particularly polemical vein, both because in 1972 Lévi-Strauss is at the peak of his activity, and because, as is well known, the personal relations between the two scholars were not at all friendly: far more famous than Girard, Lévi-Strauss never mentions his youngest colleague, who does not belong to the community of anthropologists operating "in the field". To Lévi-Strauss's disregard, Girard mimetically strives to show that his own theory is able to grasp reality more effectively than any investigation carried on in distant lands, rejecting the criticism according to which, in his works, "blood is only in the library"[11].

Girard starts his critique by examining a sentence that, in Lévi-Strauss's work, may seem of little importance: even the most elaborate system of relationships, we read, "must take biological parenthood carefully into account"[12]. Cultural systems may be formed in many ways but none of them can ignore the biological *fact* that, to have children, it takes a man and a woman. Lévi-Strauss thus grants Radcliffe-Brown a non-marginal point: even though the biological family is not the primary element, no system can ignore the natural laws of reproduction. To Girard the attempt to keep a deeply-rooted basis in nature appears to be in contrast with the structuralist approach, as it presupposes an absolute given (the biological laws), which would affect the system without being part of it. It is, substantially, an approach still vitiated by the "naturalist myth", that is, in Girard's words, by "the belief that a particular affinity exists between the "state of nature" and biological truth or even scientific truth in general"[13].

As we know, in *Violence and the Sacred* Girard states that the foundational moment of the system is "the mechanism of the surrogate victim"[14],

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[11] See R. Girard, *Letter to Pierre Pachet*, in M. R. Anspach (éd.), *René Girard*, Cahier de l'Herne, Éditions de l'Herne, Paris 2008, p. 61.
[12] C. Lévi-Strauss, *Structural Anthropology*. cit., p. 50.
[13] R. Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*, tr. Patrick Gregory, The Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore – London 1977, p. 225.
[14] Ivi, p. 235.

which is triggered by an event – the collective murder – that determines hominization and with which humans move on to culture; to support this hypothesis, he criticizes the idea that the structure "must take biological parenthood carefully into account". After taking the institution of family outside nature, Lévi-Strauss then takes a step back, arguing that every system must have its foundation in the universal laws of reproduction; in doing so, he makes it impossible to understand why we cannot "photograph" the origin, that is, the moment in which the symbolic system asserts itself on a natural basis. If biology precedes culture, it is theoretically possible to investigate how the transition takes place from one to the other, but the only basis on which structural anthropology supports this possibility is the recourse to "the permanent traits of human nature", thus recurring to an essence which cannot be known and which is misleadingly identified with the real laws of biology.

If there is a gap between nature and culture, as Lévi-Strauss himself had claimed, then *every* social structure, including the one which originates from the reproductive process, is already internal to the system. The human "essence" does not univocally determine the social institutions, which originate from very distant events but that can be, nevertheless, obtained via hypotheses. The beginning of culture cannot be based on the laws of biology, which men initially ignored and which they only gradually and painfully learned over history, nor on a supposedly immutable essence; instead, it must derive from needs and behaviors that depend on the historical conditions of human groups. These conditions, of course, almost infinitely vary from place to place and from time to time, conferring upon the structure of family a high degree of arbitrariness; the understanding and conveyance of the social outcomes of the original event is therefore not the distancing and diversification from a unique and universal model belonging to human nature, but rather the continuation of the effects of an act of violence that happened in different ways and whose development is subject to almost infinite variations. But since the system born from this origin does not cease to change, it is possible that different forms of family appear, never experienced before. As we will see in the final paragraph, this point is of the utmost importance in shaping a few consequences of Girard's position which, very likely, he himself had not foreseen.

§ 3. Scientific truth and cultural system

One might think that, sticking to Girard's theory, we would end up devaluing scientific truths, which would become nothing but arbitrary attributions of meaning, marked by the same relativism that applies

to the manifold forms of social life; as we will see, however, this does not happen. Undoubtedly, Girard rejects the idea that past knowledge needs to be "demystified" by the superior knowledge of the modern scientist: "in severing the cord that attached us to the matrix of all mythic thought, this liberator of humanity will have delivered us from dark ancestral falsehood and led us into the luminous world of truth. Our hard and pure science is to be the result of a *coupure épistémologique*"[15]. Such "scientific angelism springs from a deep-rooted reluctance, philosophical and even religious in origin, to admit that *truth can coexist with the arbitrary*"[16]. Yet, a sharp distinction between our knowledge and ancient beliefs exists: "there is such a thing as *false* symbolic thought (for example, the assumption that childbirth is the result of a woman's possession by spirits) as well as *true* symbolic thought (for example, the assumption that childbirth is the result of the sexual union of man and woman)"[17]. Some cultural products work better than others. It is true that modern biology arises within a very specific context, but the idea that women are impregnated by the spirit of a place, not during sexual intercourse, can be defined false insofar we try to find means to control the social aspects of reproduction (e.g. the attribution of paternity). We can certainly admit that our biology belongs to a cultural system, much like the knowledge of reproduction of any other group depends on the circumstances that prompted its elaboration; however, it allows us to control the reproductive process more effectively than different theoretical constructions. Considering truth in a pragmatic way, as a problem-solving tool, we can state that the symbolic knowledge, including our science, is true as it allows the achievement of socially significant goals for the group that elaborates it; as in Durkheim, social ineffectiveness is the only true mistake[18]. Modern biology makes it possible, for

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[15] Ivi, p. 233.

[16] *Ibid.*; my italics. Girard emphasizes for example Lévi-Strauss's weak attempt to tone this dualism down by distinguishing the ancient "savage thought" or "bricolage" from the modern "thought of the engineers"; this would also explain why he hesitates on affirming not that kinship systems "depend" on biological facts, but only that they take them "carefully into account".

[17] Ivi, p. 229.

[18] "It is undeniably true that errors have been able to perpetuate themselves in history; but, except under a union of very exceptional circumstances, they can never perpetuate themselves thus unless they were true practically, that is to say, unless, without giving us a theoretically exact idea of the things with which they deal, they express well enough the manner in which they affect us, either for good or for bad. Under these circumstances, the actions which they determine have every chance of being, at least in a general way, the very ones which are proper, so it is easily explained how they have been able to survive the proofs of experience. But an error and especially a system of errors which leads to, and can lead to nothing but mistaken and useless practices, has no chance of living" (É. Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*, cit., p. 80).

example, to develop methods of increasing or reducing the number of births; in societies with different social structures, such aim would be of much lesser interest.

Many factors made modern biology possible; one of which, certainly quite important to Girard, is the affirmation of the elementary family as the primary social unit; the narrowing of incest prohibitions (for Girard, unlike Lévi-Strauss, prohibitions come before positive rules[19]) to the mother-father-children relationships, has channelled all our attention and knowledge on the problem of paternity. Our world "reduces the principle of exogamy to its simplest forms and requires in consequence only the minimum number of prohibitions necessary to bring out the basic facts of generation"[20]. On the contrary, a more complex kinship system, like the ones of previous cultures, is unable to bring out the basic biological laws, which are "somewhat lost in a maze of other distinctions"[21].

Biological laws are obviously inescapable for Girard, but the formal recognition that a human group has of them is the decisive factor for the systemization of social norms; even for Lévi-Strauss of course, it is only what is known that determines the social production of a norm. But what Girard adds is decisive; he states that what you want to know depends on what interests you. Scientific discoveries on human reproduction are the result of an investigation that is not neutral, conducted only out of intellectual curiosity, but "commanded" by needs of crucial interest to the social order. It is the decisive importance of the identification of the father, for example, that has led many "patriarchal" societies to identify the exact biological contribution of the male, overcoming the difficulty of a long interval (a few weeks) between the sexual intercourse and the woman's realization of being pregnant. The explanation according to which pregnancy depends on the spirit of a place (and more precisely of the place where the woman first becomes aware of the changes in her body) is good enough for a society that does not entirely revolve around a male-controlled family. On the other hand, if paternity represents a decisive element of stability of male domination, the reproductive process *must* be investigated more carefully, in order to establish a safer causal link between the child and the father. It is therefore the social imperative of binding a woman to a man, with whom there is a legal contract (marriage) and who then has complete authority

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[19] "I have […] adopted a point of view diametrically opposed to that of Lévi-Strauss: for me, prohibitions come first […]. Positive exchanges are merely the reverse of prohibitions, the result of a series of maneuvers or avoidance taboos designed to ward off outbreaks of rivalry among the males. Terrified by the fearful consequences of endogamous reciprocity, men have created the beneficial reciprocity of exogamic exchange" (R. Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*, cit., p. 239).

[20] Ivi, p. 229.

[21] *Ibid*.

over her and over the children, to provide an extraordinary impulse to the elaboration of a different biological knowledge. Girard's previously quoted statement that "truth can coexist with the arbitrary" can be displayed by the following example: "as far as the facts of reproduction are concerned, it is true that our system is as arbitrary as any other. For as far as real biological functioning is concerned, it scarcely matters whether a system forbids a man to marry either (1) his mother, his sisters, his daughters, and any of the women of tribe X; or (2) his mother, his sisters and his daughters only. The biological machinery works neither better nor worse in the first case than in the second"[22]. But the simplicity of our family gave us the opportunity to focus our interest for the reproductive process on issues which are equally simple, much easier to solve than the ones implied by a more complex kinship system; from this radical simplification, Girard says, comes the greater success of our understanding efforts, which led to modern biology.

The discovery of simpler and better biological laws has brought our culture to the belief that the elementary family is "natural", thus reversing the historical process by which it is the social structure that determines *what one knows* (or tries to know) about nature, and not the other way round. One of the consequences of this logical and historical *hysteron proteron* is the possibility of standardizing social institutions in order to sanction anomalous relationships, which are considered unnatural when they actually just do not comply with the grammar of the system. As Girard's well known interpretation of Sophocles's *Oedipus rex*, the victimization of the protagonist is the cause of the accusation of incest that is made against him, not its consequence; and the implacable investigation about whose son Oedipus is, prompted by himself under the menacing pressure of the citizens of Thebes, displays at best the conditions under which the quest for paternity has become a major aim of our culture. By retrieving Freud's notion of the incest prohibition as a norm that brothers give themselves in order to avoid rivalry, Girard can explain why some human groups began to investigate biological laws with a tenacity that was probably not necessary in different societies.

§ 4. Nature and normativity

The consequences of this paradigm shift are huge: in opposition to the Greek-Medieval model of the natural family, still in 1972 the foundational notion of social institutions, Girard proposes a system that is solely cultural. It is the system itself that defines fundamental human re-

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[22] Ivi, pp. 229-230.

lationships, not nature: "the system truly comes first"[23] is a sentence that destroys the traditional idea of family, whether Girard realizes it or not.

The family institution is separated from its supposed biological basis, on which it was founded by a line of thought that began much earlier than Aristotle and that has been taken up without exception by thinkers of all times. This nature-based conception of the family is also obviously the foundation of the Christian social theory, according to which what is "natural" corresponds to the divine Law and is therefore perpetually normative. Nature does not change, therefore the notion of family cannot change, since it derives from the immutable laws of biology. In contrast to this position, Girard paves the way to the idea that family is the product of an original event, therefore dependent on accidental circumstances. The inalterability of biological laws does not in any way imply the existence of a single way to define the family, which can be constituted in different ways and which is subject to change as a result of the group's changed needs.

The laws of biology, first investigated to provide solid elements to support a cultural system through the recognition of stable relationships, now allow procedures that are just as "natural" as mating, like assisted reproduction; in the same way, the inclusion of non-heterosexual couples in the concept of family, for example through adoption or surrogacy, allows just as much stability to the parental nucleus as to any heterosexual family. Even though they are defined as "monstrous" by traditionalists, they are based on the exact knowledge of reproductive mechanisms and on sustainable social models which cause no particular harm, just like other practices we have long been recurring to, such as the adoption of the partner's child or the recognition of children born out of wedlock. Like any other cultural foundation, the powerful mythogenesis that narrates about a heavenly Father, and the two primordial parents He gave us, is not based on Nature, but on a long series of social institutions that have undergone profound changes throughout history. The elementary family, according to Girard, is the result of an event that took place long ago and that has more or less efficiently satisfied, for a very long time, the main needs of almost all human groups. Like all institutions born out of the founding violence, however, it has generated contradictions and produced an incalculable amount of suffering: the utmost harshness of sanctions against non-standard bonds; the disparagement of children born out of wedlock; the suppression of all forms of unconventional sexuality; the refusal to grant the aid of reproductive medicine to childless couples (even to heterosexual ones, legitimately united in marriage); the impos-

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[23] Ivi, p. 227.

sibility of accessing forms of practical mutual support for unmarried couples; the contempt for cultures in which family norms were, albeit slightly, different from ours. The list goes on.

If we focus our attention on the consequences of Girard's critique of the naturalist myth, it is evident that the hard-core defenders of the natural family, by not recognizing its cultural and contingent aspect, cannot see how different forms of interhuman relationship are actually as natural as the traditional one. It is ironic how, by criticizing Lévi-Strauss, Girard actually gets to a point that can only be described as the beginning of an ethico-anthropological revolution, still unacceptable to many fifty years later. But this is true of many ideas expressed in his 1972 book, characterized by such an open-mindedness, both ethical and philosophical, which is way more powerful than what Girard himself has later on written. Any argument aimed at establishing norms on the basis of natural laws is without foundation: all prohibitions are systemic, that is, cultural, and therefore relative to a context. Staying true to Girard, we must renounce any argument of a natural character that presumes to prove the immutability of a social institution, including the biological family. The bioethical doctrine of the Church finds in the catholic Girard the worst possible opponent of its most sacred, and most violent, assumptions.

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Maria Stella Barberi[*]
Misconoscimento e santità della vittima espiatoria

L'interesse per il sacro e per le religioni extraeuropee ha coinvolto molti ambiti della cultura, già a partire dalla metà del XVIII secolo, anche grazie all'espansione degli imperi coloniali, che favorirono la scoperta dei culti e delle tradizioni indigene, poi divulgate soprattutto dai Padri Gesuiti. Per la nascita dell'antropologia, della sociologia e della psicologia in senso moderno dobbiamo tuttavia guardare al XIX secolo. Queste discipline nascono, sia detto incidentalmente, in seno allo stravolgimento degli ordini politici dell'Europa, provocato dai moti rivoluzionari del 1848 e dall'unificazione tedesca seguita alla sconfitta di Napoleone III e alla Comune del 1871. La contemporanea e generalizzata crisi della tradizione ebraico-cristiana viene a completare un quadro storico di cui interessa sottolineare la percezione che la cultura ha di sé stessa. Nel XIX e nel XX secolo, il processo di demitizzazione delle scienze naturali e il pregiudizio eurocentrico, nell'analisi dei miti e dei riti primitivi, s'intrecciano con il riconoscimento dell'importanza del sacrificio nella genesi delle più antiche culture. La coscienza emancipatoria dell'individualismo moderno ha conferito a tale intreccio di mitizzazione del religioso e di demitizzazione delle scienze naturali un accento particolare. Sia nei suoi aspetti romantici, universalistici e cosmopolitici, relativi alla morale, al diritto e al potere, sia nei suoi aspetti positivistici di progressismo illuminista e ateo, l'individualismo moderno si presenta come una forza neutralizzante e depoliticizzante, distruttiva del precedente ambito storico – quello che Schmitt chiama "grado storico della coscienza spaziale"[1].

Il rinnovato interesse per il sacro ha certamente fatto emergere tratti genealogici evolutivo-regressivi che prevalgono su quelli storico-spaziali attinenti alla "santificazione" del suo stesso principio fondativo. Ovviamente, utilizzando i termini "sacro" e "santo", dobbiamo tenere conto delle numerose intersezioni, dei contatti culturali, dei mutamenti, dei

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[1] Per l'espressione schmittiana "l'arte rappresenta un grado storico della coscienza spaziale", cfr. C. Schmitt, *Terra e mare,* Adelphi, Milano 2002, p. 70.

prestiti, delle creazioni spirituali e delle reciproche influenze che (come ricorda, fra gli altri, Mircea Eliade) implicano differenze anche notevolissime tra singoli popoli e singole culture. D'altro canto, dobbiamo pure constatare che il *sacro* non è disgiungibile dal sacrificio (*sacrificium*): perciò si distingue dal *santo*, cui invece è propria la tendenza a farsi modello d'autorità (*augeo*) e di forza ricevuta (secondo la lezione di Georges Dumézil); senza naturalmente dimenticare l'accezione militare della nozione di *santo*, applicata allo spazio aperto in una zona recintata – questa, sì, propriamente sacra (Émile Benveniste)[2]. Infine – e più in generale – vanno considerate sacre le azioni che (immediatamente e profondamente oppure ciclicamente e gerarchicamente) unificano l'uomo alla forza originaria, il sacro in sé; laddove santo è qualcosa o qualcuno distinto dal "consueto", "preservato dall'ingiuria degli uomini" e perciò santificato perché "sancito" da una separazione. Se quindi la distinzione tra il santo

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[2] Secondo Émile Benveniste, *sacer* sta in relazione diretta con *sacrificare*, mettere a morte; perché "il sacrificio è strutturato in modo che il profano comunichi con il divino, con l'intermediario del prete e per mezzo dei riti". Sacro è il sacrificio che unisce i due universi, il profano e il divino. *Sanctus* invece per Benveniste è (secondo la definizione del *Digestum*, 1.8.8) "tutto ciò che è difeso e protetto dall'ingiuria degli uomini", dunque esso rappresenta un'operazione che stabilisce ciò che è proibito con una pena sancita da una legge. Cfr. É. Benveniste, *Il vocabolario delle istituzioni indeuropee*, Einaudi, Torino 1976, pp. 426-427. Queste e ulteriori considerazioni di Benveniste chiariscono la differenza del santo dal sacro e dal profano; il sacro (*sacer*) pertiene esclusivamente all'essere, sia che lo si consideri come uno stato naturale oppure come una misteriosa, originaria e assoluta qualità vitale nel suo valore di forza e di energia; mentre il *sanctus* è il risultato (o lo strumento) di un'operazione che divide e insieme media fra l'uomo e la divinità. Inoltre per Benveniste la formazione di *sanctus* ha carattere secondario, perché le nozioni di *sacer* e di *sanctus* non sono sovrapponibili al punto che *via*, *dies* e *mons* sono *sacri*, mentre *lex* e *murus* sono sempre *sancti* (cfr. ivi, p. 428). La stessa distinzione rintracciata nei termini latini *sacer* e *sanctus* si ritrova nei termini greci *hierós* e *ágios*: anche in greco, come del resto nelle lingue indoeuropee e in molti idiomi non indoeuropei, "esiste una dualità di nozioni: [...] ciò che è pieno di una potenza divina; ciò che è proibito al contatto degli uomini" (ivi, p. 441). Richiamando i due aspetti, quello positivo del sacro e quello negativo del santo, Mircea Eliade giunge alla conclusione che la mancanza nell'indoeuropeo comune di un termine specifico per designare il "sacro" e parallelamente di un termine comune per indicare il "sacrificio" sta a indicare come "sin dalla protostoria comune, i diversi popoli indoeuropei mostravano la tendenza a reinterpretare continuamente la loro storia" (M. Eliade, *Storia delle credenze e delle idee religiose,* vol. I, Sansoni editore, Firenze 1979, pp. 211-212). Più radicale la presa di posizione di Georges Dumézil: "Da un lato sta il sacro per separazione [...] ciò che è stato scisso dall'uso quotidiano e appartiene a un dio. Dall'altro lato sta il sacro positivo, la qualità indefinibile ma evidente nei suoi effetti che distingue dal consueto taluni esseri e talune cose. Verso il primo aspetto del sacro l'uomo mostra un atteggiamento di riserva e di timore; [...] la pietà si esprime soprattutto nei divieti: non toccare, non entrare, o farlo solo in casi determinati, con determinate precauzioni. Verso il secondo aspetto del sacro l'atteggiamento dell'uomo è più sfumato, il rispetto è soprattutto ammirativo e non esclude la fiducia e una certa familiarità [...] la pietà si esprime nella preghiera nell'offerta, praticamente in tutte le azioni cultuali" (G. Dumézil, *La religione romana arcaica*, Rizzoli, Milano 2001, p. 125).

che divide e il sacro che unifica inerisce soltanto in parte a due sistemi, quello sacrificale antico e quello ebraico-cristiano, essa tuttavia fornisce un'utile guida per un confronto con alcuni caratteri religiosi e giuridici, sia primari sia secondari, dai quali René Girard muove per riflettere, a vario titolo, sull'origine delle istituzioni umane.

In effetti, Girard non si limita a indicare i meccanismi primitivi della violenza indifferenziatrice e della sua pacificazione: in *La violenza e il sacro*, rintraccia il modo in cui questi meccanismi "misconosciuti" ma comunque inaccessibili alla ricostruzione storica strutturano la "potenza generatrice" dell'umano, lo fondano, nell'atto massimamente religioso del sacrificio. Su questo aspetto vorrei qui soffermarmi, analizzando i capitoli VII e VIII, dedicati a un confronto con il Freud di *Totem e tabù*.

Com'è noto, Freud additò nell'assassinio del padre primigenio il motore della civiltà e la fonte del suo disagio. Anche Girard scorge le origini della cultura nelle crisi di violenza, sempre pronte a fare implodere le proto-società umane sotto il peso delle molteplici rivalità. Il "misconoscimento"[3] inerente alla soluzione di quelle crisi implica che l'azione collettiva sia capace di polarizzarsi sulla elezione – messa da parte e messa a morte – di un soggetto che degli altri e per gli altri sopporti la colpa. Quest'azione santifica la "vittima espiatoria", la acquisisce alla duplicazione e all'espulsione della colpa, in una sorta di ritorno salvifico, datore di vita: è il vero e proprio nucleo o principio morfogenetico del mito, che il rito ripete e da cui trae origine la tragedia.

Le pagine di Freud sul coro della tragedia riprendono questo quadro: una folla composta da individui tutti uguali, senza volto, si distingue di fronte all'eroe singolo, che deve, egli solo, rispondere della colpa[4]. Girard

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[3] "Nel religioso, il pensiero moderno sceglie sempre gli elementi più assurdi (perlomeno in apparenza), quelli che sembrano sfidare ogni interpretazione razionale; insomma fa sempre in modo di confermare la giustezza della sua decisione fondamentale riguardo al religioso, e cioè che esso non ha nessun rapporto di nessun tipo con nessuna realtà. Questo misconoscimento non durerà più a lungo" (R. Girard, *La violenza e il sacro*, Adelphi, Milano 1980, p. 304).

[4] Cfr. R. Girard, *La violenza e il sacro*, cit., p. 278 ss. Nella Relazione introduttiva e nelle successive discussioni a un Convegno organizzato nell'autunno del 1983 da Robert Hamerton-Kelly, René Girard continuò a sviluppare le linee critiche del suo confronto con Freud sulla funzione del mito e della tragedia. Vedi R. Girard, *Il capro espiatorio generativo*, in W. Burkert, R. Girard, J. Z. Smith, *Origini violente. Uccisione rituale e genesi culturale*, a cura di R.G. Hamerton-Kelly; ed. it. a cura di M.S. Barberi e G. Fornari, Giuffrè, Milano 2018, pp. 111-215 (ed. or.: W. Burkert, R. Girard, J. Z. Smith, *Violent Origins. Ritual Killing and Cultural Formation*, a cura di Robert G. Hamerton-Kelly, Stanford University Press, California 1987). Ricordo che nel 1972, l'anno di pubblicazione della *Violenza e il sacro*, Walter Burkert pubblicò *Homo necans*. Appunto nel Convegno del 1983, Girard e Burkert, partendo da presupposti diversi, analizzarono il fenomeno del sacro come violenza sacrificale, sostenendo entrambi che al cuore delle religioni arcaiche sta l'assassinio rituale di una vittima (uomo o animale assimilabile all'uomo per

sottolinea al riguardo come l'uguaglianza reale fra coro ed eroe prepari, attraverso l'indifferenziazione rituale, la via alla differenza mitica. Questa però non rispecchia semplicemente gli aspetti simmetrici del rituale (altrimenti riconducibili alla percezione della violenza e all'individuazione della vittima), ma immette nel coro, espressione della folla, il *pathos* di una comunanza che culmina poi nella mediazione affettiva, desiderante, dell'eroe, emblematica vittima espiatoria.

Il mito*,* sostiene Girard, "non può mettersi dinanzi alla nuda verità dell'evento, a cui, per qualche ragione imperscrutabile, risale l'esperienza del sacro, e tuttavia, in quanto resoconto di quell'evento, e se intende ricordarlo nel modo più veritiero che gli è possibile, non nei termini che si preferirebbero, ma in quelli resi possibili dall'avvenimento reale"[5]. E poiché i persecutori sono coinvolti nell'evento che il racconto presenta come fondativo di comunità, il mito non può essere visto come una menzogna sui crimini attribuiti agli eroi (si tratti dei capri espiatori trasfigurati dei miti o dei protagonisti della tragedia). A un tempo criminale e salvatore, "nella forma tragica ereditata dal mito e dal rituale, l'eroe, per molto tempo unico, occupa realmente la posizione dominante e centrale che gli riconosce Freud"[6]. Le azioni dell'eroe, sempre parzialmente fedeli alla comunità o alla divinità contro le quali sembravano essere rivolte, non comportano una cosciente colpevolezza, ma una pesante responsabilità oggettiva; neanche ai membri della comunità si può imputare la colpa del trattamento inflitto alla vittima, dal momento che essi non sembrano avere avuto altra scelta per la salvezza della vita collettiva. Il malessere, il disagio che accompagnano l'uccisione sacra, tanto nel mito quanto negli antichi culti e nella tragedia, rispecchiano una tale dislocazione rituale della colpevolezza e della responsabilità, una via di mezzo fra la "menzogna" del persecutore e la verità del sacrificio che nella tragedia non si rivela. Di ciò d'altronde troviamo traccia, pur tra abbellimenti e rimozioni, nella storia di tutte le religioni e nei valori dell'umanismo.

I racconti e le rappresentazioni, i riti sacri e anche la tragedia dispongono all'equilibrio o all'equidistanza, alla giusta distribuzione delle parti tra vittima e linciatori: è il punto mediano da cui i linciatori rinascono come discendenti di un antenato comune, "innocentizzati" dalla risoluzione della crisi di una collettività. In riferimento alla nascita delle istituzioni sacrificali, la vittima è sempre colpevole, non certo in

Girard; animale per Burkert). Si veda anche R. Girard, *Violenza e rappresentazione nel testo mitico*, in Id., *La voce inascoltata della realtà*, a cura di G. Fornari, Adelphi, Milano 2006, pp. 27-56).
[5] R. Girard, *Il capro espiatorio generativo*, in W. Burkert, R. Girard, J. Z. Smith, *Origini violente. Uccisione rituale e genesi culturale*, cit., pp. 148-149.
[6] R. Girard, *La violenza e il sacro*, cit., p. 281.

senso psicologico-morale, ma secondo il "criterio" propriamente mitico-rituale del misconoscimento della violenza.

Il padre primigenio di Freud, la vittima espiatoria di Girard e gli eroi tragici sopportano le esigenze della civiltà così come la civiltà stessa se le rappresenta; tant'è che Freud si chiede "perché l'eroe della tragedia deve soffrire e che significa la sua 'tragica' colpa?". Girard cita estesamente la risposta di Freud:

> Egli deve soffrire perché è il progenitore, l'eroe della grande tragedia primordiale […] che trova qui una rappresentazione tendenziosa; quanto poi alla colpa tragica, è quella che egli deve addossarsi per liberarne il coro. Gli eventi che si svolgono sulla scena rappresentano una deformazione, che potrebbe dirsi ipocrita e raffinata, di eventi veramente storici. In ogni realtà antica, furono precisamente i membri del coro la causa delle sofferenze dell'eroe; qui, invece, si profondono in lamenti e in manifestazioni di simpatia, come se l'eroe stesso fosse la causa delle proprie sofferenze. Il delitto che gli viene imputato, l'insolenza e la rivolta contro una grande autorità, è appunto quello stesso che in realtà pesa sui membri del coro, la schiera dei fratelli. Ed è così, dunque, contro la sua volontà, che l'eroe tragico è promosso redentore del coro.[7]

Sebbene la parte assegnata al coro e quella attribuita all'eroe sulla scena teatrale ripeta la scena primitiva ("la grande tragedia primordiale", "la scena storica"), il travisamento, la rappresentazione tendenziosa e la raffinata ipocrisia di cui parla Freud servono non tanto a discolpare i sacrificatori e a colpevolizzare le vittime, quanto a stabilire una coerenza tra le posizioni tragiche e le posizioni mitico-rituali, pubbliche e oggettive.

A ragione, Girard avverte di essere qui in sintonia con Freud; entrambi infatti antepongono all'interpretazione del genere tragico il ruolo religioso della vittima espiatoria, responsabile per la comunità (che promuove il racconto del mito e la rappresentazione della tragedia). D'altra parte, non va dimenticato che a suggello di *Totem e tabù* figura il faustiano "in principio era l'Azione", inteso come principio mitopoietico della storia: giacché l'azione desiderata e compiuta dall'orda sul padre primigenio "è per così dire un sostituto del pensiero". Non bisogna quindi esitare a chiedersi se davvero il religioso tragga origine dal "*senso creativo della colpa* […] per produrre nuove prescrizioni morali […] come espiazione per i misfatti compiuti"[8]. L'azione rituale ha troppa assonanza con l'azione colpevole per poterne fornire la spiegazione: semplicemente, aggira l'ostacolo che il mito dell'origine gli oppone, senza d'altronde poter dare altrimenti prova di sé.

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[7] Ivi, pp. 278-279. Cfr. S. Freud, *Totem e tabù*, in Id., *Totem e tabù – Psicologia delle masse e analisi dell'io*, Bollati Boringhieri, Torino 2011, pp. 177-178.
[8] S. Freud, *Totem e Tabù*, cit., p. 178.

Nella freudiana uccisione del padre primigenio, la ricostruzione filogenetica del desiderio, delle sue leggi e dei suoi divieti, non riesce a evadere dall'*impasse* evolutiva del senso di colpa. La riconciliazione *post-mortem* con il padre primigenio non salva l'io, non prospetta all'essere desiderante quella via di fuga interna che riduce il mito dell'origine a una filosofia unitaria dell'azione-pensiero. L'io è insalvabile – come ritengono Ernst Mach, Robert Musil e Hugo von Hoffmannsthal –, non già perché è un insieme di sensazioni e di esigenze culturali più o meno irreconciliabili, ma perché fa parte di una rete di relazioni osservabili, cui Freud e Girard hanno dato, volta per volta, i nomi del disagio, di peste emozionale, di menzogna romantica o di irrealismo nichilista. Con la stessa baldanza demistificatoria, Freud in viaggio alla volta dell'America (il paese che, nella sua Costituzione, sancisce il diritto alla felicità) dice: "non sanno ancora che stiamo portando loro la peste"; e Girard (in *La voce inascoltata della realtà*): "il desiderio mimetico è una teoria realista dell'irrealismo del desiderio". Torneremo più avanti sulle affinità tra il mito dell'origine in Girard e la mitologia del desiderio di Freud. Intanto, vorremmo proporre alcune osservazioni su *Totem e tabù*.

L'uccisione del padre primigenio è, secondo Freud, l'atto o il misfatto che ha dato inizio alla civiltà e che "da allora non cessa di tormentare l'umanità". Ma quale significato dobbiamo attribuire al doppio contratto che ne è seguito: con il padre, nel banchetto sacrificale, e, tra i fratelli, con l'interdizione dell'incesto? Forse, esso preserva e stabilizza la progressione filogenetica della civiltà su un duplice principio formale: protezione religiosa dalla colpa dell'uccisione del padre, all'esterno, affermazione dell'interdetto dell'incesto, all'interno? Oppure, il doppio contratto conserva – occulta, ma anche trattiene – nelle proprie fondamenta l'unica fonte ontogenetica dell'ordine pre-simbolico e pre-giuridico? O, ancora, il doppio contratto prospetta una problematica associazione (regressiva e progressiva a un tempo) tra il sacrificio totemico e la costituzione dei riti religiosi e dell'esogamia? Ci troviamo di fronte ad altrettante possibili critiche dell'origine culturale del doppio contratto. Girard sottolinea il segno razionalista tanto dell'alleanza stabilita *post-mortem* con il fondatore della religione quanto dell'"inversione" tipicamente moderna della colpa condivisa da "tutti i falsi innocenti". Contro tali razionalizzazioni e inversioni, egli punta sul *pathos* che orienta il misconoscimento della vittima espiatoria sulla comunità del sacrificio (comunità del pasto, comunità della giustizia) con "*il suo dio e l'animale [che] erano dello stesso sangue*, membri di un solo e medesimo clan"[9]. In questo senso, per Girard, in *Totem e tabù*, l'omicidio "non

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[9] R. Girard, *La violenza e il sacro*, cit., p. 273.

serve a niente, perlomeno sul piano in cui si suppone debba servire […] la genesi dei divieti sessuali"[10]. Un *sacrificio inutile* sta all'origine della cultura, anzi, sul piano funzionale, controproducente più che inutile: opposto alle regole comportamentali delle proto-società umane, perché l'assassinio collettivo spezza la continuità tra le privazioni sessuali, da Darwin assegnate all'orda primitiva, e i divieti culturali dell'esogamia come "legge conscia: niente relazione sessuale all'interno del totem"[11]. L'importanza di tale rottura della continuità si esprime, secondo Girard, su più piani: 1. "Freud rifiuta tutti i punti di vista 'troppo razionali' che non tengono "in alcun conto il lato affettivo delle cose"; 2. "Freud osserva che, nel religioso, le opposizioni più radicali coincidono: quelle del bene e del male, della tristezza e della gioia, del permesso e del proibito. […] – e non è sorprendente poiché la festa e il sacrificio, in definitiva, non costituiscono che un solo e medesimo rito"[12]; 3. Ancora, e soprattutto, negli aspetti propriamente religiosi del totemismo Freud ritrova l'assassinio fondatore.

> Un medesimo *gioco della violenza che si inverte nel suo stesso parossismo, grazie alla mediazione, in verità, di quell'omicidio collettivo di cui Freud vede mirabilmente la necessità ma il cui carattere operatorio gli sfugge, perché non scopre il meccanismo della vittima espiatoria.* Solo tale meccanismo permette di comprendere perché, man mano che si compie, l'immolazione sacrificale, dapprima criminale, 'svolti' letteralmente verso la *santità.* Esiste con ogni evidenza un rapporto stretto, e persino un'identità fondamentale, tra tale *metamorfosi* e l'atteggiamento di ogni gruppo nelle comunità totemiche, di fronte al proprio totem particolare.[13]

Il meccanismo della vittima espiatoria rigenera e santifica l'azione dei sacrificatori; svolge l'esigenza di partecipazione unanime alla santità. Così, progressivamente, il "carattere operatorio", trasformativo, della santificazione viene a coincidere con lo spazio "operativo" – il *sacrum facere* – istituito, della immolazione. All'origine del meccanismo, anzi (e in fusione con l'originario potere generativo dello stesso meccanismo), sta la trasformazione del nemico di tutti in un oggetto simbolico condiviso o in una *persona* mediatrice del culto. "Il sacrificio – conclude Girard – è ciò che è nel *rito*, perché in un primo momento è stato qualcos'altro e perché conserva questo qualcos'altro come modello. Per conciliare la funzione con la genesi, per svelare completamente l'una per mezzo dell'altra, oc-

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[10] Ivi, p. 267.
[11] *Ibid.*
[12] Ivi, p. 270: "Sacrifici e feste coincidevano presso tutti i popoli, ogni sacrificio comportava una festa e non c'era festa senza sacrificio".
[13] Ivi, pp. 271-272, corsivi miei.

corre impadronirsi della chiave universale che Freud elude sempre: solo la vittima espiatoria può soddisfare tutte le esigenze ad un tempo"[14]. Del resto, egli aggiunge, "in numerose culture, l'uomo-animale, il mostro totemico, si definisce come *antenato*, giudice e guida"[15].

Sappiamo che nell'*Edipo a Colono* di Sofocle, la città di Tebe, dopo avere riversato la colpa su Edipo e dopo avere espulso il re, s'aspetta di riceverne le spoglie mortali perché la patria aspira a istituirne infine il santuario e il monumento funebre. Così, in una circolarità di ruoli, Edipo, da figlio empio ed esecrato, dovrebbe assurgere a padre offerto alla venerazione collettiva: ma egli si rifiuta di prendere il posto assegnatogli tra i figli-fratelli in lotta. L'azione santa dell'eroe tragico non assurge a fondamento, non *fonda ciò che resta*. Forse, si spiega così il motivo per cui Freud, in *Totem e tabù*, esclude le tragedie di Edipo dalle sue citazioni: Edipo non diventerà il padre ucciso, l'*antenato* totemico.

Edipo, per la legge del mito, del rituale e della tragedia, resta un eroe *hors-la-loi*; su di lui non può fondarsi la rappresentazione di una realtà condivisa. A lui non s'è potuta applicare fino in fondo quella *reductio ad unum*, di cui parla Giuseppe Fornari[16]. Perché il culto pubblico allude ai desideri di *molti*, sottratti all'appropriazione di parte e santificati; ma non sempre è esemplato sul rivolgimento, sul trauma improvviso e violento, risolutivo, e in definitiva benefico, della vicenda tragica, rappresentata nei suoi propri gesti e nei suoi propri eventi.

Il *pathos* unificante che René Girard riconosce in *Totem e tabù*, Jacques Lacan lo acquisisce come necessità dalla relazione simbolica, sincronica, con il padre primigenio, oggetto fobico del desiderio e dell'odio dei figli. Sul totemismo, questa è la reazione polemica di Lacan: "Siamo ancora a questo punto, in quanto evoluzionisti abbiamo bisogno di un antenato animale"[17]. Sembra una battuta provocatoria, ma rivela un tipo di lettura che accantona il totemismo evolutivo, ancora presente nel testo di Freud, per privilegiare quello simbolico, rotante attorno al Nome del Padre. Per Lacan, bisogna emendare Darwin e Freud su un punto capitale: l'evoluzione dell'uomo come specie naturale passa per l'invenzione di esseri naturali, ma essi esistono veramente nella vita simbolica. Il sacro ha una "ragione nel reale"[18]. L'uomo nasce incompleto – si dice – ed è il carattere segnatamente suppletivo della relazione con il padre che lo obbliga a creare degli esseri naturali (o sovrannaturali) per so-

[14] Ivi, pp. 276-277.
[15] Ivi, p. 272.
[16] G. Fornari, *La conoscenza tragica in Euripide e Sofocle*, Transeuropa, Massa 2013, pp. 335-339.
[17] J. Lacan, *Dei Nomi-del-Padre*, Einaudi, Torino 2006, p. 50.
[18] Cfr. J. Lacan, *Discorso ai cattolici*, prima conferenza tenuta a Roma il 9 marzo 1960, in *Dei Nomi-del-Padre*, cit., pp. 64-79.

pravvivere. Attribuire all'uomo una deficienza costitutiva torna utile alle psico-ermeneutiche. Ma basta a gettare l'ombra del sospetto sulla natura illusoria del religioso?

In effetti, non troviamo una chiara risposta a tale questione. Per tentarne una, dobbiamo fare un passo indietro. Girard sa come sia difficile unificare i due poli del pensiero freudiano: da una parte, l'identificazione con il padre e, dall'altra, il desiderio rigidamente oggettuale, che è l'inclinazione libidica per la madre. La dichiarata "coscienza del desiderio parricida e incestuoso" e l'"ingombrante necessità della rimozione e dell'inconscio" contrastano però con l'intuizione freudiana del modello identitario paterno. Girard asserisce che dove la *mimesis* verte sul desiderio paterno essa è "*anteriore a qualsiasi scelta di oggetto*"[19], e risulta pertanto totalizzante, tanto per il desiderio d'essere (non meramente coscienziale), quanto per il desiderio d'avere (non meramente oggettuale). Contro la pretesa autonomia del desiderio oggettuale, è dunque la *persona* del padre, paradigmaticamente e simbolicamente portatore dell'essere e dell'avere, che preordina e autorizza il desiderio di appropriazione.

La prospettiva di René Girard collega la figura paterna di Freud a quella di *qualunque* modello che dispieghi la mimesi e orienti il desiderio oggettuale nel susseguirsi, sempre impervio, delle possibili trasformazioni di un troppo specifico oggetto e di un troppo definito modello. Agli occhi dell'imitatore, la dipendenza "doppio vincolante" dal modello non è trasformabile in alcun modo nell'identità coscienziale del soggetto (all'*ergo sum*). D'altra parte implica non tanto il desiderio di prendere il posto del padre presso la madre, quanto l'ambizione ad appropriarsi culturalmente della paternità, per sostituire il padre sotto ogni aspetto, ideale e reale. Rivesta il ruolo di padre reale o ne costituisca un ideale compiuto e significante, il modello sottrae il desiderio imitativo al continuo e rischioso incedere delle crisi sacrificali verso l'indifferenza di un vuoto generalizzato; il suo interporsi modifica la mimesi, la rende indiretta portatrice di convergenti innovazioni e di appropriazioni creative, trasforma il presente in un ricordo e il ricordo in un presente. La relazione doppiamente vincolante imprigiona pertanto nell'unica forma di una vita vibrante di dolore il modello e l'oggetto dell'appropriazione; li inizia alla centralità mediatrice del sacro.

Qui la lezione di Girard enfatizza il segno positivo della mimesi nel commento *a contrario*, assai corrosivo, al Freud che si fa decostruttore e interprete disincantato della forma tragica, pronto a "ritrovare la reciprocità delle rappresaglie, restaurare la simmetria violenta, vale a dire correggere il *tendenzioso*". Gli elementi divisi, in lotta, fino all'autoannullamento

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[19] Vedi R. Girard, *La violenza e il sacro*, cit., p. 236 ss.

dell'eroe tragico, portatore della colpa, esprimono "quel *risentimento* moderno che mette sotto accusa la violenza altrui perché è presa essa stessa nell'andirivieni delle rappresaglie, cioè nel doppio gioco del modello e dell'ostacolo, nel circolo vizioso del desiderio mimetico"[20]. Per Freud sanzionare il tragico equivale allora a riconoscere fallita sia la mediazione della santità dell'eroe sia la tendenziosità imitativa della comunità: così, mentre demistifica la centralità del sacro, egli vanifica o almeno non coglie fino in fondo l'operatività del meccanismo della vittima espiatoria.

Per il Girard della *Violenza e il sacro*, invece, il misconoscimento della violenza (le sue metamorfosi, i doppi mostruosi già attivati dalle comunità totemiche) associa vittime ed eroi nella forma operativa, simbolica, trasformativa, della santificazione. Così, il meccanismo della vittima espiatoria sollecita le molteplici metamorfosi del desiderio mimetico: dal primo manifestarsi della violenza alla trasformabilità dell'azione collettiva, che vale come rielaborazione, magistero e interpretazione religiosa. Punto d'arrivo della violenza, il misconoscimento vira verso la santità, richiama una realtà superiore che ha ben altra valenza rispetto a quell'autonomia oggettuale che la psicoanalisi post-freudiana considera il punto di partenza del desiderio individuale. Il misconoscimento non può infatti vantare né la chiara indipendenza dell'oggetto desiderabile, né l'oscuro sottrarsi dell'oggetto della rivalità sia all'imitatore sia al modello-ostacolo. Il traumatico virare del misconoscimento verso la santità, in una dimensione spiazzata e sfasata, va ben oltre la "mediazione esterna" di *Menzogna romantica e verità romanzesca*, semplicemente sottratta al conflitto dei rivali dalla distanza temporale o istituzionale[21]. D'altra parte, con il moderno progredire verso la "mediazione interna", le crisi sacrificali, indifferenziatrici, si avvicinano e si attualizzano con il progressivo autonomizzarsi del desiderio, che opera "in modo graduale e misurato, senza scatenamento vero, senza violenza manifesta, senza infatuazione catastrofica né risoluzione di sorta. […] Il complesso di Edipo è occidentale e moderno, così come sono occidentali e moderne la neutralizzazione e la sterilizzazione relative di un desiderio mimetico sempre più libero dai suoi impedimenti […] che comporta la cancellazione completa del ruolo paterno"[22].

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[20] R. Girard, *La violenza e il sacro*, cit., p. 282 e p. 283; ma si legga anche p. 261: "L'assenza di ogni legge […] fa parte di un *risentimento* tipicamente moderno, ossia di una risacca del desiderio che va a frangersi non contro la legge, come pretende, ma contro il modello-ostacolo di cui il soggetto non vuole riconoscere la posizione dominante".

[21] Contro una comprensione statica e puramente classificatoria della "mediazione esterna" Girard si esprime in *Achever Clausewitz* (tr. it. R. Girard, *Portando Clausewitz all'estremo*, Adelphi, Milano 2008, pp. 64-67). In quel contesto, precisa che termini come "mediazione esterna" e "mediazione interna" o "crisi sacrificale" sono indicativi di momenti di un ciclo del sacro che li comprende entrambi.

[22] R. Girard, *La violenza e il sacro*, cit., p. 262.

Certamente, Freud mantiene irrisolte le tensioni e le spinte contrad-dittorie, dall'antropologia religiosa al complesso di Edipo. Manca il raccordo tra la colpa destinale e naturale (che per Kerényi, ad esempio, riconduce il figlio vittima verso la madre assassina, ultima frontiera della conoscenza interiorizzata come pulsione di morte[23]) e la colpa simbolica e pre-culturale (che Lacan rintraccia nei figli assassini abbandonati a sé stessi quando scoprono un bisogno di amore e di protezione che non li lascerà più).

Una realtà rimossa e irricomponibile sottostà quindi alla "prismatica" antropologia freudiana. La commistione dei piani storico-antropologico, scientifico-naturale e psico-sociale in opere come *Totem e tabù* e *Mosè e la nascita del monoteismo* è stata quasi unanimemente criticata e contestata; Freud per primo avanza dubbi e perplessità, in particolare nel *Mosè* – che si decide a pubblicare soltanto alla vigilia della morte e che conclude con una "condanna" senza appello del popolo ebraico, trasformato in un "fossile" dal mancato riconoscimento/pentimento per una colpa che non può assurgere a realtà. La colpa inespiata (inespiabile) è l'assassinio dell'ebreo Gesù, che ripete l'assassinio di Mosè l'egizio e, andando a ritroso nel tempo mitico, l'uccisione del padre primigenio. Freud afferma pertanto che la morte di Gesù conferma il mito dell'eroe. Nondimeno il popolo ebraico non ha potuto riconoscere in Lui il colpevole oggetto della compassione comune. Forse perché la morte di Gesù segna l'inizio di un nuovo più ampio monoteismo; ma forse anche per la ragione opposta, perché questo

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[23] Tra le numerose critiche sollevate dal totemismo freudiano, va ricordata ancora quella secondo cui esso si baserebbe in realtà su premesse matriarcali. Scrive Károly Kerényi: "Freud vide che il rito selvaggio è una variante della cerimonia il cui classico esempio è il sacrificio centrale del culto di Dioniso. Ciò che egli non vide e a cui non rifletté è che i personaggi del dramma […] erano donne e il loro amante-figlio [… la] vittima del parossismo ambivalente del loro amore dilaniante" (K. Kerényi, *Introduzione*, in S. Freud, *Totem e tabù*, cit., pp. 18-19). Né Freud vide che il pasto comune – "un'azione estremamente ambivalente" – collega la storia delle religioni, sia di epoche precedenti sia di epoche successive, all'ipotetico parricidio primordiale. Ingiustificato sul piano storico-antropologico, il modello totemico di Freud mette in campo gli universali "psico-sociali" dell'inconscio, noti sotto il nome di "complesso edipico"; basti ricordare che l'interpretazione freudiana della tragedia sofoclea ha conservato *soltanto* la colpa dell'incesto, proiettandola nell'universo immaginario, intrapsichico del desiderio per la madre (o per il padre, nel caso delle figlie). E il *senso creativo della colpa* non è un'attenuazione sufficiente a evitare che la relazione originaria con la madre-natura amata e tradita condizioni poi l'intera evoluzione mentale e spirituale dell'uomo. Così, allontanatosi dal ciclo nascita/crescita/morte, l'uomo resta come un pezzo di natura che gira su sé stessa: il desiderio sessuale per la madre e la morte del figlio amante sono un unico destino: in definitiva lo stesso destino di morte della civiltà, già rintracciabile nella "azione estremamente ambivalente" del banchetto sacrificale. La fonte di Freud per il sacrificio, come ricorda anche René Girard in *La violenza e il sacro*, è William Robertson Smith, autore delle *Lezioni sulla religione dei Semiti*, sebbene questi riporti un solo esempio di sacrificio consumato sulle carni crude, il rito del cammello praticato da parte dei saraceni del Sinai nel IV sec. d. C.

Gesù del mito cristiano comporta una regressione verso il mito più arcaico. Freud ci propone entrambe le tesi senza risolversi per l'una o per l'altra. Egli ha peraltro analizzato le implicazioni emancipatorie che la rimozione (ma Girard parlerebbe ironicamente di accantonamento) del desiderio ha nel divenire storico e culturale di aspirazioni spirituali normativizzate. Non ad altro conducono i positivismi "scientifico-naturale" e conoscitivo applicati ai fenomeni della coscienza. Ma alla fine del "romanzo storico di Mosè" Freud denuncia l'accidentato percorso della rimozione: "Gli Ebrei", egli scrive, "*non riuscirono a prendere parte al progresso implicito nella confessione*, per deformata che fosse, del *deicidio* […]. In un certo senso, così comportandosi, si sono fatti carico di una tragica colpa; per questo hanno pagato pesantemente il fio"[24].

L'ebraismo è divenuto "un fossile", quell'organismo che fu vitale non si è estinto per cause naturali, per consunzione o per lasciare spazio a una più evoluta specie spirituale. Quasi che in questo reperto archeologico fossero iscritti i segni della malattia che ha causato la fine del popolo ebraico, Freud vi osserva la volontà di potenza (di progresso), separata dalla confessione (del deicidio); quella tragica colpa attesta un fallimento, se non addirittura una ominazione incompiuta.

Progresso e confessione, "progresso implicito della confessione": da *Totem e tabù* fino al *Mosè* è ancora Edipo-l'eroe che con i legami dei suoi piedi e la cecità dei suoi occhi impedisce l'oblio della colpa nel tempo, nello svolgersi e il succedersi di età e generazioni. Il monoteismo mosaico si è manifestato come forza evolutiva, azione conoscitiva e progresso scientifico-naturale della civiltà. Ma nella storia sociale del popolo ebraico, la sostituibilità e corrispondenza morale tra colpevolezza e responsabilità oggettiva dei padri-eroi e colpevolezza e responsabilità soggettiva dei figli-linciatori non ha operato abbastanza in profondità, segno che la rimozione della colpa ha lasciato la relazione tra padri e figli nello stato di uno scarto interno, di un epifenomeno del desiderio. Preso tra l'inestirpabile bisogno di protezione e il rigetto dell'obbedienza, il popolo che non ha potuto riconoscere il deicidio ripresenta, attraverso il "romanzo storico di Mosè", il centro vuoto rimosso del suo desiderio.

Così, quando nell'Occidente cristiano si consuma la morte di Dio, è ormai chiaro che l'esperienza del sacro non è più un dato eteronomo rispetto all'umano. Come ha indicato René Girard, l'aforisma 125 della *Gaia Scienza* di Friedrich Nietzsche iscrive l'uccisione di Dio in una temporalità profana che getta nuova luce sulla "scena originaria" di Freud e sull'origine misconosciuta della cultura. La notizia nietzschiana conferma che i sacrificatori non si proclamano innocenti della morte dell'eroe-

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[24] S. Freud, *L'uomo Mosè e la religione monoteistica* (1934-1938), Bollati Boringhieri, Torino 2002, p. 150, corsivi miei.

vittima: essi sanno che vittime e sacrificatori appartengono al medesimo spazio sacro. Nietzsche, Freud e Girard, insieme o a turno, denunciano l'autoinganno della comunità, perpetuamente oscillante nel suo legame alla vittima, e l'impossibilità della civiltà contemporanea di sopportare le esigenze della civiltà stessa. È la grande scoperta ebraico-cristiana, la forza all'opera nel mondo moderno.

Il mito e la tragedia esondano dalla genesi funzionale delle norme morali e dei divieti; sono quindi indispensabili e concreti interpreti di quel sacro arcaico che il positivismo evolutivo rigetta insieme alla più forte intuizione antropologica del padre della psicoanalisi: la nascita della cultura da un assassinio reale. Freud, tuttavia, non accosta il dettato della tragedia e del mito e il doppio vincolo (*double bind*) del desiderio mimetico. Ne consegue la difficoltà di fronteggiare l'incitazione paradossale ("imitami, non imitarmi") imposta dal modello all'imitatore del desiderio. E con ciò il complesso di Edipo si destina alla neutralizzazione psicologica del desiderio oggettuale di tipo, volta per volta, autoritario o nichilistico. In materia di progettualità conoscitiva, pensiamo, infatti, che "effetti" analoghi, non meno indifferenziatori, abbiano la ciclica, automatica, regolazione della violenza collettiva, intesa come sbocco autoritario, e l'impianto evolutivo morfogenetico del desiderio, sistemico, razionalizzatore, positivista, antistorico. Dove il realismo sacrificale o autoritario si associa alla normatività delle scienze umane s'attinge alle radici dell'*impasse* conoscitiva delle "crisi sacrificali" della violenza, non rigenerate dalle santificazioni mediatrici.

Diremo allora che, se il "misconoscimento della violenza" genera vittime, il "misconoscimento delle vittime" genera l'ultima attesa del nulla sociale. Possiamo equiparare il "misconoscimento della violenza" al generale senso comune delle società mitico-rituali perché da esso traggono sostanza quei processi primordiali di trasformazione, di metamorfosi e di duplicazione che del sacro sono la *manifestazione*. Tale "misconoscimento" non dipende pertanto né da una precaria conoscenza dei dati di partenza né da determinazioni della psiche individuale – quali il disconoscimento coscienziale d'ogni conflitto e la rimozione nell'inconscio (nozioni essenziali del freudismo e modalità di conoscenza esistenziale senza relazione con il modello): è, invece, *riserva di senso* depositata nel mito e nella tragedia, da cui derivano le critiche di Girard alle pretese di un'antropologia che si ostina a rintracciare le ragioni positive d'ogni singolo rito.

Ricordiamo che, per Girard, "all'inizio era la crisi", "la peste della violenza", come egli la chiama. Dalla voracità di una comunità *in effervescenza* nasce il potere riconciliatore, conseguenza diretta della fusione dionisiaca; l'assassinio in comune sospende il disordine degli uomini "indifferenziati" dalla rivalità mimetica. Girard adduce l'esempio degli an-

tropologi Lienhardt e Turner, i quali riconoscono nel sacrificio una vera e propria operazione di *transfert* collettivo che si effettua a spese della vittima e che investe le tensioni interne. Dunque, la violenza concentrata contro un sol uomo, dai tempi preistorici ai nostri giorni, ha scongiurato, con un unanime gesto risolutivo, il rischio di morte a cui espone l'entrata in circolazione della violenza stessa. Il rito sacrificale riproduce gli effetti mediatamente pacificatori dell'espulsione radicale di conflitti e di tensioni immanenti al mimetismo umano: non presuppone aggressività e paura animale, né l'espiazione di un preesistente sentimento di colpa. Girard sviluppa questo modello della pacificazione collettiva in tutti i suoi scritti, ma va ben oltre quando considera la nascita del divieto, "unitamente a ogni altra nascita culturale".

> L'epifania divina, il sorgere universale del *doppio mostruoso*, avvolge la comunità: lampo improvviso che invia le sue ramificazioni lungo tutte le linee di scontro. Le mille diramazioni della folgore passano *tra* i fratelli nemici che indietreggiano. […] Tutto quello che la violenza sacra ha toccato appartiene ormai al dio e, come tale, diviene oggetto di un divieto assoluto.[25]

Un lampo discende abbagliante sugli uomini e li obbliga a deviare, a indietreggiare. È il dio della violenza che espelle la violenza e le dà una forma trascendente. Gli uomini indietreggiano davanti al primo marcatore di uno spazio interdetto al branco e tramutato in recinto totemico. Questa improvvisa pacificazione, questo esclusivo potere di *interdire* i rivali rimane però mascherato e si nasconde agli individui. L'epifania del "misconoscimento della violenza" paradossalmente si duplica nel *doppio mostruoso* come totem, dio della violenza. Esso è innanzitutto "misconoscimento" del morto lasciato sul terreno per aprirvi uno spazio di trascendenza. Si comprende che il *doppio mostruoso* sia oggetto di una "falsa trascendenza" perché, dove l'assoluto dell'interdetto sociale e quello del totem coincidono, unica è la necessità di monopolizzare la verità insostenibile dei rapporti umani. Di contro alla conflittuale reciprocità dei rapporti mimetici, l'esclusione tragica dell'uno, verso cui *propendono* i più, conta propriamente come santificazione. Nel fluire delle metamorfosi, la santità della vittima assolve, cioè, i sacrificatori. Girard adotta una formula toccante, se non addirittura sconcertante: "la comunità appartiene alla vittima e non la vittima alla comunità". Indica, con ciò, la funzione essenziale del *doppio mostruoso*: "solo una trascendenza qualunque può *in-*

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[25] R. Girard, *La violenza e il sacro*, cit., p. 301, nell'originale francese si legge: "Les mille branches de la foudre passent *entre* les frères ennemis qui reculent, *interdits*" (*La violence et le sacré*, Grasset, Paris 1972, p. 320); così, questi "fratelli nemici che indietreggiano, *interdetti*" esprimono e fanno valere la loro interdizione come appartenenza al totem.

gannare durevolmente la violenza"[26]. In corso d'opera egli scopre, però, che il succedersi storico degli avvenimenti religiosi e politici impedisce di considerare l'unanimità fondatrice quale semplice strumento funzionale al perpetuarsi dell'inganno della violenza. Del resto, nelle società moderne, la continuità d'ordine tra religioso, giuridico e politico sembra inabile ad arginare vendette e contagio della violenza. Aggiungiamo il cambio del punto d'ancoraggio: la vittima che appartiene alla comunità diviene l'argomento attorno al quale si sedimenta il desiderio rivale di assorbirla e di inglobarla per intero. Sono i conformismi che ci minacciano. Ma, ampliato "stavolta in maniera vertiginosa", con un piglio storico più radicale, Girard rinviene ora il primo, basilare, "meccanismo della vittima espiatoria e meccanismo originario di ogni simbolizzazione"[27]. Il formarsi della comunità dipende dalla vittima, perché essa è la misura dell'unità di tutta la cultura umana. È il tributo simbolico originario alla fondazione del religioso che Girard estende dalla istituzione delle monarchie sacre del mondo primitivo alle monarchie assolute della nostra storia recente, cui dedica importanti pagine conclusive della *Violenza e il sacro*.

"La comunità appartiene alla vittima": quest'asserto presuppone la distinzione dei due significati etimologici del religioso spiegati da Émile Benveniste; da una parte, *ligare* (legare), e, dall'altra parte, *legere, religere* (cogliere, distaccare, rivenire su, prendere)[28]. Seguendo l'accezione della religione che *lega*, Girard non ha cessato di far avanzare la verità vittimaria nascosta da questo legame. In genere, si ritiene che le spiegazioni di René Girard sul meccanismo della vittima espiatoria presuppongano il senso etimologico del religioso a partire da *ligare* (legare): gli uomini si legano gli uni agli altri, si fanno complici. D'altra parte, nel senso di *religio* a partire da *legere* – cogliere o raccogliere mentalmente con il pensiero –, gli uomini si rappresentano un universo divino, e, secondo l'opinione di Cicerone, si obbligano anche ai riti e agli onori richiesti. In realtà, dai primi capitoli di *La violenza il sacro* al confronto con il Freud di *Totem e tabù*, Girard ha vieppiù precisato che il "misconoscimento della vittima espiatoria" costituisce "il meccanismo stesso del pensiero umano, il processo di 'simbolizzazione' è radicato anch'esso nella vittima espiatoria"[29].

Non basta quindi affermare che il potere politico e religioso sempre trattiene e intrattiene, manipola, le relazioni della comunità. In quest'ot-

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[26] Ivi, p. 43.
[27] Ivi, p. 412; vedi anche ivi, p. 416: "aldilà della diversità in apparenza estrema vi è un'unità non solo di tutte le mitologie e di tutti i rituali ma della cultura umana nella sua totalità, religiosa e antireligiosa, e questa unità delle unità è tutta quanta sospesa a un unico meccanismo sempre operativo perché sempre misconosciuto, quello che assicura spontaneamente l'unanimità della comunità contro la vittima espiatoria e intorno a essa".
[28] É. Benveniste, *Il vocabolario delle istituzioni indeuropee*, II, cit., pp. 268-271.
[29] R. Girard, *La violenza e il sacro*, cit., p. 425.

tica, le critiche moderne della religione e del potere politico vi scorgono la sottomissione a un legame collettivo illusorio, utopico e totalitario. Di preferenza, pertanto, si tiene conto anzitutto della soglia divisoria tra i detentori del potere e i loro sudditi: configuri uno spazio mobile di intermediazione, adotti i principi di contraddittorietà e di complementarietà, s'adatti alle differenze più o meno ideologiche oppure alle tradizioni consacrate, ricerchi l'equilibrio di strutture pragmatiche, del saper vivere e del buon funzionamento di poteri complessi. Ma inquadrare ideologie e complessità sistemiche delle pratiche di potere non discioglie il nodo dell'origine. Ogni potere politico e religioso è l'erede di quella forza che indusse i rivali a indietreggiare e a separarsi? Sì, se la linea di separazione *tra* i fratelli nemici interdice il centro e l'origine simbolica della vita vivibile: il "divieto assoluto" stabilito nel luogo del conflitto è il prezzo dell'implodere degli antichi legami, addita, propriamente, la legge (Legge del Padre) e la vittima espiatoria (nel senso di Girard, di Freud o del cristianesimo).

Si può pur considerare la linea di separazione come la soglia mobile che permette di definire il funzionamento del potere sistemico, ma il principio mitico e tragico dell'"inganno della violenza con la violenza", quando divide la "violenza buona", (quella che inganna la violenza) dalla "violenza cattiva" (quella su cui si esercita l'inganno) suggerisce tutt'altro: la santità delle vittime espiatorie e degli eroi, la tragedia come rappresentazione della santità.

A metà dell'Ottocento si è compiuto – come s'è detto – un passaggio epocale che trova espressione nel riemergere delle culture del sacro in coincidenza con il declinare dell'idea di santo propria della tradizione biblica. La nozione di sacro riemerge, possiamo dire, quando entra in crisi la santità del nome, della cosa o della persona oggetto del desiderio di appropriazione. Ma, se è stata necessaria la morte di Dio (il riconoscimento della sua uccisione) per incidere sulle componenti oscure e nascoste del sacro, sui suoi misteriosi poteri, non è detto che lo spazio umano così difficilmente conquistato debba inevitabilmente disperdersi nell'indifferenziato, fino a implodere e chiudersi su sé stesso. Fondamentale riesce qui il confronto con la mitologia (individuale e collettiva) del desiderio che Freud e Girard rendono riconoscibile attraverso le menzogne – non solo romantiche ma anche utilitaristiche – delle quali sono entrambi interpreti partecipi. È questa mitologia del desiderio, che cresce insieme con le reali imitazioni del modello, a contraddire l'accezione comune di santità (o di sacralità) quale mera condizione identitaria di singoli e di entità sociali. Il desiderio mimetico di appropriazione emerge di conseguenza come la dimensione affettiva, relazionale, insieme simbolica e reale, che permea la filogenesi culturale dell'uomo, nel mentre la libera dalla rigorosa normatività di un piatto evoluzionismo: dapprima storico-umanistico, poi

scientifico-naturale e infine positivistico e tecnico-procedurale[30]. Si può dunque auspicare che – sotto la specie della "durata" del desiderio – nel futuro sarà ancora la santità del nome, della cosa o della persona oggetto del desiderio a rendere praticabile l'apertura/delimitazione del sacro unificante. Si tratta invero di mediare (non di comporre, ma di rendere radicalmente transitabile) il rapporto che intrattengono i fratelli-nemici, interagendo e retroagendo, permutando le loro rispettive posizioni sulla terra, affinché sugli uni e sugli altri – e sull'umano in generale – non vengano a trionfare e a legiferare i rituali conoscitivi, positivi e normativi del post-umano.

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[30] Sebbene in *Menzogna romantica e verità romanzesca*, Girard sembra scorgere nel "desiderio d'essere secondo l'altro" una sorta di carattere ontologico del mimetismo, in *La violenza e il sacro*, egli critica nel Freud del complesso di Edipo l'arbitrario spostamento del desiderio verso un'ontogenesi (individuale), con la conseguente perdita dell'accesso alle origini mitico-sacrificali della cultura, proprie della filogenesi (collettiva).

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Carving Spaces: Violence and the Sacred

Introduction

Violence and the Sacred is René Girard's first engagement outside of the domain of literary studies in which he examines the generative potential of mimetic processes of rivalry and violence, showing how cultural institutions can emerge from the local repetition of a spontaneous self-regulating mechanism of violence, and from the "misunderstanding" (or *méconnaissance*) of how it functioned by those who acted it out[1].

The book is remarkable for displaying the scientific fecundity of the mimetic theory in its morphogenetic dimension. Indeed, in Girard's thought, mimetic desire is the spark igniting a panoply of social dynamics, the *primum movens* of an evolution where intricate micro-social interactions of rivalry, conflict, and violence can lead not only back to peace, but also to the creation of cultural institutions. Here, the properly morphogenetic nature of mimetic theory arises from relatively simple mechanisms engendering complex, often counter-intuitive outcomes, with small changes capable of bringing about major transformations and shifts in evolutionary trajectories. The great significance of Girard's work is to propose intelligible, in principle empirically testable, mechanisms shedding light on why and how such evolutions may progress and branch into different trajectories of social dynamics and cultural creation.

Given its breath and morphogenetic nature, mimetic theory would prove relevant outside the domains of literature, early institutions and of

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[1] P. Dumouchel, *De la méconnaissance*, *The Ambivalence of Scarcity and Other Essays*, Michigan State University Press, East Lansing (MI) 2014, pp. 209–224.

religious phenomena where Girard himself mainly applied it[2]. Though others have used mimetic approach for empirical research and analysis[3], it is surprising that little attention has been given to the mimetic perspective on spatial phenomena in urban studies and political geography, in the fields studying the emergence and transformation of spatial objects and institutions, or to explore the possible implications and explanatory power of the mimetic hypothesis for the *social production of space*[4]. Our goal in this paper is to suggest the possible interest and wealth of the mimetic analyses of spatial objects and institutions.

Objects and space

Following Girard, scholars of mimetic theory usually focus on the agents involved in the triangular relations of desire. The third vertex of the triangle, the object of desire, is usually considered inert, passive, immutable, hence uninteresting. This may be in part because Girard himself observed that often, as the rivalry progresses and intensifies, interest for the object may fade away: the antagonists obsessed by each other progressively lose sight of what originally seemed to be at stake, or are prepared to "do away" with the object if necessary to pursue their violent conflict. Furthermore, Girard brilliantly showed and analysed how the object of desire may be born out of fiction. For example, how in *Le Rouge et le Noir*, Julien Sorel turns into desirable as tutor of Mr. de Reynal's children only because Vallenod is interested in hiring him for his own children, or how in *Don Quixote* a barber's washbasin becomes a famous knight's helmet. In all these cases, the object itself in its materiality seems nearly irrelevant, as it is either shaped or destroyed by the mimetic rivalry which alone is viewed as dynamic.

However, these transformations of the object are far from trivial and if the object undergoes an evolution because it is *part of a mimetic triangle* we should not assume that the evolution of the rivalry is not in turn influenced by these evolutions of the object. Is it not one of the central theses of *Violence and the sacred* that the fictive object *par excellence* – the gods

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[2] Mainly, but not exclusively; among others he also applied it to international conflicts in the modern world in his last book *Battling to the End: Conversations With Benoit Chantre*, Michigan State University Press, Michigan 2010.

[3] Exemplary in this regard is Simon Simonse's *Kings of Disaster: Dualism, Centralism and the Scapegoat King in Southeastern Sudan*, Fountain Publishers, Kampala 2017.

[4] There is towards the end of Henri Lefebvre classic *La production de l'espace*, Editions Anthropos, Paris 1974, p. 454 a brief reference to Girard and the importance of the mimetic hypothesis to understand the "dialectical relationship between *need* and *desire*". To our knowledge Lefebvre never further explored that suggestion.

of the sacred as the "outcome" of (self-regulating mechanisms) of exacerbated mimetic violence – transformed the course of human history? If the transformation of the object by mimetic rivalry can act in return on the evolution of the conflict that transformed it, is it really the case that the nature of the object has no effect on to the development and trajectory of mimetic desire and conflicts?[5]

No matter what the evolution of mimetic rivalries may be from case to case, it seems to us important to explore *what actually happens to the objects* that occasioned the conflict. Whether they "fade away", or their value changes dramatically, what type of evolution and transformation do they undergo? Mimetic mechanisms of conflicts, including their victimary "resolution", do not only bring about rich interindividual[6] dynamics. In the course of the rivalry the object is also transformed, physically and symbolically. Changes in this third vertex of the triangle, we argue, influence in turn the evolution of the mimetic dynamic. What we propose in short is that the object should not be seen merely as dispensable and external to mimetic conflict and rivalries. To the opposite, its characteristics may have momentous sway on their trajectory, evolution, and resolution.

Space may be an exemplary case in point. Space, urban land, territory, are a fascinating special kind of objects. They may not only become the exclusive possession of one party, nor is the Solomonian solution of cutting the baby in half the only other possible resolution of a dispute. Space is a particularly malleable object. It can be moulded, reshaped, transformed, reorganised, and adapted – physically, normatively, symbolically. It can evolve and acquire new meanings and values. Through formal and informal norms, social practices, or by its very form and design space can be made public to a different degree, devised to selectively exclude or

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[5] In fact, very early on many scholars argued that particular characteristics of different economic objects influenced the structure of mimetic relations surrounding them: scarcity and merchandise (P. Dumouchel, *The Ambivalence of Scarcity and Other Essays*, *op. cit.*; P. Dumouchel, J.-P. Dupuy, *L'Enfer des choses: René Girard et la logique de l'économie*, Seuil, Paris 1979), money (M. Aglietta, A. Orléan, *La Violence de la monnaie*, PUF, Paris 1982; M. R. Anspach, *Les fondements rituels de la transaction monétaire, ou comment remercier un bourreau*, *La Monnaie souveraine*, Odile Jacob, Paris 1998, pp. 53–83), financial markets (A. Orléan, *The Empire of Value: A New Foundation for Economics*, MIT Press, Cambridge (MA) 2014), or markets in general (P. Lantz, *Monaie archaïque et monaie moderne*, in P. Dumouchel (Ed.), *Violence et vérité*, Grasset, Paris 1985, pp. 159–181; G.-H. de Radkowski, *Les jeux du désir: De la technique à l'économie*, PUF, Paris 1980). In all these cases mimetic conflicts were shown to have a different evolution and form than when they centre on objects that can neither be shared, divided nor replaced, like a person or a prize, or 'being the first one'.
[6] In *Things Hidden since the Foundation of the World* (1987, pp. 299-325), Girard proposes to replace the term *inter-individual* with *interdividual*.

include. Elaborated norms may be agreed upon for its use. Entitlements, access rights and prohibitions may be established. Or pacification may also be obtained by declaring it outright as "belonging to no one and everyone" (a public space, *a piazza*, a protected park, and so on). This particular malleability makes it possible for space to brew special flavours of rivalry – for example there can be contrasting projects, visions, competing appropriative and transformative intentions for the same place –, but because of it, we argue, space also makes possible peculiar means of "resolution" of rivalries and conflicts.

Given its ubiquity – space is everywhere –, and inevitability – we can never be outside space –, space constitutes both a need and an object of desire. It is also the most material and the most abstract of all objects. Everything that is a material object is a spatial reality, yet space itself is either nothing, emptiness, the universal container, or any abstract system of relations that allows the measurement of distance. Space and spatial metaphors structure our way of thinking[7]. However, the spaces (in plural) where we live are all constituted as particular cultural objects: the territory, pastures, the place of my childhood, a *piazza*, a tourist destination, a sacred space, a wasteland, an empty lot. In these, space is divided, carved out, portions of space are individualised as specific object which have definite characteristics. Such is the production of space, its becoming various objects that we inhabit, value, share, buy and sell and over which we often fight. Mimetic desire and rivalries, how the conflicts to which they lead are resolved, the rules that we make to avoid them, or at least to limit their destructive consequences play a fundamental role in the way space is instituted as particular objects and in the type of objects instituted.

What important insights can mimetic theory offer in accounts of these processes? Can it shed light on the phenomena of attachment to territory, ethno-geographies [8] and territorial rights? Can we find traces of mimetic rivalry, even scapegoating (symbolic and real), and therefore the "mark of the sacred"[9] in practices of the production of spaces? To what extent do the trajectories of such mimetic conflicts depend on the particular characteristics of spatial objects?

[7] G. Lakoff, M. Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago 2008; M. Tovey, *Spatial Metaphors as Linguistic Primitives: A Comparison of UP-DOWN Metaphors in Three Languages*, in "Totem: The University of Western Ontario Journal of Anthropology", no. 2, 1, 2011.

[8] A. Kolers, *Land, Conflict, and Justice. A political Theory of Territory*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, UK 2009.

[9] J.-P. Dupuy, *The Mark of the Sacred*, Stanford University Press, Palo Alto (CA) 2013.

The mimetic evolution of space

It is not difficult to identify situations in the real world, in the everyday practices and episodes frequent in urban contexts, showing that spaces constitute a hotbed for *mimetic* rivalries. The morphogenetic dimension of mimetic theory implies that the generative mechanisms it studies may branch into numerous possible trajectories of mimetic desire, rivalry, conflict, and violence, as well as possible modes of resolution. Our agenda for the empirical research should thus aim to document, record, and reconstruct many such different trajectories, and to accumulate evidence indicative of the efficiency and the effectiveness of a mimetic interpretation.

As mimetic studies on economic objects have shown[10], the evolution of a mimetic rivalry depends in part on whether the 'object' is exclusive – singular, unique, indivisible, irreproducible –, or somehow non-exclusive – plural, shareable, divisible, reproducible. A distinction akin to that in economics between rivalrous and non-rivalrous goods. Note that this is not a strict dichotomy: depending on their features, objects may occupy a place along the spectrum from exclusive to non-exclusive.

Public spaces, a square, a park, a street in a neighbourhood, any space capable of hosting some form of collective life are often non-exclusive in the above sense, and in economic terms they are non-rivalrous goods, at least below a certain threshold of crowding. An emblematic case of highly desired spaces are the main promenades of urban centres, subject to the invasion of tables and chairs from the nearby cafés and restaurants. At least in our experience of observing city centres in Italy, besides the purely economic competition for a "scarce resource", aspects of mimetic rivalry and processes can be detected. In what is often called "*la guerra dei tavolini*" (the war of the tables), it is the dynamics of mimesis of appropriation – among commercial activities, and between, on the one hand, commercial activities, and on the other, residents and city users – that which confers the *excess of value to* those contested spaces, and can explain the *relentless intensity* of the conflicts surrounding them. Up to symptomatic cases we observed of bars and restaurants demanding local authorities for *tighter* regulation and control, in a twist only apparently paradoxical, and worthy of *El perro del hortelano*[11]*,* the gardener's dog who does not eat cabbage and does not let anyone else eat some.

Mimetic dynamics may also be relevant for the mutation and the history of "non-desired" spaces (spaces that are abandoned, not used, on which nobody apparently has any appropriative or transformative project or in-

[10] See note 4.
[11] A comedy by the Spanish author Lope de la Vega, first published in 1618.

tention to use). Often in the effort to revitalise such "non-desired spaces", "successful" urban design projects first give rise to rivalries and conflicts, by arousing and kindling mimetic desires. By presenting a scheme of transformation, use, and appropriation, such projects unsettle the established order (even an apparent absence of use is an established order). The idea that urban projects simply "solve problems" that are already there is naïve, especially in a pluralistic social context where there are contesting and conflicting interests, needs and desires. Mimetic theory helps us understand why, before solving anything, effective projects may first have to upset things, causing conflicts, at times risking to lacerate the polity.

This furthermore helps us see the illusory nature of an often-tacit assumption in many so-called participatory processes: the uncritical mechanical practice to first "ask people what they want", and then to elaborate a project which would accommodate those wants within given technical and financial constraints. If anything, mimetic theory forces us to radically question the assumption that "people" from the outset would know what they desire, let alone that they are able to express it with fidelity. This is likely the reason why opinion surveys so often yield unconvincing or conformist answers tainted by a social desirability bias. Even if there is a formed desire, or an apparently deeply held belief, that desire should not be taken as fixed and immutable.

Likely, to revitalise an abandoned space first requires arousing "collective" desire for it, possibly by fostering rivalries which eventually could be successfully resolved through a (should we say "cathartic"?) project. That is where may be located the effectiveness of some forms of tactical urbanism[12] as "a means of testing relational processes in space"[13]: rather than first "asking people" and then manipulating space, tactical urbanism inverts the sequence and begins with the manipulation by introducing a "spatial perturbation" that suggests uses, intentions and appropriative drives, mimetically arousing such drives in others. Therefore, rather than a straightforward problem-solving, we could think of "successful" projects of public spaces more as a properly political process with a series of dialectical reversals: first unsettling, possibly kindling desires (appropriative, transformative, of possible alternative uses) for undesired or little desired places, then the ignition of rivalries, and finally the eventual resolution, which may not always be granted or obtained, in the form of a new established order. A scheme of shared uses and appropriations, or a "sacrifice" of the space in the form of a renunciation from appropriation

[12] P. Silva, *Tactical urbanism: Towards an evolutionary cities' approach?*, in "Environment and Planning B: Planning and Design", no. 43, 6, 2016, pp. 1040–1051.
[13] S. Wohl, *Tactical urbanism as a means of testing relational processes in space: A complex systems perspective*, in "Planning Theory", no. 17, 4, 2018, pp. 472–493.

by all parties, for example through a conventional figure of public spaces (a *piazza*, a boulevard, a public park, and so on).

The reference to a "sacrifice" of space suggests that the mimetic looking glasses may help us to discover a form of *mensonge romantique* surrounding public spaces, and to recognise their violent origin. A piece of land becomes and symbolically functions as an *effective* public space, not because of its residual character, or because of the lack of interest and rivalries around it, but to the opposite in reason of excess of mimetic appropriative drives converging on it. So that the communal value of a public space resides in declaring it public as a way of resolution of mimetic rivalries and a means of warding off future mimetic crises. A public space as a silent permanent "ritual", a tangible outcome of a successful resolution of conflicts, hence bearing the "mark of the sacred".

In the following sections we look in more details into one specific way in which space may be turned into such a silent but permanent ritual structuring the community.

Sacrificing spaces

In this section we want to examine in more detail scenarios in which space can itself become the target of violence, and the extent to which it makes sense to talk about the sacrifice of spaces. This seems to be at first a rather controversial claim, since not only foundational scapegoats, but also sacrificial victims are usually thought of as either humans or animals. However, we should remember that there are also many rituals where plants or even man-made objects are sacrificed[14]. While our exposition of these scenarios may not conclusively settle the question, we believe it will assist us in showing the scientific vitality, fecundity, and relevance of mimetic theory whose groundwork was laid out by René Girard in *Violence and the Sacred* 50 years ago and its particular relevance to urban studies.

We could call *spatial mimetic rivalry* a specific kind of mimetic rivalry where the target of the rival desires "alert[ing] the subject to the desirability of the object"[15], is a space. Accordingly, *spatial mimetic violence* is violence caused by spatial mimetic rivalry. It is directed at the space the rival possesses, and aims at ransacking, raiding, demolishing, burning, devastating, or otherwise destroying it. We conjecture that, especially in sedentary communities, spatial mimetic rivalry frequently and easily had

[14] Especially in the hindu tradition, see B. Collins, *The Head Beneath the Altar: Hindu Mythology and the Critique of Sacrifice*, Michigan State University Press, East Lansing (MI) 2014.
[15] R. Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*, Johns Hopkins University Press 1977, p. 155.

occasions to break out. The outcome of such conflict was not only the appropriation of the space by one party, but in many cases lead to the destruction or annihilation of the rival. The desired space identified with the rival becomes the object of mimetic violence, because destroying it can be seen as a surrogate of destroying the rival him/herself.

In a community convulsed by a crisis of spatial mimetic rivalry where spatial mimetic violence breaks out, arises the danger of interminable escalation. We claim that, just as a collective murder can restore peace in the community shaken by mimetic violence, a unanimous, collective act of "spatial violence" may stop all spatial mimetic violence, especially if the members of the community are not aware of this hidden result. In other words, we argue that in this case also a form of "méconnaissance", misunderstanding, plays an important role. When mimetic violence is specifically spatial, the victim can be a space, thus satisfying one of the fundamental requirements of sacrifice according to Girard. "Society is seeking to deflect upon a relatively indifferent victim, a "sacrificeable" victim, the violence that would otherwise be vented on its own members, the people it most desires to protect"[16].

The notion of a spatial sacrifice should also pass the test of other sacrificial rites in which the initial murder is repeated.

> All the dangers, real and imaginary, that threaten the community are subsumed in the most terrible danger that can confront a society: the sacrificial crisis. The rite is therefore a repetition of the original, spontaneous "lynching" that restored order in the community by re-establishing, around the figure of the surrogate victim, that sentiment of social accord that had been destroyed in the onslaught of reciprocal violence.[17]

Here, when looking for a spatial sacrificial rite, we do not need to search for some explosive or untidy spatial destruction. Quite the contrary, the violence of sacrificial rites is organised and done by the community members together in a structured and controlled way given that "society is seeking to deflect upon a relatively indifferent victim, a 'sacrificeable' victim, the violence that would otherwise be vented on its own members".

Let us first try to identify the appropriate kind of ritual victims in this case. They must be spaces, for sure. But what kind of spaces? Possessing which characteristics? In analogy with human victims of ritual sacrifices, these spaces should have no "proper place in the community". Just as children, who have not yet undergone the rites of initiation, or marginal

[16] Ivi, p. 4.
[17] Ivi, p. 100.

members of the community who are difficult to classify or the king whose position at the centre that serves to isolate him from his fellow men, to render him casteless"[18], these spaces could be "on the fringes of society" or, vice versa, of exceptional centrality. In any case, they can be expected to be uncommon and nonconforming spaces – spaces which we may identify as *singularities* of the more extended space of the city or territory inhabited by the community.

The hypothesis of "spatial carving"

Mimetic violence, either reciprocal or the unanimous violence of the foundational lynching, is messy, slovenly, and spontaneous. The violent component of the ritual sacrifice is planned and under the control of the community. Just like the living victim is "a substitute for all the members of the community, offered up by the members themselves"[19], the spatial victim would be a substitute for all the spaces of the community otherwise threatened by spatial violence, and violence against the spatial victim is domesticated violence. While in part *it is* real violence – it is the original mimetic violence deflected onto the victim – in part it is no longer violence – it *represents* the violence of the original lynching, symbolically repeating it, at the same time celebrating the miracle of newfound peace. "Men's minds turn back to the miracle in order to perpetuate or renew it; and in order to accomplish this they need to reflect upon that miracle, to rethink it. Myths, rituals, and kinship systems are the first fruits of this endeavour"[20].

So, on the one hand, we must expect that in the ritual spatial sacrifice "some space actually dies". On the other hand, that murder must display marks of a "*good violence*":

> In the primitive ritual view, sacrifice fights violence not with ordinary violence, which would simply cause the crisis to escalate, but with a good violence that seems and therefore is mysteriously different from the bad violence of the crisis, because of its foundation in an unanimity that religion – that which binds men together – tends to perpetuate. If used wisely and piously, this good violence can stop the bad one from spreading whenever the latter reappears, as it necessarily must. Sacrifice is the violence that heals, unites, and reconciles, in opposition to the bad violence that corrupts, divides, disintegrates, undifferentiates.[21]

[18] Ivi, p. 12.
[19] Ivi, p. 8.
[20] Ivi, p. 248.
[21] R. Girard, *A Theater of Envy: William Shakespeare*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, UK 1991, p. 214.

One key feature of good violence, which is "mysteriously different from the bad violence of the crisis", can be found in the words of Brutus in Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*, analysed by Girard[22]. Brutus wants to persuade the conspirators that sacrificing Caesar is a good thing, basically because the violence of their act is a good violence that will not revert to the bad violence of the crisis, and that will bring peace:

> *Let's be sacrificers but not butchers, Caius.*
> *We all stand up against the spirit of Caesar,*
> *And in the spirit of men there is no blood;*
> *O that we then could come by Caesar's spirit,*
> *And not dismember Caesar! But, alas,*
> *Caesar must bleed for it! And, gentle friends,*
> *Let's kill him boldly but not wrathfully;*
> *Let's carve him as a dish fit for the gods,*
> *Not hew him as a carcass fit for hounds*
> (Julius Caesar, II, 1, 166-174)[23]

Brutus demands his co-conspirators to *carve* Caesar's body rather than to *dismember* it. Carving the flesh of the victim stands to dismembering as good violence stands to bad violence. Note that this opposition between two types of violence is eminently spatial. "Carving" basically means dissimulating violence and its effects, death, by manipulating the victim in a way that has to do with mereology and topology. Carving takes place in consideration of the relations between the body parts and the whole, as well as in view of the properties that are preserved through deformations, such as twisting or stretching both the whole and its parts.

The notion of carving elected by Girard as fundamental to separate good from bad violence, and hence, to identify what is essential to ritual sacrifice is partly metaphorical (violence and its effects must be dissimulated) and, when we come to its literal part, spatial. It is, therefore, a very promising notion to apply to a spatial victim. As Girard explains:

> [B]eing rooted in sacrificial practice, carving is a powerful metaphor and really more than a metaphor. When a communion meal follows the immolation

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[22] Ivi, p. 212.

[23] Of course, this is not what happens in the play (or historically), illustrating the point which Girard makes in the first chapter of *Violence and the Sacred*, the ease with which sacrificial violence can slide into murderous criminal violence. However, the important point for us here is Brutus's claim that there is a fundamental difference between the two forms of violence and that the conspirator should construe the assassination of Caesar as a sacrifice, not as a crime, insisting on the visual, quasi aesthetic difference between the two forms of violence.

of an edible animal, the carving is done with great care, according to traditional rules. To carve is to dismember gently, to cut delicately and artistically. As it reaches the joints effortlessly, the carver's knife separates the bones with no visible damage. Expert carving is pleasing to the eyes; it does not tear or crush any part of the body; it does not create artificial discontinuities. Its moral and aesthetic beauty consists in revealing existing differences.

Envy and wrath do not know how to carve; their avidity and brutality can only mangle their victims. Behind the opposition between carving and hacking, we recognize a familiar theme: mimetic violence is the principle of a false differentiation that eventually turns to outright undifferentiation in a violent dissolving of the community. In the carving metaphor all aspects of culture seem harmoniously blended, the differential and the spiritual, the spatial, the ethical, and the aesthetic. This metaphor illustrates what we may call the "classical moment" of sacrifice.[24]

Carving a living body means killing it, turning it into a corpse. Yet, at the end of the process there is no external evidence of the violence that the victim suffered. Its look reveals nothing about the violence it has been subjected to.

What condition of a space could correspond to the carved body of a human or animal victim? The space must be dead, but it must visually appear to be in good shape. For space, this is tantamount for it to be no longer used, to become closed off and inaccessible. While anthropic spaces can tolerate temporary lack of use without dying, permanent disuse "kills" them. However, we are not speaking of forms of abandonment that make the space visually worse, an abandoned factory or empty lot. The invisible killing involved must be such that it preserves the invisibility of the violence and in that sense of the death of the space.

"Killing" a space in that sense, turning it into a sacrificial victim and carving it is to make it unreachable, to lock it down, or in some way to isolate it, prohibiting people to use it as before, a way of projecting upon it the "mark of the sacred". That space becomes the object of the "transference of deification"[25] because it has been touched by the violence that can destroy the community as well as restore peace, by virtue of this touch it becomes a *sacred enclosure*. "Everything touched by the sacred violence belongs to the gods; as such, it becomes the object of a most solemn prohibition"[26]. So, a space that has been sacrificed is a space whose use is prohibited or highly regulated and ritualised – although its death remains somehow concealed, while being, in another

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[24] R. Girard, *A Theater of Envy: William Shakespeare*, cit. p. 213,
[25] Id., *I See Satan Fall Like Lightning*, Orbis Books, Ossining (NY) 2001, p. 123.
[26] Id., *Violence and the Sacred*, cit., p. 230.

sense, *before the eyes of all*. We advance the hypothesis that the sacred character of a place can not only come from being where the founding murder happened, but may also arise from its being the victim of a spatial murder. There is thus a deep relationship between what it is for a space to become sacred and its becoming unattainable in a variety of respects. As in any ritual sacrifice, the victim must be dead, and everybody must know it – while the violence responsible for its death and often the fact that it is dead are, so to speak, *spectacularly dissimulated*.

Among contemporary ways of sacrificing a space in this particular sense, we classify secular *marks of the sacred* secured by national and international organisations and agencies automatically providing legal and material protection from human use. For example, when becoming a listed building entails for it to be no longer available for traditional functional usage. The protection it receives can be seen as a death which, in Girard's sense of the term, is a way of carving it. In this respect, it would be interesting to distinguish between symmetrical and asymmetrical violence in the sacrifice of space, depending on whether the community or a third part is the perpetrator of the killing. The same can be said of all forms of expropriation and musealisation, i.e. the bringing an anthropic space, constructed or not, to end its human employment and be exposed in a museum-like manner to members of the community and the tourists[27]. Indeed, what the tourists continue to see, beyond the trace of the space's former life, is just a corpse: the cadaver as the spectacle of both the death and the appeasing violence that caused it. In our perspective, adding a building to the list of World Heritage can be tantamount to carving it in Brutus's sense. It is now destined to a form of embalming purpose such as hosting of some impalpable and ephemeral national agency, foundation, or political organisation. The invariable result is for the enclosed and fenced off space to mummify and fossilise, condemned to the illusorily use of people visiting it on Sunday mornings from 10.00 to 12.00. It appears clear to us that such a touristic traffic can be compared to a flow of the bystanders looking at the cadaver of the sacrificial victim.

Note that spaces that are musealised or destined to mere contemplation often, if not always, are those we identify as exceptional or corresponding to *singularities* in the more extended space of the community. This way of carving a space, de-functionalising it and preserving it in formalin, so to speak, is also a way of taking it away from the set of goods that people can fight over for control or appropriation. Carving space in observance of Girard's idea that sacrificial rites are "preven-

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[27] P. Osterlund, *Contestation of Space and Identity in Istanbul: Musealization as an Urban Strategy*, in "Turkey and the Politics of National Identity", 2014, pp. 169–193.

tive measures" aimed at pre-empting the spread of reciprocal violence: "wherever violence occurs, a prohibition is proclaimed"[28].

Thus, the hypothesis we advance is that preserving a space while making it lifeless is a way of sacrificing it, of unwittingly making it the victim of a ritual sacrifice. The core of the mechanism is essentially violent and sacrificial, in the sense established by *Violence and the Sacred*.

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Extending Girard's theory in this way may seem problematic. Despite the existence of ritual sacrifice of plants or inanimate objects in some traditions as mentioned above, it seems that an essential requirement of a potential sacrificial victim is that of being a living being, ideally a *human* being, in order to be a good *substitute* of the violence of all-against-all and for the violence of all-against-one. "Violence is not to be denied, but it can be diverted to another object, something it can sink its teeth into"[29]. Can an inanimate object be "something violence can sink its teeth into"?

One possible "structural" answer to this objection may be that, when mimetic violence is *spatial*, then the suppression of a space may be the right kind of surrogate for the suppression of the primary targets of that violence. The absence of an authentic murder may not be a serious lack, because what is needed is not real blood, but a violent and peace-restoring elimination of a single, vulnerable, and close-at-hand item *of the same kind as* the items of the community menaced by the crisis. Since normally these items are exclusively or primarily the members of the community themselves, the victim is typically a human being. But when the violence is spatial, that is, it is importantly though derivatively directed at the spaces possessed or controlled by the members of the community, the victim – which will be killed of course only metaphorically – could well be a space. Provided that we put the word "individual" in quotation marks, for example, we can appreciate how the truth of all the crucial statements in the following passage from *Violence and the Sacred* is preserved under such a hypothesis of space as a possible surrogate victim:

> Any community that has fallen prey to violence or has been stricken by some overwhelming catastrophe hurls itself blindly into the search for a scapegoat. Its members instinctively seek an immediate and violent cure for the onslaught of unbearable violence and strive desperately to convince themselves that all their ills are the fault of a lone individual who can be easily disposed of.[30]

[28] R. Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*, p. 130, cit.
[29] Ivi, p. 4.
[30] Ivi, p. 84.

Here we arrive at the crux of the matter. The key theoretical question is if inanimate objects of rivalry can play an effective function in uniting a community and (mimetically) producing unanimity. As we saw above, some practices seem to point in that direction. For instance, maybe we can see in the practice of turning spaces and architectures into museums and monuments, a form of sacrifice. Or, to draw from another notable example, in *potlatch*, quite obviously material objects are destroyed, and in that common sense they may be said to be sacrificed. All these practices present us with cases of objects being wasted, "sacrificed" in one way or another.

Paraphrasing the above citation from *Violence and the Sacred*, what could it possibly mean for the members of a community to "convince themselves that all their ills are the fault of a lone space"? This is clearly possible when the target space is external to the community. The destruction of such a space, a country that is invaded, a city is that is plundered, or where the earth is salted, could be supported by the idea, diffused among the members of the community, that the contagious, reciprocal spatial violence spreading throughout the community was due to *a lack of space*, the lack of *Lebensraum*, and notably to the fact that *that space* was not in the possession of the community. Therefore, the spontaneously unanimous victimisation of a specific external space could, in a sense, go together with the member of the community's blaming it for the evil aspect of the crisis.

The initial expulsion of a space internal to the community may also have some features in common with a human victim. It will be "chosen only because it is vulnerable and close at hand", although its innocence remains unperceived, and it may be the space, i.e., house, small farm, or property of the designated human victim, who will perhaps survive the unanimous act of violence by virtue of this spatial surrogation[31].

By pursuing the idea that manipulating, re-designing, carving, even destroying spatial objects may result in pacifying and uniting the community, we envisage the possibility to "extend", or better to fully embrace and explore the morphogenetic nature of mimetic theory. Quite

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[31] All this may induce us to think of the possibility to extend the Girardian terminology and consider these practices as scapegoating of objects. That is to say, to question if we could, and if we should, consider these practices under the tent of scapegoating proper, extending it beyond living victims. The hypothesis may sound interesting, and the four of us have nuanced and at the moment somewhat different attitudes towards making such a step. Since it certainly deserves to be explored and discussed more extensively in all its niceties and implications, we take the commitment to return onto it in near future. Sufficient for our purposes here is that it again shows the fecundity of the mimetic frame of interpretation by assisting us in conjecturing the emergence of different "new" kinds of (sacrificial) institutions.

directly deriving from Girard's fundamental intuition that the primary "problem" of any culture is how to manage and contain internal violence[32], we could assume as fundamental the drive for pacifying, uniting, that is, for the expulsion of violence and the appeasement of mimetic tensions. And then go onto observing how that may be obtained by many different "means" in different concrete circumstances: through scapegoating proper, through forms of prohibitions and regulations, through spatial carving, through potlatch-like ritual destruction of the objects, and through other cultural practices and institutions. In particular, we want to suggest that when the contended object is malleable, carvable, divisible, transformable as is space, different pacifying, even "cathartic", resolutions are possible and can be reached sometimes simply by intervening on that object.

This is not to say that all such forms of appeasement of mimetic tensions are functionally equivalent and equally effective. The lack of a proper sacrificial progression may be a reason why many "spatial solutions" are not as effective – at times only temporary and contingent hacks for a precarious, fragile appeasement of rivalries – because they are not based on the "canonical" progression of accusation-*cum*-expulsion-*cum*-misrecognition resulting in stable communion, and its regeneration through rituals.

Conclusions

Cities are places of highest human density, and their organisation must, and cannot but, be related to the core social problem of how to manage mimetic rivalries and violence. If Girard is right, such density of interactions, sharing, closeness, must pose the threat of a runway violence, which hence cannot but constitute a primary problem of the social organisation of space. The city of desire, to exist, needs mechanisms both to keep desires alive and to contain the violence flowing from mimetic rivalries. Indeed, when Girard talks about the growing proximity of models, mediators, rivals, in our case we need to take him quite literally, as if he was talking about space and spatial relations, geography and territory.

We believe that our hypotheses on the role of mimesis in the social production of space can also be of a more general interest for the application of mimetic theory. Indeed, once we acknowledge that space as object of desire can evolve, mutate, and be transformed by mimetic rivalries,

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[32] This is the primary "problem" of a culture in an almost evolutionary sense that without some, even precarious, mechanisms of governing internal violence, that culture would simply not be fit to survive.

also as a means of their resolution (no matter how temporary and provisional), a more general theoretical hypothesis emerges that many other objects, not only space, can undertake transformations of many kinds. It is of course a question of objects' specific plasticity, malleability, carveability, but may we not still be able to acknowledge mimetic forces at work driving the evolution of objects, not only that of the rivalrous subjects? This is so much so evident if we admit that we can also talk about symbolic, and not merely physical transformations (What else, in Alfred Hitchcock's Vertigo, is Jimmy Stewart's character Scottie doing when he obsessively tries to turn Judy into Madeleine?).

Such a research agenda on the mimetic evolution of objects seems to us promising also as a methodological guidance for empirical research by coupling the analysis of two different types of "objects", on one hand the action, intentions, moves, and decisions of agents in mimetic interactions, and on the second hand the spatial objects and places that change and evolve through time as a result of conflicts, rivalries, and other forms of mimetic entanglements. So that on the one hand we write case histories of particular conflicts and social episodes, and on the other something that resembles "the social life of things[33] or "biographies of scientific objects [34], in our case of spatial objects. The main point however is to discover and reveal how these two are related, how they interact, and *co-evolve*. How mimetic rivalries and conflicts transform the objects on which they bear and how these objects in turn can play a role in appeasing and resolving the conflicts, or to the contrary in aggravating the opposition surrounding them.

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Pierpaolo Antonello[*]
Archeologie della sovranità e politiche del sacro

A distanza di 50 anni dalla sua formulazione, l'ipotesi mimetico-vitti-maria di Girard come origine del sacro e dell'intero apparato culturale e istituzionale dell'uomo, continua a rimanere da una parte un impianto teorico particolarmente fecondo rispetto alla sua capacità storico-erme-neutica e in senso lato "diagnostica", d'altra rimane soggetto di una evidente rimozione o di vistose forme di resistenza e di critica in vari contesti disciplinari. Le obiezioni portate alla prospettiva girardiana sono varie e ampiamente discusse, e l'esposizione teorica in libri fondamentali come *Delle cose nascoste* e *Il capro espiatorio* soffre in fatti della vena polemica con cui Girard ha risposto alle critiche portate a *La violenza e il sacro*, e alla smisurata ambizione teorica della prospettiva mimetica. Esemplare a proposito la recensione di Hayden White all'edizione inglese di *La violence et le sacré*:

> Like Freud and Levi-Strauss, Girard explains too much. […] There is nothing about culture and society that Girard's theories cannot predict. in this respect, they are exactly like any religious system or any metaphysical one. This does not make them useless, but it is fatal to the claim of scientificity.[1]

Pur nella ovvia considerazione che diversi punti della cosiddetta "cattedrale mimetica" rimangano altamente speculativi e richiederebbero un corposo apparato integrativo, non solo in senso generale ma anche rispetto a specifici paradigmi e linguaggi disciplinari, la teoria mimetica viene o derubricata, o volutamente ignorata, non solo o non tanto sulla base di contro-argomentazioni puntuali, ma soprattutto sulla base di presupposti ideologici di partenza, su forme di resistenza, più o meno esplicitate criticamente, che hanno sostanzialmente a che fare con la preminenza accordata da Girard al sacro e al religioso nella costituzione simbolica e nell'organizzazione istituzionale dell'umano, e che lo rendono per molti

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[1] H. White, *Ethnological "Lie" and Mythical "Truth"*, in "Diacritics", 8.1, 1978, p. 7.

uno dei "great apologists of Reaction"[2]. Ribaltando il procedimento di sospetto che tipicamente viene avanzato nei confronti di Girard, si può allo stesso modo asserire che questa sorta di "political unconscious" (in realtà pienamente esplicitato) crea delle ovvie strettoie concettuali nella potenziale ricezione dei presupposti della teoria mimetica, basate su una serie di ipostatizzazioni che condizionano necessariamente le procedure ermeneutiche e le conclusioni teoriche relative. A distanza di mezzo secolo, le obiezioni avanzate da Girard in *La violenza e il sacro* rimangono pertanto ancora valide, nel senso di una continua e protratta resistenza nei confronti del religioso e del sacro e del loro statuto fondativo originario, spesso nella non curanza illuministica rispetto all'oggetto in esame: "Di tutte le istituzioni sociali, il religioso è la sola cui la scienza non sia mai riuscita ad attribuire un oggetto reale, un'autentica funzione"[3].

On Kings

Un esempio, fra i molti e esposto per la prima volta in *La violenza e il sacro*, riguarda la discussione sull'emergere e sulle caratteristiche proprie dell'istituto della regalità, ovvero uno dei punti cruciali nel processo di strutturazione politico-istituzionale delle società arcaiche – che nel caso della teorizzazione girardiana mantiene una riverberazione storica che giunge fin dentro alla modernità, con quei tipici gesti di compressione storica che rimangono tanto fecondi quanto cursori[4]. Ribaltando con un solo gesto secoli di teorizzazione a riguardo, Girard asserisce nel suo tipico tono perentorio e apodittico: "Né la più atroce tirannia né l'astratta buona volontà del 'contratto sociale' possono spiegare l'istituzione della regalità. Solo la religione, evidentemente, ne è capace ed è il paradosso rituale che il paradosso del potere centrale riproduce"[5]. Girard si pone

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[2] Ivi, p. 3.
[3] R. Girard, *La violenza e il sacro*, Adelphi, Milano 1980, pp. 134-35.
[4] Si veda ad esempio R. Girard, *Il capro espiatorio*, Adelphi, Milano 1987, p. 60. Paul Dumouchel a riguardo sottolinea: "mimetic theory has always seemed to be marked by what one could describe as a void or a missing central piece. Indeed, the mimetic explanation "jumps", so to speak, from segmented and stateless societies of the ancient world to the present. The whole history between these points of departure and arrival gains meaning through, as you said, the progressive loss of efficacy of sacrificial mechanisms. But this history is never analysed in detail. This "emptiness" or missing piece is not only a chronological, but also a theoretical matter"; P. Dumouchel, A. Wilmes, *René Girard and Philosophy: An Interview with Paul Dumouchel*, in "The Philosophical Journal of Conflict and Violence", I.1, 2017: https://trivent-publishing.eu/journals/pjcv2/1.%20 Interview_ENG.pdf.
[5] R. Girard, *Delle cose nascoste sin dalla fondazione del mondo*, tr. it., Adelphi, Milano 1983, p. 76.

contro la propensione platonizzante di considerare gli istituti statuali come perenni, esistenti da sempre, e per i quali apparentemente non serve una spiegazione sulle loro origini. L'istituto della regalità, secondo Girard, è basato sulla sacralizzazione della vittima espiatoria che per circostanze storiche riesce a procrastinare indefinitamente il momento del suo sacrificio e della sua morte.

> In tutte le istituzioni umane, si tratta innanzitutto e sempre di riprodurre, per il tramite di nuove vittime, un linciaggio riconciliatore. Nella sua qualità di fonte apparente di ogni discordia e di ogni concordia, la vittima originaria gode di un prestigio sovrumano e terrificante. Le vittime che la sostituiscono ereditano questo prestigio. È in tale prestigio che bisogna ricercare il principio di ogni sovranità politica e religiosa.
> Perché il rituale produca una istituzione politica, un potere monarchico, e non forme sacrificali ordinarie […], che cosa deve accadere? È necessario e sufficiente che la vittima approfitti di un eventuale rinvio dell'immolazione per trasformare in potere effettivo la venerazione atterrita che le portano i suoi fedeli.[6]

In maniera particolare, lo statuto scientifico della teoria mimetica viene testato nella maniera più "spettacolare", come asserisce Girard stesso,[7] attraverso l'analisi dei riti di intronizzazione dei re africani. Constatandone la somiglianza con i rituali di immolazione sacrificale, Girard sostiene che l'istituto regale è emerso come prodotto secondario del linciaggio fondatore e della logica mimetico-sacrificale nella sua evoluzione protostorica. Girard fa riferimento a studi antropologici storici come quelli di J. G. Frazer o di Luc de Heusch sull'incesto sacro in Africa[8], sottolineando come parecchi etnologi, "riconoscono candidamente che il re è in effetti un capro espiatorio, ma non si soffermano su questa strana unione della più esaltata sovranità e della più estrema oppressione"[9].

Rispetto a questa ipotesi, si possono verificare, a distanza di 50 anni, delle ulteriori congruenze significative rispetto a discussioni di repertori etnografici e antropologici che hanno tentato di sistematizzare l'argomento. Se sfogliamo uno degli studi più recenti e autorevoli sulla regalità in epoca e in culture premoderne, *On Kings* di David Graeber e Marshall Sahlins, ritroviamo uno schema antropologico che si avvicina molto a

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[6] Ivi, p. 74.
[7] R. Girard, *La violenza e il sacro*, cit., p. 63.
[8] L. de Heusch, *Essai sur le symbolisme de l'inceste royal en Afrique*, Université Libre de Bruxelles, Institut de Sociologie Solvay, Bruxelles 1958; L. de Heusch, *Aspects de la sacralité du pouvoir en Afrique*, in *Le Pouvoir et le Sacré*, Université libre de Bruxelles, Institut de sociologie, Bruxelles 1962.
[9] R. Girard, *Delle cose nascoste*, cit., p. 78.

quello espresso in *La violenza e il sacro*, ma che nel suo impianto teorico complessivo non si discosta da quelle riserve e critiche che Girard contestava mezzo secolo prima.

Analizzando comparativamente l'istituto della regalità come si è definito in Congo, nel Madagascar centrale, nelle società Chichimeca e Tolteca in Meso-America, tra gli Indiani Natchez in Mississippi, tra i Shilluk nel Sudan del Sud, nel Sulawesi o in Sri Lanka –, Graeber e Sahlins pongono dei quesiti che si muovono in una direzione congruente con quella esposta da Girard. Perché il re ha accesso al divino, o è esso stesso divinità o semi-divinità? Come possiamo spiegare la diffusione mondiale dei cosiddetti "Stranger-kingdoms", i regni dello straniero, definiti come "the dominant form of premodern state the world around, perhaps the original form" e dove i re "are foreign by ancestry and identity. The dynasty typically originates with a heroic prince from a greater outside realm: near or distant, legendary or contemporary, celestial or terrestrial"[10].

l rituali di intronizzazione del re straniero seguono uno schema mitico chiaramente riconoscibile rispetto all'eziologia del processo vittimario descritto da Girard. Tipicamente infatti, secondo la descrizione di Graeber:

> [they] recreate the domestication of the unruly stranger: he dies, is reborn, and nurtured and brought to maturity at the hands of native leaders. His wild or violent nature is not so much eliminated as it is sublimated and in principle used for the general benefit: internally as the sanction of justice and order, and externally in the defense of the realm against natural and human enemies.[11]

Nello schema di Girard, la vittima viene solitamente designata attraverso meccanismi arbitrari, ovvero attraverso il riconoscimento di tratti differenziali superficiali, che distinguono la vittima dal contesto sociale: deformità fisiche o l'essere uno straniero, uno esterno al gruppo dominato da strutture di parentela, in questo caso scelta che viene dettata dalla necessità di evitare potenziali escalation di vendetta se il re/vittima viene scelta all'interno di gruppi famigliari parte del gruppo sociale proprio:

> Se si osserva la gamma formata dalle vittime, in un panorama generale del sacrificio umano, ci si trova […] di fronte ad una lista eterogenea. Ci sono i prigionieri di guerra, ci sono gli schiavi, ci sono i fanciulli e gli adolescenti non sposati, ci sono gli individui minorati, e i rifiuti della società come il *pharmakos* greco.[12]

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[10] D. Graeber, M. Sahlins, *On Kings*, Hau Books, Chicago 2017, p. 5.
[11] Ivi, p. 6.
[12] R. Girard, *La violenza e il sacro*, cit., p. 25.

Un altro indice significativo nella definizione del regnante come *phar-makos* e *outcast*, riguarda la sua natura di *ex-lege*: "on his way to the king-dom, the dynastic founder is notorious for exploits of incest, fratricide, patricide, or other crimes against kinship and common morality"[13].

> In any number of African kingdoms, at least, this meant that at their installations, kings were expected to make some kind of dramatic gesture that marked a fundamental break with "the domestic order" and domestic morality. Usually this consisted of performing acts – murder, cannibalism, incest, the desecration of corpses – that would, had anyone else performed them, have been considered the most outrageous of crimes.[14]

Riguardo a *On Kings*, si potrebbe estendere quanto asserito da Girard rispetto a *Totem e tabù* di Freud: "dappertutto, nel nostro testo, Edipo brilla per la sua assenza"[15]. Nei suoi testi, da *La violenza e il sacro* a *Il capro espiatorio*, Girard torna più volte sul mito di Edipo Re come para-digmatico di questa dimensione farmacologica della sovranità. Proprio come nelle descrizioni etnografiche di Graeber e Sahlins, Edipo è un re straniero che si macchia di crimini atroci, crimini di indifferenziazione sociale e famigliare (regicidio e incesto), e che viene espulso perché ri-tenuto responsabile del disordine sociale, la peste, che ha colpito Tebe, proprio a causa delle sue trasgressioni. "Ogni re africano è un nuovo Edipo, che deve rappresentare di nuovo il suo stesso mito, dall'inizio alla fine, perché il pensiero rituale vede in questa rappresentazione il modo di perpetuare e rinnovare un ordine culturale sempre minacciato di disgregazione"[16]. Girard sottilinea la dimensione ad un tempo mitica e referenziale di questo racconto, uno dei vari ostacoli che la ricezione di Girard ha incontrato in ambito teorico e antropologico. Girard trat-ta il mito come un reperto e resoconto *storico*, dove l'accusa è mitica, ma la crisi è reale, come reale è la soluzione espiatoria a cui il gruppo sociale fa ricorso per porre fine alla crisi. Ogni società in un momento di crisi strutturale, deve trovare un colpevole, un responsabile, la cui punizione, immolazione, espulsione, possa porre termine alla crisi. La selezione vittimaria si basa sulla costruzione di un principio di respon-sabilità che è del tutto arbitrario e quindi mitico: "Non comprendiamo la monarchia sacra perché non notiamo che l'efficacia del meccanismo fondatore implica strutturalmente un malinteso a proposito della vitti-ma, una convinzione incrollabile che questa vittima sia colpevole, con-

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[13] D. Graeber, M. Sahlins, *op. cit.*, p. 5.
[14] Ivi, p. 70.
[15] R. Girard, *La violenza e il sacro*, cit., p. 287.
[16] Ivi, p. 153.

vinzione che si traduce nell'esigenza rituale di commettere l'incesto e altre trasgressioni"[17]. *La violenza e il sacro* inaugura una forma di inedita ermeneutica antropologica che si rivolge ai testi (tragedie classiche, repertori litografici, resoconti rituali etnografici) alla ricerca di un suo contenuto referenziale. Propone lo stesso movimento che aveva informato *Menzogna romantica e verità romanzesca*, dove la pluralità delle vicende romanzesche e dei personaggi della tradizione novellistica europea veniva ridotta ad una unità interpretativa generale di carattere psico-sociale: il desiderio mimetico. Lo stesso impianto ermeneutico si trova *La violenza e il sacro* dove la lettura indiziaria dei testi restituiscono un quadro unitario pur nella diversità apparentemente irrelata delle fonti. Questa generalizzazione è uno dei maggiori ostacoli nella comprensione del pensiero di Girard, rubricato come riduzionistico, o infondato, fantasioso o assurdo[18].

L'impossibilità di considerare qualsiasi elemento di referenzialità del mito (the "ethnological lie" di Girard, nella dizione di White) impedisce a Graeber e Sahlins di associare la figura del re-straniero al paradigma edipico, che non viene mai citato dai due antropologi, nemmeno in termini traslati o metaforici. La somiglianza strutturale fra i resoconti etnografici sulla ritualità del re straniero e il mito di Edipo viene per tanto ignorata da Graeber e Sahlins che ovviamente non possono assecondare una tale vistosa trasgressione di precisi protocolli scientifici, per cui un tema mitico o una tragedia classica hanno uno statuto finzionale che appartiene al campo della pura arbitrarietà rappresentativa, e che riguarda l'analisi delle forme linguistico-simboliche di una determinata cultura (la "verità mitica" di White). I capitoli di *La violenza e il sacro* considerati posteriormente da Girard stesso come digressivi, quelli su Lévi-Strauss e lo strutturalismo e su Freud, possono avere indotto Graeber a derubricare la prospettiva girardiana nei termini di una teoria "quasi-psychoanalytic"[19]. Questo nonostante studi sulla regalità premoderna in ambito antropologico, come quello di Simon Simonse realtivamente alle popolazioni del Sudan meridionale, abbiano trovato particolare attenzione nelle discussioni di *On Kings*[20].

[17] R. Girard, *Delle cose nascoste*, cit., p. 72.
[18] "Girard's is one of those arguments that, even if so overstated it might seem self-evidently absurd, nonetheless never fails to find an audience because it managed to find a way of framing something we are taught to already suspect is true – that is, that society is always, everywhere founded on some kind of fundamental violence"; D. Graeber, M. Sahlins, *op. cit.*, p. 71.
[19] *Ibid.*
[20] S. Simonse, *Kings of Disaster: Dualism, Centralism and the Scapegoat King in the Southeastern Sudan*, Leiden/New York/Copenhagen/Cologne, E.J Brill 1992.

Ciò nonostante, è possibile riscontrare una particolare e significativa convergenza, e allo stesso tempo inversione di carattere ermeneutico, per cui le ricerche di Graeber e Sahlins si pongono paradossalmente come prospettive corroboranti, perché volte a descrivere e a spiegare fenomeni coerentemente convergenti con le considerazioni girardiane, fenomeni che appaiono strutturati da ambivalenze o paradossi (come nel caso dell'origine della sovranità) e che trovano nella prospettiva mimetica una quanto mai efficace risoluzione interpretativa e teorica, a dispetto della presunta carica riduzionistica che questa offre. D'altro canto, come detto, modellizzano un protratto rifiuto di un paradigma durkehimiano riguardo alla preminenza del religioso rispetto al sociale, attraverso un ostentato tentativo di ricomporre le tessere interpretative e probatorie risultanti da una precisa gerarchizzazione eziologica dove il politico risulta matrice prioritaria e formativa del sociale. Vi è una divergenza nell'attribuzione causale ed evolutiva rispetto alle forme di *agency* umana, che per Girard il religioso scavalca, essendo esso stesso il principio antropogenetico che costruisce l'umanità stessa, la sua matrice di affrancazione dalle esigenze del *bios*, e del confinamento dell'uomo in una nicchia ecologica, verso una apertura creativa legata a una co-evoluzione del naturale e del culturale. La razionalità pragmatica del politico viene anticipata dalla razionalità rituale del religioso che è la vera matrice di costituzione della cultura umana. In questo senso va compreso l'elemento creativo che Graeber e Sahlins individuano proprio nei rituali legati all'intronizzazione del re:

> The advent of the stranger-king is often said to raise the native people from a rudimentary state by bringing them such things as agriculture, cattle, tools and weapons, metals – even fire and cooking, thus a transformation from nature to culture.[21]

Allo stesso tempo, è l'apparato rituale che, paradossalmente, produce un continuo processo di desacralizzazione, attraverso tutti quei meccanismi di distanziamento dal sacro istituiti dallo spazio rituale e che progressivamente si liberano dalle determinazioni sacrali, verso forme d'uso comune, "profano":

> Il rito fa uscire a poco a poco gli uomini dal sacro; permette loro di sfuggire alla propria violenza, li allontana da questa, conferendo loro tutte le istituzioni e tutti i pensieri che definiscono la loro umanità.[22]

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[21] D. Graeber, M. Sahlins, *op. cit.*, p. 6.
[22] R. Girard, *La violenza e il sacro*, cit., p. 426.

Per tanto, "noi diciamo monarchia sacra, come se la monarchia venisse prima e il sacro dopo, come se il sacro andasse ad aggiungersi (come un elemento posticcio) a una monarchia pre-esistente e che non avrebbe bisogno di essere inventata"[23].

Animato da questo sospetto ideologico, Graeber rimane incapace di concettualizzare ad esempio il ritorno dell'ordine sociale a forme primigenie di indifferenziazione mimetica. Ne dà un esempio discutendo le forme della regalità nel Congo del XIX secolo, definito attraverso una dissociazione esplicita tra la dimensione sacrale e divina del sovrano ("a divine king of the classic stranger-king type, if not an especially sacred one"). Investito, per ragioni storiche, da lotte intestine, e da processi sociali degenerativamente violenti, "divine kingship underwent a process of 'involution'":

> Nineteenth-century sources unveil a veritable Victorian wonder-cabinet of strange and exotic political forms: kings executed on the first day in office who then reigned as ghosts; kings exiled to forests like the Priest of Nemi; kings regularly beaten and mutilated by their guards and companions; kings who actually were regularly put to death at the end of their four- or seven-year terms.[24]

Queste forme così "strane e esotiche" trovano ovviamente una logica esplicativa ricorrendo all'ipotesi espiatoria di Girard, come origine dello statuto del re come vittima ritualmente designata, come *homo sacer* perpetuamente sospeso in uno stato di anomia espulsiva. Anche Graeber, soprattutto attraverso la mediazione di Simonse, concede ai girardiani l'onore delle armi in questa disputa esplicativa, pur non comprendendone a pieno l'articolazione descrittiva: "All this is, perhaps, what a Girardian would predict, except that, far from being the solemn sacrificial rituals with willing victims that Girard imagines, king-killings more resembled lynch mobs"[25]. È infatti esattamente da questi fenomeni di crisi mimetica indifferenziata, di "lynch mobs", che paradossalmente l'ordine sociale trova origine.

La figura del capro espiatorio e della vittima sacra ha una fluidità extra-giuridica assumendo forme diverse nel momento in cui fluttua in termini latenti e potenziali sul limite di un sistema giuridico-legale particolare, e che recupera una serie di vestigia rituali quando circostanze contestuali portano a un collasso istituzionale e a un propagarsi della violenza senza forme di regolazione (se non nella forma di vittimizzazioni più o meno arbitrarie).

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[23] R. Girard, *Delle cose nascoste*, cit., p. 75.
[24] D. Graeber, M. Sahlins, *op. cit.*, p. 413.
[25] Ivi, p. 79.

Il processo involutivo, descritto da Graeber, è una sorta di riavvolgimento del nastro mitico-rituale che ritorna alle radici stesse dei meccanismi violenti di intronizzazione.

> genuine "sovereignty" does always carry with it the potential for arbitrary violence. This is true even in contemporary welfare states: apparently this is the one aspect that, despite liberal hopes, can never be completely reformed away. It is precisely in this that sovereigns resemble gods and that kingship can properly be called "divine".[26]

Da un punto di vista di un antropologo che non nasconde le proprie posizioni politiche di carattere "anarchico"[27], la lettura dei dati etnografici si piega a una resistenza illuministica che portano a dissociare la società dalla sua violenza strutturale, di vederla sempre come un eccesso, un epifenomeno, un'occorrenza occasionale, ovvero come una legittima strategia di resistenza politica alle derive dispotiche dei regnanti:

> I think this perspective allows us to see that the mechanics of sacred kingship – turning the king into a fetish or a scapegoat – often operate (whatever their immediate intentions) as a means of controlling the obvious dangers of rulers who feel they can act like arbitrary, petulant gods. Sahlins' emphasis on the way stranger-kings must be domesticated.[28]

Il dispositivo sacrificale è quindi il meccanismo attraverso cui il re viene mantenuto sotto scacco e controllato dai sudditi. Da questo ne discende una comprensione del religioso o del sacro essenzialmente come elemento "parassitario" rispetto alle dinamiche istituzionali e politiche. Ovvero come un mero epifenomeno di istituzioni che sono presenti già come pienamente secolarizzate:

> The Ganda kingship, for example, was almost entirely secular. Not only are we not dealing with a "divine king", in the sense of one identified with supernatural beings, we are not even dealing with a particularly sacred one – except insofar as any king is, simply by virtue of hierarchical position, by definition sacred.[29]

Nel protratto tentativo ermeneutico di spogliare queste vestigia istituzionali di qualsiasi forma sacrale, vengono descritte anche nelle loro forme performative e teatrali, travestimenti autocelebrativi del potere:

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[26] Ivi, p. 75.
[27] Cfr. D. Graeber, *Fragments of an Anarchist Anthropology*, Prickly Paradigm Press, Chicago 2004.
[28] D. Graeber, M. Sahlins, *op. cit.*, p. 75.
[29] Ivi, p. 74.

Creatures like Mutesa transcend all ordinary limitations. Whether they were said to embody a god is not the issue. The point is that they act like gods – or even God – and get away with it.[30]

L'esternalità assunta dal re è sistemica e funzionale, indotta dal meccanismo stesso della totalizzazione (il re è l'architrave che rende stabile il sistema attraverso questa stessa esternalità), mentre i caratteri della divinità e della trascendenza sono, per così dire, illusori, apparenti, sono dei trasferimenti di similitudine, per cui elementi regali "assomigliano" ad aspetti del divino, senza esserlo in maniera attuale e sostanziale.

In termini metodologici e paradigmatici, i resoconti antropologici registrano in maniera puntiforme occorrenze etnografiche che forniscono un campo descrittivo che non si presta a nessuna possibile unificazione, presentando sostanzialmente una costellazione di differenze che rimangono ipostatizzate come tali, e che per tanto continuano a risultare "paradossali", quando per Girard possono essere riconducibili a forme di possibile "degradazione" o evoluzione del sistema rituale originario, senza poterle però riposizionare in una stretta prospettiva storica di carattere evolutivo, anche per la loro dispersione temporale e geografica. Ritornando proprio ai lavori di de Heusch, già commentati da Girard in *La violenza e il sacro*, Graeber sottolinea come de Heusch rifiuti l'espressione "divine kingship":

kings actually taken to be living gods are in fact surprisingly rare: the Egyptian Pharaoh may well have been the only entirely unambiguous example [...]. Better, he argued, to speak of "sacred kingship". Sacred kings are legion. But de Heusch also emphasizes that sacred kings are not necessarily temporal rulers. They might be. But they might equally be utterly powerless. Different functions – the king as fetish, the king as scapegoat, the king as military commander or secular leader – can either be combined in the same figure or be distributed across many; in any one community, any given one of them may or may not exist.[31]

Girard aveva del resto già individuato la dimensione proiettiva o retrospettiva che informa lo sguardo antropologico che pensa la regalità e il politico.

Le sopravvivenze rituali sono come i pezzetti di crisalide che si attaccano ancora a esso ma di cui l'insetto perfetto si sbarazza a poco a poco. La regalità sacra si è metamorfosata in regalità pura e semplice, in un potere esclusivamente politico. Quando osserviamo la monarchia dell'Ancien Régime in

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[30] *Ibid.*
[31] Ivi, p. 72

Francia, o qualsiasi altra veramente tradizionale, siamo costretti a chiederci se non risulterebbe più proficuo pensare tutto alla luce delle monarchie sacre del mondo primitivo piuttosto che proiettare la nostra immagine moderna dell'istituzione regia sul mondo primitivo.[32]

Del resto, tutte queste forme evolutive o involutive, le eccedenze rispetto a un calco preciso di una formulazione ristretta dell'ipotesi vittimaria, si prestano ad essere usate come "eccezioni'" falsificanti per la teoria di Girard, da cui la necessità di pensare e comprendere la teoria mimetica in termini paradigmatici e non di "scienza normale", come sottolineato da più parti.[33] Non abbiamo nessun *experimentum crucis*, ovviamente, ma frammenti storici di varia natura e delle genealogie simboliche, di pensiero, di pratiche rituali, attraverso cui leggere controluce una progressione storico-antropologica, caratterizzata da un percorso di progressive "secolarizzazioni", per così dire, a partire da una matrice che per Girard è religiosa e sacrale.

Homo sacer

Questa forma di derubricazione del religioso e del sacro a epifenomeno delle dinamiche politiche intrinseche all'organizzazione istituzionale umana e alle forme assunte storicamente della regalità, è riscontrabile non solo in campo antropologico ma anche in quello filosofico, che presuppone spesso l'elemento politico come istitutivo dell'organizzazione umana propriamente detta[34].

Un esempio è l'impianto teorico orchestrato da Giorgio Agamben nel suo monumentale e paradigmatico *Homo sacer*. Anche in questo caso, la convergenza fra le prospettive di Agamben e il sistema vitti-

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[32] R. Girard, *La violenza e il sacro*, cit., pp. 422-23.

[33] Si veda la nostra discussione in R. Girard, with P. Antonello & J.C. de Castro Rocha, *Evolution and Conversion: Dialogues on the Origins of Culture*, Continuum, London 2007, capitolo 5; nonché Dumouchel: "It is possible to argue for the simplicity and explanatory power of an approach, not by trying to measure it from the outside, as we do when we compare it with a different theory, but by demonstrating it at work so to speak – that is to say, by making visible the explanatory power and simplicity of the theory by applying it to phenomena that are different from the ones that it was originally designed to explain"; P. Dumouchel, *The Ambivalence of Scarcity and Other Essays*, Michigan State University Press, East Lansing 2014, p. xxi.

[34] Come ha specificato chiaramente, ad esempio, Roberto Esposito in *Due*, "L'origine della violenza *è sempre politica* – riguarda e coinvolge innanzitutto i rapporti di potere che vincolano gli uomini secondo forme determinate di *comando e obbedienza*, di *oppressione e resistenza*"; Roberto Esposito, *Due. La macchina della teologia politica e il posto del pensiero*, Einaudi, Torino 2013, p. 81.

mario prospettato da Girard è talmente eclatante che esiste ormai una nutrita letteratura critico-filosofica che ha computato le forme attraverso cui l'istituto della *sacertas* può venir ricondotto a pratiche rituali di carattere sacrificale, e in generale come la prospettiva girardiana collimi con molti dei postulati espressi da Agamben nelle sue discussioni teologico-politiche[35]. La figura concettuale cardine dell'architettura concettuale di Agamben, l'*homo sacer*, è anch'essa legata a un meccanismo di esclusione, di espulsione violenta, ma ipostatizzata storicamente all'interno di una costruzione giuridico-istituzionale già evoluta e complessa come quella del diritto romano. L'arbitrarietà con cui Agamben sigilla questa figura come paradigmatica dell'imperio politico, e della riduzione biopolitica alla nuda vita del soggetto umano, ovviamente più che costituire un punto *post quem*, agisce come metafora concettuale, estendibile attraverso ampie traslazioni storiche spesso abitrarie (di cui Girard stesso del resto non è immune).

A differenza di Graeber, Agamben non fa mai menzione di Girard nei suoi scritti, né lo considera un interlocutore legittimo per ragioni che possono essere varie[36]. Ciò nonostante, come nel caso di Graeber e Sahlins, il lavoro di Agamben esplora strutture concettuali e questioni storiche e teoriche che sono profondamente rilevanti per l'impianto probatorio della teoria mimetica, e che risuonano con il sostrato antropogenetico dei processi vittimari discussi da Girard a partire da *La violenza e il sacro*. L'ipotesi di Girard illumina varie zone grigie nella teorizzazione di Agamben, mentre le analisi archeologiche del filosofo italiano possono essere incluse nella struttura probatoria dell'edificio teorico girardiano.

Rispetto al nostro discorso, la struttura antinomica del sacro come articolata da Girard può chiarire proprio "il paradosso della sovranità", una delle questioni affrontate da Agamben in *Homo sacer* e mutuata da Carl Schmitt[37]. Agamben sottolinea come sia stato costantemente osservato

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[35] Ne discuto in P. Antonello, *Sacrificing Homo Sacer: René Girard reads Giorgio Agamben*, in "Forum Philosophicum", 24.1, 2019, pp. 145–182. Si veda inoltre a proposito: Christopher A. Fox, *Sacrificial Pasts and Messianic Futures: Religion as a Political Prospect in René Girard and Giorgio Agamben*, in "Philosophy and Social Criticism", 33.5, 2007; Antonio Cerella, "The Myth of Origin: Archaeology and History in the Work of Agamben and Girard", in E. Brighi e A. Cerella (a cura di), *The Sacred and the Political: Explorations on Mimesis, Violence and Religion*, Bloomsbury, London, 2016; L. Enright, *'Divine but Not Sacred': A Girardian Answer to Agamben's The Kingdom and the Glory*, in "Contagion: Journal of Violence, Mimesis, and Culture", 26, 2019, pp. 237-249.

[36] Avanzo qualche ipotesi in P. Antonello, *Sacrificing Homo Sacer*, cit.

[37] Agamben si sbarazza con un semplice gesto retorico di tutta la questione relativa al sacrificio, postulando semplicemente che la ritualità sacrificale non ha nulla a che vedere con il bando regale e il sovrapporsi dei termini sono semplicemente dovuti alla confusione occorsa nella letteratura antropologica moderna.

come l'ordinamento giuridico-politico abbia la struttura di una inclusione di ciò che è, allo stesso tempo, "spinto fuori"[38], espulso: "il sovrano è, allo stesso tempo, fuori e dentro l'ordinamento giuridico"[39].

Confrontandosi con Schmitt, Agamben postula che sia l'eccezione la struttura di questa particolare ed enigmatica "esclusione inclusiva" che caratterizza la sovranità. Non si tratta però di una categoria giuridica, né una potenza esterna al diritto, come predicata Schmitt, ma di una "struttura originaria in cui il diritto si riferisce alla vita e la include in sé attraverso la propria sospensione. Riprendendo un suggerimento di J.-L. Nancy, – scrive Agamben – chiamiamo *bando* (dall'antico termine germanico che designa tanto l'esclusione dalla comunità che il comando e l'insegna del sovrano) questa potenza"[40].

Questa struttura paradossale di inclusione/esclusione, della regalità come bando, è immediatamente interpretabile, in termini archeologici e storici, alla luce della spiegazione che Girard dà all'emergere dell'istituto della regalità. In *Homo Sacer*, Agamben nota la simmetria tra corpo del sovrano e dell'*homo sacer*, assieme al moltiplicarsi di figure reali o totemiche di carattere sostitutivo che presiedono la ritualità del potere, senza trarne però elementi conclusivi a proposito[41]. Si tratta anche in questo caso di vestigia dell'esercizio rituale e sacrificale che assumono in epoca storica una serie di conformazioni sostitutive e di allontanamento progressivo dalla matrice sacrale e violenta da cui prendono origine.

La regalità si situa in una zona di eccezione. Come l'*homo sacer*, il re vive in uno spazio di potenziale anomia. La presunta "insacrificabilità" del sovrano come *homo sacer* risiede proprio nel fatto che il sovrano abita uno stato di eccezione, cioè uno stato di sospensione permanente o semi-permanente, è sfuggito per così dire al controllo della liturgia rituale e sacrificale.

La vittima sacrificale è "bandita", "abbandonata" dalla comunità, ma ad essa si lega perché prodotto dall'atto di esclusione differenziale a cui la società si sottopone per esternalizzare la propria violenza, e per conferirle la potenza che questa violenza stessa è capace. Per Girard, alla vittima emissaria è stato conferito lo stato di sovrano, perché è lui che ha accesso alla violenza più pura e indiscriminata che ha dato origine all'ordine e alla pace della comunità. Nello stato di eccezione, la violenza ha lo stesso ruolo della legge ha in uno stato normale delle cose, e appare come arbitro supremo delle azioni umane. Il re è come il custode della porta che fa

[38] G. Agamben, *Homo sacer. Il potere sovrano e la nuda vita*, Einaudi, Torino 1995, p. 22.
[39] Ivi, p. 19.
[40] Ivi, p. 34.
[41] Ivi, p. 115.

accedere la comunità alla sua violenza indiscriminata. "Un re sacrificato; non vi è in ciò un'idea del potere stesso che cerca di ingannare gli uomini sull'arbitrio della tirannia che si fa pesare su di loro?"[42].

Come nel caso delle descrizioni antropologiche di Graeber e Sahlins, il gruppo sociale può sempre precipitare nello "stato di eccezione" primordiale, uno spazio *ex-lege*, una zona di anomia, dove la struttura delle differenziazioni sociali vengono a cadere e ogni tipo di norma perde di efficacia. "Uno degli elementi che rendono lo stato di eccezione così difficile da definire, scrive Agamben, è certamente la sua relazione intima con la guerra civile, le insurrezioni, e la resistenza"[43]. Lo "stato di eccezione", in termini mimetico-vittimari, come processo di degradazione violenta dell'ordine sociale mette in atto usi farmacologici della violenza stessa a fini restaurativi dell'ordine sociale e politico. Lo stato di eccezione si accompagna infatti a evidenti forme persecutorie, amministrate da un potere centrale, da un sovrano che però a sua volta può essere investito dalla violenza indifferenziata e indifferenziante dell'organismo sociale, dove il re stesso può assumere il ruolo di vittima emissaria, come le rivoluzioni sociali moderne hanno ampiamente dimostrato. Lo stato di eccezione è un apparato vittimario.

Usando la terminologia di Agamben, possiamo comprendere come il sovrano sia pertanto il primo "bandito", come criminale e come espulso, ovvero il punto di intersezione fra esterno e esterno, che dal margine viene posto al centro, "nel cuore stesso", del sistema sociale.[44] Se il costituirsi dell'ordine sociale avviene attraverso dei meccanismi di esclusione ovvero di persecuzione, il centro non si distingue se non di grado da ciò che è marginale, da ciò che rimane sul limite, e per tanto è più facilmente passibile di esclusione, il diverso, lo straniero o l'*homo sacer*[45]. Tutto questo predica della consustanziale interdipendenza fra esterno e interno nell'equilibrio sistemico sociale. Nella teoria sistemica di Luhmann è ciò che garantisce la chiusura del sistema stesso e la sua stabilità (temporanea). C'è una solidarietà tra ciò che esterno e ciò che si situa al centro dell'ordine sociale, proprio per l'eccezionalità delle loro posizioni. Chi è ai margini e chi è al centro sono coloro che detengono quelle caratteristiche differenziali, quei tipici segni vittimari che li distinguono dalla massa.

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[42] R. Girard, *Delle cose nascoste*, cit., p. 52.
[43] G. Agamben, *Stato di eccezione. Homo sacer II. 1*, Bollati Boringhieri, Torino 2003, p. 168.
[44] R. Girard, *Delle cose nascoste*, cit., p. 54.
[45] *Kentron* in greco, scrive Michel Serres, designa "il pungolo con cui il contadino stimolava […] la coppia di buoi aggiogati all'aratro", il pungiglione di api o scorpioni, "ma anche uno staffile chiodato, strumento di tortura. Ora, la stessa parola designa lo strumento di punizione e colui che la subisce e la merita, la vittima"; M. Serres, *L'origine della geometria*, tr. it., Feltrinelli, Milano 1994, p. 119.

Il re è un "vero e proprio fuoricasta. Egli sfugge alla società 'dall'alto', così come il *pharmakos* le sfugge dal basso"[46]. Il punto più alto della gerarchia sociale è il più potente ma anche il più pericoloso ed esposto, perché il re può ritornare a diventare quello che l'apparato istituzionale ha progressivamente nascosto, la sua origine vittimaria, e le involuzioni descritte anche da Graeber, forniscono materiale probante rispetto a queste manifestazioni storiche e antropologiche.

Comparativamente, potremmo dire che se dal punto di vista di un discorso filosofico come quello di Agamben, le evidenze storico-testuali vengono piegate a un disegno di spiegazione complessiva che presuppone una determinata dialettica storica (il politico come base di ogni attività reale e simbolica, incluso il religioso), il tentativo di decifrazione del rapporto fra rito e sovranità di Graeber si misura su dati ed evidenze antropologiche e etnografiche più precise consentendo una maggiore plasticità argomentativa (al di là del pregiudizio negativo nei confronti di Girard), che porta materiale corroborante alla prospettiva mimetica, ampliando la casistica delle occorrenze mitiche e rituali che possono essere interpretate in maniera cogente e più completa all'interno del paradigma proposto da Girard. In questo senso l'antropologia si libera man mano degli orpelli pregiudiziali che la tengono legata a cornici interpretative ideologicamente orientate lasciando spazio a una rilettura della tradizione antropologica e degli studi più recenti in chiave più apertamente capace di intercettare i suggerimenti della teoria mimetica (e Graeber, seppur a malincuore, può anche essere costretto a dar ragione a Girard…).

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Tania Checchi G.[*]

Violent Plasticity: a Phenomenological and Mimetic Approach to Art and Myth

Taking into account the scope of mimetic theory and its impressive accomplishments, the very attempt of a new critique of myth as such and not of a particular case may prove either redundant or utterly presumptuous. I hope the following may attain a middle ground with the help of Emmanuel Levinas, whose thought can be read as thoroughly akin to that of René Girard in many respects, the least explored of which is his critical approach to mythical and artistic time and their intimate link[1]. Even though Girard's stance in *Violence and the Sacred* is strictly anthropological, we firmly believe a phenomenological analysis can be attempted regarding how myth, in its legitimation of transcendent violence – as posed by the French thinker – operates at the level of sensibility as a sort of induced and timeless "stasis"[2]. If myth, as Girard affirms, keeps communities engaged in the same type of sacrificial practices that originated them, we would like to suggest the possibility that it does so, and very efficaciously, in a way analogous to art – be it eminently religious, as in its beginnings, or not – and the way the artistic image imposes itself on the subject's sensibility. To do so, we would like to answer the following question: what kind of new threshold is transposed when as a result of the sacrificial crisis, described in *Violence and the Sacred* as the generative process of all culture, a new entity – the image as symbol – makes its entrance into our phenomenological field of perception? Along many other authors which have attempted to trace the origin of all symbolic activity in an originally religious and mythopoetic framework, we have in mind

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[2] Because brevity is of the essence in this volume, a full account of Levinas truly original interpretation of Edmund Husserl's Urimpression, that is, the original point source of time as the encounter with the Other cannot, alas, be offered, but its more salient points can be delineated by contrast with the main issue at hand, what I would like to call *mythical stasis*.

here Schelling's idea – prolonged in Levinas's thought – of art´s construction of the world through the optic of mythology as expressing, avant la lettre, genuinely mimetic insights in the vein of those exposed by Girard in *Violence and the Sacred*[3].

Art, particularly Greek classical art, constitutes a privileged object of analysis in terms of temporal effects for both authors, but while Girard's exegesis of tragedy is well known to those acquainted with his thought, Levinas approach to art has been neglected just until lately with few exceptions. Nevertheless it is precisely on this point that a convergent reading can clarify the existential stakes involved in the acritical acceptance of myth as a pervasive structure of experience, a fact that is a given for both authors. It would be suitable here to paraphrase George Steiner's comment concerning the perennial presence in our midst of the Greek world that precedes philosophy: "each time we even attempt to think, a host of specters from Hellas rises to walk by our side"[4]. This image is as beautiful as it is ominous, for how can we even dream of escaping from myth's grasp if the fundamental milestones and perplexities of life are crystalized through myth in language itself? One thinks of Antigone's final ordeal accompanied by the shadows of all her ancestors, ever present in her understanding of the very words she utters against Creon[5]. This is the dead weight of lineage, the sorrow of a story that, in its perfection, forecloses any other possibility: the armature without crevices of myth. In this regard, Girard and Levinas pose the same questions in what Ann Astell describes as "complementary critical axiologies" that run in the first case in a horizontal axis and in a

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[3] In his *Philosophy of Art*, a text from 1804 but published posthumously by his son, Schelling states the following at the very beginning of his exposition: "In the philosophy of art I accordingly intend to construe first of all not art as art, as this particular, but rather the universe in the form of art, thus the philosophy of art is the science of the All in the form or potence of art" (p. 16). Then, when broaching the subject of the *mode* of construction he will attempt to show in his § 38 that mythology is the necessary condition and content of all art. (p. 45). See F.W.J. Schelling, *The Philosophy of Art*, Stott, D.W., University of Minnesota Press, Minnesota 1989.

[4] See G. Steiner, *Antigones*, Yale University Press, New Jersey 1996: "But I want to put myth and grammar into a seminal relation. Many of the ways in which the Greek language and our inheritance of this language inform, abstract, make symbolic, analogize or metaphorize the components of our mental experience and of our presence in the natural and the social worlds seems to me inseparable from certain key myths. It is in intimate conjunction with these myths that the semantic encoding, the expressive means of our grammar of thought can be most vividly construed", p. 135.

[5] Jean Pierre Vernant stresses the lack of communication between the tragic characters trapped in their own semantic universe, unwilling and uncapable of understanding the other's meaning until it is too late. Inherited symmetrical oppositions will be underscored by Girard's approach to myth and tragedy. See J.P. Vernant, P. Vidal Naquet, *Myth and Tragedy in Ancient Greece*, Zone Books, New York 1996, pp. 29-48.

vertical one in the latter[6]. Both, anthropologically and phenomenologically tackle this issues: to what kind of temporality do we give ourselves into when a succession of fascinating but, as we shall see, ultimately motionless images, as the ones that appear in myth first and then in art, overtakes us? How does the anonymous murmur and rage of undifferentiated violence transmutes itself into art?

In his brief but unsparing analysis of art published in 1948, *Reality and its shadow*, Levinas links the Greek notion of μορφή to that of narrativity in a way that reminds us immediately of the sobering texts in which Girard explores the inversions operated by myth and explored by tragedy. Against the frequent assumption of art's innocuous existence and given its links to myth Levinas asks his readers to consider if art is really at such a safe distance from every kind of quasi-religious usurpation. Because Levinas answers this question in the negative, he also puts into question the conviction of his contemporaries about the political engagement of art. His critique tries to settle what could be understood as the ontological status of art, that is, the basic condition that underlies any further sociological or economical denunciation of particular works. According to his phenomenological analysis, as we shall see, the artistic endeavor ends up producing a sort of polished and independent reality upon which any idea of a closed totality, that is, a system of mythical and unchallenged differences can be built[7]. To put it in Girardian terms, images, both artistic and ritual – inasmuch as they ultimately share the same origin – would be warrantors of the differential order that emerges after sacrifice has put an end to the vertiginous proliferation of sameness that the mimetic crisis induced.

But how can this feat be accomplished? To begin with, Levinas tells us that the artistic image, being a double of the real object, is exempt from giving continuity to the phenomenologically endless perception of the world. Of course, he avoids here the cliché of art being a world of its own, but he insists on its emanation of an essence, a form, that for all its apparent luminosity, depends on a darkening of being, as if in the image, the object left only its raiment behind. For Levinas, that's the price of the radical isolation of an object through its appearance. Contrasting with the holistic approach of ordinary perception, the objects offered by art are made up by what he calls adjectival sensations. This crude course

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[6] See A. Astell, *Girard and Levinas as readers of King Lear,* in M. Gold, S. Goodhart (eds), *Of Levinas and Shakespeare "To see another thus"*, Purdue University Press, Indiana 2018, p. 87.

[7] The French term we would have liked to employ here, not very frequently used, is *hypostatization*, but it lacks an equivalent in English. It connotes the projection of a substantial reality into something that doesn't really entails it.

of impressions without referent closes itself up in a persistent materiality that according to Levinas no longer plays dialectically with any conceivable notion of spirit. Art's commerce with reality would then only refer to its shadow, for the sensorial qualities that constitute the image, be they verbal, aural or visual, do not pertain anymore to any substrate or substance[8]. Syllabic wreaths, visual textures, tactile gleams: the only thing that would give consistency and coherence to this aggregate of synesthetic sensations is rhythm for, in their isolation, they have abandoned any referential endeavor. It's just as if the artistic image was constituted by a discrete pulse – rhythm – that goes from the dispersion of its components to its regrouping in a totality announced even in the slightest of verses or melodic phrases. It would thus seem for the Lithuanian thinker that empiricism's concern with impressions and sensations was correct but only in regard to the aesthetic experience. While for a phenomenologist like Merleau-Ponty, art reconstructs step by step the labor of perception, for Levinas art does precisely the opposite. It invites us, as we shall see, to witness the "end of the world", that is, the possibility of its not being phenomenologically constituted as such[9]. That is why, though trying to obtain a transhistorical category, Levinas finds in modernism, the formal and material elements whose atomicity and strangeness is underscored not only by abstractionism but by atonality and the formless background of some narratives:

From a space without horizons, things break away and are cast toward us like chunks that have weight in themselves, blocks, cubes, planes, triangles, without transitions between them. They are naked elements, simple and absolute, swellings or abscesses of being[10].

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[8] Very generously, Professor Sandor Goodhart made available to us his notes for a study on Levinas, Blanchot and art. There, quite rightly, he points out Sartre's acknowledgement of the independent status of things such as "notes, colors and forms". This should be taken into account to avoid an easy dismissal of Sartre's position which aspires to be as phenomenologically precise as the one proposed by Levinas. Nevertheless, there is still a significant difference inasmuch as Sartre still considers such instances as "things" in a substantive sense. By contrast, for Levinas they can be conceived, in a Husserlian manner, as non-intentional sensations. That's precisely why it is not unthinkable that they may fail to phenomenologically constitute or yield the "world" as Husserl hypothesized.

[9] Moreover, in a text entitled "Simulacres", published originally as an interview in the Italian magazine *Nuovi Argomenti* in 1984, after alluding to the terrible events of the last sixty years, Levinas went to the length of comparing Husserl's ominous eidetic experiment in *Ideen* § 49 with the cosmic catastrophe alluded in the Psalm 82,5 —"all the foundations of the earth are out of course"— and ultimately, citing Husserl again — *that swarming of absolutely irreducible conflicts*— with the nuclear menace of complete extinction. Both images that correspond almost exactly to Girard's mimetic crisis and the ultimate possibility of uncontained violence in our world.

[10] E. Levinas, *Existence and existents*, Martinus Nijhoff, The Hague 1978, p. 56.

For Levinas, contemporary art shows us the refractory character of those elements that in traditional art are integrated with greater ease into a totality. So, in an inverse operation to that of classical art, modernism would let us glimpse into "the crevices that rupture the continuity of the universe"[11]. Therefore, the avant-garde is not interpreted by Levinas as the consummated accomplishment of the original and autonomous subjectivity of romanticism – a myth also denounced by Girard — that is, of a subjectivity capable of playing with formal and material elements at will and without restriction, but as a sort of regression into an acosmic sameness.

So, intuiting a complete disarray of experience that prefigures the one described by Girard apropos the undifferentiation of the sacrificial crisis, Levinas dares to asks: isn't the image as such a sort of falling away of being into cadences, a swooning – *cadere* in Latin – that far from inviting us into a dialogue, only asks of us our blind consent, our capitulation before its seductive sequences? Instead of the Kantian disinterestedness of aesthetic experience that we moderns might expect, we would find here a kind of submission to the rhythmic resonance of the image, rhythm being recognized now as a general aesthetic category that functions as the only integrating principle of the inter-sensorial and otherwise centrifugal elements of any kind of image. Now, far from being a mere historical convention, the Form, with capital letters, expressed by rhythm and challenged by contemporary art, has its roots, according to Levinas in a fundamental and very ancient experience. As Mikel Dufrenne, puts it, there is something imperious in rhythm that forces us to tune in with its flux, awakening in us an schematic and pre-reflexive activity that situates us within the object and outside ourselves.[12] Levinas calls this imperious quality "the exteriority of intimacy". In his view, each musical compass insinuates itself into our body depleting our initiative, turning us into quasi-objects that will take part in the spectacle itself. Appealing to a familiar experience for all of us, he evokes this overtaking of our body vividly: "to listen to music is in a sense to refrain from dancing"[13]. Henri Bergson, a very important influence in Levinas's critique of art tells us apropos this experience:

> The regularity of the rhythm…and the periodic returns of the measure are like so many invisible threads by means of which we set in motion this imaginary puppet. Indeed, if it stops for an instant, our hand in its impatience

[11] Ivi, p. 55.
[12] See M. Dufrenne, *The Phenomenology of Aesthetic Experience*, Northwestern University Press, Evanston 1973, p. 263.
[13] E. Levinas, *Reality and its shadow,* Blackwell, Oxford 1989, p. 133.

cannot refrain from making a movement, as though to push it, as though to replace it in the midst of this movement, the rhythm of which has taken complete possession of our thought and will.[14]

For Levinas the musical dialectic that sustains every work of art as a sort of vortex in which sensibility strays from the constitution of worldly objects and puts it under the service of an anonymous order finds its archaic concretion in what the French anthropologist Lucien Levy-Bruhl describes as *participation*[15]. For this author – not taken very much into account by Girard, whose main interlocutor in *Violence and the Sacred* is Levi-Strauss – in primitive societies, the criteria of reality for any given object is a collective experience that plunges the group into an anonymous and all-surrounding emotional atmosphere. So, instead of sending us beyond the world into the domain of intelligible archetypes – as Plotinus would have it – art would be a regression into a realm that strains the frontier between the subjective and the objective and that is marked by the horror of undifferentiation. Though he considers it a fundamental experience for the constitution of any objective reality, Lévy-Bruhl also speaks of the menacing aspects of this trans-personal participation.

For anyone familiarized with René Girard's thought the analogies here cannot be postponed for much longer. In *Violence and the sacred*, describing the Dionysian festivities and their orgiastic atmosphere, he cites Euripides *Bacchae* in a very similar vein: "The Lydian chorus declares: he who leads the dance becomes a Bromios"[16]. In the mimetic trance of the Dionysian thiasus, this god, described by Maria Zambrano as the god of transfusion, permeates everything and everyone[17]. This "becoming" is for Levinas a capitulation of the self in which the aesthetic experience is lived a sort of narcosis, a surrendering into the neutral waves of matter and rhythm in a way completely analogous if not identical to the ritualized remembrance of the founding crisis described by Girard. Thus the consummation that gives birth to myth, ritual and art has as its price the annihilation of free initiative, be it in the case of the spectator and the author or in the case of the original communities, who become all servants of what Levinas himself calls an obscure deity: the one forged in the communal violence, Girard would add. So, art and myth as described here by Levinas, would pertain to that liminal realm

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[14] H. Bergson, *Time and Free Will*, Dover Paperback Editions, Mineola, New York 2001, p. 12.
[15] See E. Levinas*, Levy-Bruhl et la philosophie contemporaine*, in Id., *Entre nous, Essais sur le penser à-l-autre*, Grasset, Paris 1991, pp. 53-67.
[16] R. Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*, The Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore 1977, p. 128.
[17] M. Zambrano, *El hombre y lo divino*, FCE, México 1955, p. 57.

in which the emerging order of the symbolic, with its asymmetries and differences, takes place: from a rhythmic and anonymous vortex and into Form[18]. We could say that art, when thoroughly deconstructed as Levinas does here, lets us take a peek into the imponderable "before" of the differential structure that for someone like Levi-Strauss is forever out of reach[19]. Even Merleau-Ponty, a defender of *l'art egagé*, that is, of an art of capable of political activism, admired what he called Levinas impressive description of the "pre-human medium of art this side of time and life"[20].

"This side of time and life", this is precisely what is at stake here. If the image constitutes an indifferent opacity that nonetheless sweeps us into an ecstatic turmoil lacking in interiority, then its characteristic inertia is anything but time, for Levinas defines interiority not as a private and autonomous domain, but as the warrant of an order in which everything is pending, an order that can still make possible those things which historically are no longer so[21]. Therefore, if interiority is out of the equation, and collective initiative is plunged in an anonymous mimesis, time as a new beginning is blocked. Levinas introduces here the "piéce de resistance" of *Reality and its Shadow*: "l'entretemps", a notion that can be roughly translated as the *meanwhile* or the in-between of time.

> To say that an image is an idol is to affirm that every image is in the last analysis plastic, and that every artwork is in the end a statue – a stoppage of time…a semblance of the existing of being.[22]

If the present is such only because of its evanescence, because of its continuous solicitation by the future, then the image, affirms Levinas, imposes an interval that is impotent to force the advent of real time. Temporality abandons these doubled beings and lets them simply and stati-

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[18] In another text we explored the affinities between Levinas's notion of the "il y a" or "there is' with Girard's mimetic crisis as both entail undifferentiation and violent anonymity. Cfr. T. Checchi, *Myth and Il y a: a convergent reading of René Girard and Emmanuel Levinas*, in "Forum Philosophicum, International Journal for Philosophy", Vol. 24, N. 1, Spring 2019, pp. 127-144.
[19] R. Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*, cit., p. 253. See R. Girard, *Things Hidden since the Foundation of the World*, tr. S. Bann, M. Metteer, Stanford University Press, Stanford, California 1987, pp. 312-313. The undifferentiated state of mimesis experienced by the psychotic is compared by J.M. Oughourlian with the pre-sacrificial chaos akin to what Levinas finds when deconstructing the adjective sensations induced by art.
[20] M. Merleau-Ponty, *Parcours 1935-1951*, Verdier, Paris 1997, pp. 122-124. And he said so in the midst of the obligatory Sartrean objections he included as a foreword to Levinas's text first appearance in *Temps Moderns*.
[21] See E. Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, *An Essay on Exteriority*, Duquesne University Press, Pittsburg, Pennsylvania 1969. p. 55.
[22] E. Levinas, *Reality and its shadow*, cit., pp. 137-138.

cally endure[23]. Consequently, art doesn't merely reproduce the "arrest of time", it accomplishes its fall, its conversion into destiny. Levinas invokes the cruelty of Zeno's paradoxes that incarnate themselves in the sortilege operated by art. The future in its midst is forever announced but either it never truly arrives or it is accomplished beforehand: the arrow that never reaches its goal is the same as the arrow that's been there forever. It is particularly significant that in the same pages in which Levinas lets us feel the sinister shadow of the Eleatic arrest of time, he also speaks of the *amor fati* of the Stoics. Nothing can be added to the rhythmic and paradoxically immobile progression of art because the latter is consummated in advance. Diegetic or fictional time and life's temporality are equated, just as in myth the spontaneous process of the crisis and its resolution is portrayed as having a cosmic inevitability. As Bianca Nogara Notarini points out:

> This is, of course, an infallible model that is applied to every story, and that where necessary, lends its tutelage to any kind of event – so much so that it could even be described as a-historical: in the sense that it goes beyond history, or rather it indicates how history is to be interpreted, and it admits the existence of a single, sole coherent, meaningful history (this structure and functioning are what makes a universal story possible). Through this word, [order] this discourse, each event determines and represents the totality of the drama, suggests it by referring to it: and thus, obviously, makes it true.[24]

Quoting Levy-Bruhl, Levinas reminds us that: "in the presage the sign is the cause and prediction is production"[25]. According to Goodhart, Sophocles himself warns us of this danger when he subtly highlights Oedipus rushed appropriation of the myth, even when the evidence for his damnation is still incomplete[26]. For both Levinas and Girard, in myth to

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[23] Although Levinas uses the formula "durée quasi-éternelle", he describes the "instant of art" not as an infinitesimal part of duration in the sense that Bergson gives to this key concept in his philosophy —as lived time and dynamic temporal reality— but as its complete opposite: a spatialization of time that annihilates its transcendence.

[24] See B. Nogara Notarianni. *In the name of the Father, Job's name. The role of interpellation in practices of subjection*, in B. Nogara Notarianni, M. Stucchi (a cura di), *The ancient trail of the wicked. René Girard and the* Book of Job, in *Dialegesthai. Rivista telematica di filosofía*, vol. 22, 2021, https://mondomani.org/dialegesthai.

[25] See E. Levinas, *Entre Nous, Essais sur le penser à-l-autre*, Grasset, Figures, Paris 1991, p. 63.

[26] See S. Goodhart, S., *'Leskas Ephastes', Oedipus and Laius's many murderers*, in *Sacrificing Commentary, Reading the End of Literature*, The Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore 1996, pp.13-42. For Professor Goodhart, Sophocles is perfectly aware of the sacrificial pull the characters surrounding Oedipus will experience because the Greek author underscores a critical unraveling of the myth that during his lifetime produced both sacrificial and antisacrificial responses such as his own. See S. Goodhart, *Reading after Auschwitz*, in *Sacrificing Commentary*, cit., p. 257.

have a premonitory knowledge it suffices to look back: past and future are perfectly symmetrical and the present is only their collision. The image becomes, thus, the residence of destiny, of a fatality that in the authentic time of life can only be read in retrospect, because, as Girard puts it, only hindsight puts things into place and justifies the violent occurrence. Levinas thus soberly states: "*Beings enter their destiny because they are represented*" [27]. The detention of time performed by myth and art embodies thus the condition signaled as inherent to tragedy by XIX century idealist philosophy: freedom and necessity become simultaneous. And this antinomy far from being merely intellectual translates the feeling of futility of every action. Just as in Giraudoux's play every hope is crushed because the Trojan War will indeed take place[28]. But, contrary to what is thought, art doesn't simply represent destiny. According to Levinas, it plunges beings into the circuit of fate as soon as it abducts them from the world of time and precarity, producing a sort of what we would like to call a *mythical stasis*. In storytelling, contingency is integrated into an effect of necessity and all it takes is a gesture of configuration, of submitting beings and events to a *morphé*, a Form, produced by rhythm. That would be the labor of myth-makers, for whom everything is fixed once and for all: events, characters, beings, whose story, Levinas would add, still endures like in a tunnel without moving forward. For instance, in an interview for a documentary on *Richard III*'s worldwide tour under Sam Mendes' direction some years ago, Gemma Jones, the actress playing Queen Margaret, broke into tears when speaking of how for months and months she has had to see the Duke of Clarence, her son, die time and again without being able to do anything about it[29]. Hence Levinas's main point in this respect: "The events related form a situation – akin to a plastic ideal. That is what myth is: the plasticity of a story"[30].

This fact underlies the structuralist attempt at finding a logical matrix whose work consists, in the heroic tale, in reestablishing, no matter what the disturbed order, a goal in relation to which any deviation is nothing but a diachronic leftover[31]. That is why Girard criticizes structuralism's incapacity for dealing with both, pre-sacrificial undifferentiation and authentic diachronicity[32]. For Levinas, the ending of a story polarizes its development in such a way that we can read time backwards, the beginning

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[27] E. Levinas, *Reality and its Shadow*, cit., p. 139.
[28] See J. Giraudoux, *La guerre de Troie n'aura pas lieu*, Librio Théâtre, Paris 2015. Levinas mentions how this aspect of Giraudoux's oeuvre has not been rightly understood as soon as he introduces the notion of the "entre-temps" in E. Levinas, *Reality and its Shadow*, cit.
[29] See *Now: in the Wings on a World Stage*, directed by Jeremy Whelehan, 2014.
[30] E. Levinas, *Reality and its Shadow*, cit., p. 139.
[31] See P. Ricoeur, *Oneself as Another*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago 1995, pp. 143-144.
[32] See note 20.

in its ending, assimilating any hindrance into an impersonal and rhythmical inertia. As if the structuralist research just mentioned was made possible by the introduction of what he calls the *death* of each instant, of this lapse that abandons time[33] in favor of an artificial synchronicity. For instance – and we find this example very illuminating for both our authors' complementary stances – even from the first lines of Sophocles' *Trachiniai*, Deianeira knows that, in spite of the common wisdom that prevents us from declaring a life as good or bad until death, hers will be hard and unfortunate; she knows that the cycles that have determined her vital trajectory will rhythmically repeat themselves up until the end. In pursuing Iole, Heracles, Deaineira's unfaithful husband, repeats his former story with his wife, but this time there's no one to save the maid from the monster he's become. As Charles Seagal puts it[34]: "The circularity of the myth turns on perpetual reversals"[35]. The violence of Eros simply forbids the moving forward in time of either of them. Apropos this circularity, to which the tragic hero remains blind, a circularity that transforms Heracles into the monsters he once fought, Girard explains:

> The shortest path from the non-guilty to the guilty is a straight line, and so our champion of justice marches straight ahead. He does not notice when the path begins to curve – yet it proves to be a circular path in the end.[36]

Thus Maurice Blanchot, Levinas best friend, spoke of the *petit enfer* of literary eternity just as Girard did when speaking of Racine's *Phaedra*, trapped in the hybris of her forebears.[37] This is why Levinas suspects in every myth the murmur of the anonymous, the menace of a faceless violence and in every aesthetic or mystic notion of *participation* the conversion of the living word into a legitimizing spectacle that tends inexorably to repeat itself[38]. And it couldn't be any other way, as René Girard teaches

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[33] E. Levinas*, Reality and its Shadow,* cit., p. 141.

[34] See Charles Segal, *Sophocles' Tragic World: Divinity, Nature, Society*, Harvard University Press 1995, p. 37.

[35] R. Girard, *Oedipus Analyzed* in *Oedipus Unbound*, ed. Mark Anspach, Stanford University Press, Stanford 2004, p. 31.

[36] Id, *Novelistic Experience to Oedipal Myth*, in M. Anspach (ed.), *Oedipus Unbound*, Stanford University Press, Stanford, California 2004, p. 13.

[37] As a matter of fact, it is Merleau-Ponty in his preface to *Reality and its shadow* the one who mentions Blanchot's *petit enfer* of the literary, evoked by Levinas' piece. In Racine*, Poet of Glory*, Girard contrasts Racine's and Corneille's heroes and heroines underscoring the individualistic character of the latter's protagonists, meanwhile Racine is capable of recognizing the dire consequences of modern individualism in a rivalry blind to itself and to the unbearable weight of ancestry. See R. Girard, *Mimesis and Theory*, Stanford University Press, Stanford, California 2008, p. 109.

[38] "Horror is nowise an anxiety about death. According to Levy-Bruhl, primitive peoples show only indifference to death, which they take as a natural fact. In horror a subject is

us, because it is inherent to myth to hide the impersonal and collective dynamism that gives it birth. Thus, plasticity, form, beauty, are the vehicles of myth's timeless and closed off endurance, that is, in Levinas' words, of a *meanwhile* that can't bring the future about, at least, not on its own[39]. Levinas calls this the idolatry of the beautiful, "whose essence is indifference, cold splendor and silence"[40]. In a footnote in *Otherwise than Being* that might be overlooked he states:

> By an irresistible subreption, the incomparable, the diachronic, the non-contemporaneous, through the effect of a deceitful and marvelous schematism is "imitated" by art, which is iconography.[41]

Catherine Chalier, following Levinas, speaks of the ontological solitude that results from the impossibility of the Greeks to escape their plastic and magnificent cosmos[42]. For the Lithuanian thinker that is exactly the condition of the mythic hero, of Phaedra's asphyxiating situation, her "unbreakable commitment"[43]. Lineage is her burden and destiny: there is no place on earth where she can hide from her ancestors, states Levinas, and their cult is also the cult of her solar ego, adds Girard. Thus, Levinas coincides almost point by point with Girard in his interpretation of Racine's revelatory text when in *Existence and Existents* he tells us:

> In his work, the veil of myth is torn. The hero is defeated by himself. Therein lies what is tragic in him: a subject is in the basis of himself and is already with or against himself. While being a freedom and a beginning, he is the bearer of a destiny which already dominates this very freedom.[44]

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stripped of his subjectivity, of his power to have private existence. The subject is depersonalized. Nausea, as a feeling for existence, is not yet a depersonalization; but horror turns the subjectivity of the subject, his particularity qua *entity,* inside out. It is a participation in the "there is"*,* in the "there is" which returns in the heart of every negation, in the "there is" that has no exits"., E. Levinas., *Existence and Existents*, cit., p. 61.

[39] Levinas states in the Preface of *Totality and Infinity* that he will not quote Franz Rosenzweig because his influence in his thought is so vast it would be pointless. Nevertheless, let us use this citation as an example of the issue at hand: "Still today, all art remains under the law of the mythical world. The work of art necessarily has that closure in itself, that indifference to everything that may be found outside of it, that independence of higher laws, that freedom from baser duties; these are the traits we recognized as belonging to the world of myth. It is a basic requirement of the work of art that its shapes reflect a tremor of the mythical…The spirit of myth founds the realm of the beautiful"., F. Rosenzweig, *The star of Redemption*, The University of Wisconsin Press, Wisconsin 2005, p. 46.

[40] E. Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, cit., p. 193.

[41] Id., *Otherwise than being*, Duquesne, Pittsburgh 1998, p. 199.

[42] C. Chalier, *Breve estime du Beau*, in *Levinas face au Beau*, Éditions de l'Éclat, Paris 2004, p. 13.

[43] E. Levinas, *Existence and Existents,* cit., p. 62.

[44] Ivi, p. 88.

Consequentially, in mythical time, temporality *contracts* destiny as if it were a disease, a contagion. If fecundity is, as Levinas puts it, the possibility of an authentic future that breaks the iterative hegemony of the self, then myth works in the opposite direction, making synchronic what should be diachronic and confusing in the identical what should be serial, as Martha Reinecke points out [45]. In myth, Girard explains, "[t]he conflict between generations gives way to a conflict between contemporaries…Between the mythical partners, the difference in age is abolished" [46]. The son, the brother, is feared because the self puts himself forward in terms of power. But this power reveals itself sterile, fatally chained to itself, bound to a cycle as Levinas affirms.

> In power, the indetermination of the possible does not exclude reiteration of the I which, in venturing toward this indeterminate future, falls back on its feet, and riveted to itself, acknowledges its transcendence to be merely illusory and its freedom to delineate but a fate.[47]

Maybe, this is the lure of the mythical sagas: the conviction that after all the transformations of Proteus, there is a closure, a seal for the story even if ultimately it concerns only the repetition of the self and its avatars. That is the "last word of violence" – as Girard puts it in his chapter on Dionysus in *Violence and the Sacred* – so dignified and worthy of rememorating:

> *Also, violence itself offers a sort of respite, the fresh beginning of a cycle of ritual after a cycle of violence. Violence will come to an end only after it has had the last word and that word has been accepted as divine. The meaning of this word must remain hidden, the mechanism of unanimity remain concealed.[48]*

It is if the legitimate desire of escape from being with which the young Levinas struggled in his earliest texts could not find legitimate exits: only the perpetual telling of being as "polemos", in the iteration of the same

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[45] See M. Reinecke, *Intimate Domain*, Michigan State University Press, Michigan 2014. In this beautiful book, Professor Reinecke poses the possibility of escaping the conflicts of what she calls the "lateral axis" (sibling rivalry) by adopting a sort of "Antigone's complex", in which "the child articulates lines of seriality and sameness in ways that enables the child to love rather than loathe its sibling, replacing traumatizing threat with openness to the other", p. 85.

[46] See R. Girard, *Oedipus Unbound*, cit., p. 34.

[47] E. Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, cit., p. 268.

[48] R. Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*, cit., p. 136. For Girard archaic thought is wholly dependent on this supposed closure: "And religious thought returns again and again to that supreme wonder, that last word of violence which is all the more precious for being pronounced so late in the day", p. 125.

acts, the same final and violent gestures – that requisite for catharsis and its post-sacrificial aura.[49] That's why both, Levinas and Girard look for lessons in Shakespeare and Racine, anti-cathartic authors. Myth for Levinas is then the crossing out of an unforeseeable future, before which we recoil in fear preferring destiny. Better to remain in the lapse without time of art, that descendant of horror[50], as Levinas seems to imply, with its premature capitulation, destiny. In *Totality and infinity* he asserts: "The beautiful of art…substitutes an image for the troubling depth of the future"[51]. Thus, even the beauty of the Greek aspiration towards the perfect and luminous "morphé" can't hide that the suspended future of sculpture is the everlasting instant of nightmares[52]. In the second volume of his *Foundations* books Michel Serres finally asks what all his previous writing on that matter had been building up to: "What is a statue? A living body covered in stones"[53].

But what if, like Levinas points out, the closure of these terrible and magnificent stories is put into question, what if, somehow, interpretation and dialogue can open up the sealed lips of oracular wisdom and make a statue talk? After all, as Girard points out in his analysis of Oedipus and novelistic experience, the oracle is a failed revelation that nonetheless gives us a glimpse of a future truth[54]. For Levinas and we dare to think Girard wouldn't disagree, monotheism's proscription of images is mainly concerned with this possibility of overcoming destiny and idolatry to open up real, originary time. Thus, in his text on Levy-Bruhl in which he presents the latter's thought as a lucid reminder of

[49] See E. Levinas, *On escape: de l'evasion*, Cultural Memory in the Present, Stanford University Press, Stanford, Calif 2003.

[50] M. García-Baró, *De l'émotion. La phénoménologie contre l'ontologie*, conference pronounced in Rome during the Convegno Internationale *Visage e infini* in March of 2006, p. 7. It can be read on line in: http://mondodomani.org/dialegesthai/mgb01.htm.

[51] E. Levinas, *Totality and infinity*, cit., p. 263.

[52] Levinas uses the famous sculptures of Niobe and Laocoon to illustrate this point in *Reality and its Shadow*. Let us remember that in both cases the suffering is inflicted by gods, Apollo and Artemis firstly, then Athena to favor the Greeks against the Trojans.

[53] M. Serres, *Statues, The Second Book of Foundations*, Bloomsbury Academic, London 2015, p. 181. Even though this question is posed in his second book of *Foundations*, in the first one, a critical analysis of Livy's history of Rome, Serres prefigures this preoccupation with the rhythmic beating —of which Levinas is so wary— of the multiple in relation to the one: "A tragic beating in fundamental time, in which pieces depart from a body and return there, transubstantiated into stones before being transubstantiated into signs in the middle of the clamors and voices", *Rome, First Book of Foundations*, tr. ing. di Burks, R., Bloomsbury Academic 2015, p. 109. In the preface of *Rome,* Michel Serres expresses his gratitude towards his friend René Girard and soberly states that any mistakes in his *Foundations* texts are his but if anything in them is true this is due exclusively to Girard's thought bearing on his.

[54] R. Girard, *Oedipus Unbound*, cit., p. 25.

what kind of regression a philosophy modelled after the experience of de-subjectivation entails, he asks:

> But is the civilization born of monotheism capable of dealing with this crisis with a different orientation, one free of the horror of myths, of the conflicts they provoke in our souls and of the cruelties they perpetuate in our behavior?[55]

That is why confronted with the circularity and temporal stasis that perpetuate myth and give the last word to the poetical image forged from the undifferentiated horror of participation, Levinas appeals to a dia-chronic time that can only spring from that which resists all plasticity, all reduction to form: the face of the Other. So, what to do with all the Others abandoned in the tragic sclerosis of images and tales that make up myth and the sacrificial reading of history? If, as he puts it, only I can be designated as a victim without cruelty, coinciding with Girard's reassessed conception of self-sacrifice, then my responsibility does not consist of giving rules to art in order to make it behave itself decently, to avoid its being a "feast in the midst of a plague"[56]. My responsibility would be about searching for, as does Girard, in every myth, every story, every image, those crevices through which the voice of the Other, of the victim, can be heard pleading for consolation. None other is the mean-ing of Girard's recalling the moving words pronounced by King Leontes near the end of Shakespeare's *Winter's Tale* when the supposedly petri-fied image of his wrongly accused wife beckons to him silently: "Doth not the statue rebuke me for being more stone than it?"[57].

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[55] E. Levinas, *Lévy-Bruhl et la philosophie contemporaine*, cit., p. 67.

[56] In its most disparaging moment, Levinas' critique of art condemns in these terms art's evasive enjoyment.

[57] R. Girard, *A Theater of Envy*, St. Augustine Press, Indiana 2004, pp. 334-342. In the preceding chapters of his book on Shakespeare, Girard already had drawn the progres-sive arch of our western fascination with images pointing out first the obsession that in *Two Gentlemen of Verona* Silvia's portrait arouses, then the momentary but disquieting indifference shown by Bassanio toward the original when confronted with Portia's paint-erly reproduction in *The Merchant of Venice* and finally the denounced snobbery of the contemporary production of lifelike sculptures in *A Winter's Tale*. In a final note, I would like to call attention to Christopher Wheeldon's ballet based on this play. Just after all the actors leave the stage reconciled and happy after Leontes's conversion and Hermione's return, the limelight focuses on their son's statue in the background in a melancholy manner that reminds us that, even after all, there are losses that stay that way as wounded lingering absences.

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*Chelsea Jordan King**

Distorted Relations: Engaging Mimetic Theory with Feminist Re-Configurations of Sin

In a chapter of *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel* entitled "Men Become Gods in the Eyes of Each Other", Girard writes, "Every hero of a novel expects his being to be radically changed by the act of possession".[1] Throughout that work, Girard examines five male authors to construct the foundation of his mimetic theory. Not surprisingly, mimetic theory is often described from the male perspective. When asked to talk for a few minutes about so-called "feminist critics", who have argued that mimetic theory caters to men and seems to solely employ male examples, Girard responded with, "I find it strange that women so badly want participation in the male power of archaic societies, for it is precisely their real superiority that women don't appear, for the most part, as the primary agents of violence. If they want now to join the power games of the males, and that is understandable, are they not losing their real moral superiority?"[2] Based on these remarks alone, it is difficult to claim Girard as a feminist.

As for theologian, Girard has never claimed that title. However, his ideas, especially as they have developed over time, are inherently theological. Girard's entire thesis is predicated on the idea that the sacred has been formed out of violence, a violence in which innocent scapegoats have been expelled and sacrificed to the gods. The foundation of human culture itself relies on a founding murder that enabled the human species to survive. While these notions are not necessarily theological per se, Girard makes the ultimate theological move when he claims that the Gospels have revealed this entire process. The Gos-

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[1] R. Girard, *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel; Self and Other in Literary Structure.* trans. by Yvonne Freccero, Johns Hopkins Press, Baltimore 1969, p. 53.
[2] R. Girard et al., *Things Hidden Since the Foundation of the World,* Stanford University Press, Stanford 1987, p. 275.

pels and the wider Biblical witness, unlike other myths from various cultures, reveal the innocence of the victim and reveal the history of scapegoating for what it truly is. Since the publication of *Violence and the Sacred,* theologians have relied upon Girard's work to inform their own theologies.[3]

When it comes to *feminist theologians*, there is very little in terms of engagement. This could be for a variety of reasons – Girard himself never explicitly engaged the work of feminist thinkers, his theory has been charged with being male-centric, and his work has largely focused on the male perspective. Thus far, no one has placed Girard into direct dialogue with feminist theologians on the topic of sin.[4] This is a rather unfortunate omission in Girardian scholarship because there are not only similarities between mimetic theory and feminist understandings of sin, but the voices of these theologians can expand and further develop Girard's mimetic theory. Mimetic theory is constantly developing and changing to accommodate a wider world, a world in which the victims have explicitly been named and seek agency in a broken system. This article will directly engage mimetic theory with feminist re-configurations of sin, providing a way forward in furthering the dialogue between Girard and feminist theologies.

In the first section, I present three main components of Girard's mimetic theory: desire, rivalry, and scapegoating. In the second section, I lay out two feminist and one womanist theologian and their theologies of sin: Rosemary Radford Ruether, Rita Nakashima Brock, and Delores Williams respectively. In the final section, I demonstrate explicitly some similarities between mimetic theory and these understandings of sin. While cast in different language, mimetic theory and feminist theologies offer us an account of human anthropology wherein sin is defined as inherently relational and involves the placing of blame on some marginalized group, which oftentimes consists of women and women of color. I contend that not only is mimetic theory incomplete if it leaves out the voices of these women, but it runs the risk of turning victims of the scapegoating mechanism into an abstraction.

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[3] James Alison's seminal work on original sin, *The Joy of Being Wrong: Original Sin Through Easter Eyes,* Crossroad Publishing, New York 1998 directly engages mimetic theory and offers an account of Resurrection that emphasizes Jesus as the Forgiving Victim. Raymund Schwager, SJ, who perhaps had the most influence on Girard throughout his career, has also engaged Girard's mimetic theory with original sin and sacrifice in *Jesus in the Drama of Salvation: Toward a Biblical Doctrine of Redemption.* Crossroad Pub. New York 1999.
[4] This is not to say that feminist theologians haven't put Girard into dialogue with feminist thought, but none have focused solely on the theological category of "sin".

Mimetic Theory

Mimetic Desire

Girard first discovered that the great novelists of the 20th century such as Cervantes, Stendhal, Dostoevsky, Flaubert and Proust came to an important insight into what Girard calls mimetic desire. In analyzing the novels of these authors, Girard inferred psychological and anthropological insights. Girard saw that the authors themselves went through a kind of conversion where they realized that desire was not autonomous. Girard referred to this as "novelistic genius", where "what is true about Others becomes true about the hero, in fact true about the novelist himself".[5]

To explain this seemingly simple insight further, it is helpful to consider a basic understanding of desire and the self promoted by Romanticism as Girard conceived of it. According to Girard, the Romantic belief is that desire is autonomous and comes from the subject. Now, the contrast between the "Romantic" and the "novelist" could not be starker. While the Romantic sees desire as belonging to him- or herself, and therefore entirely autonomous and linear (proceeding from subject to desired object), the "novelist" recognizes a certain lack of control and autonomy in desire. Concealed beneath the idea of autonomy is the presence of a *mediator* that draws a person into desire.

This mediator can take many forms including something as particular as a person or something as abstract as an idea. The point is that desire is not shaped by the ego but is instead shaped and molded by some other. Thus, desire is not linear, but triangular, and involves a subject, an object, and a mediator or model. Beyond literature and anecdotal evidence, mimetic theory is also confirmed by studies in anthropological behaviorism. According to Matt Cartmill and Kaye Brown, "humans are the only terrestrial mammals that imitate sounds, and the only animal that imitates the things we see".[6] This allows the human being to learn language, dance, create and spread art, and socialize with one other. There is not an innate tendency to internalize values and norms, rather, "cultural homogeneity arises first from imitation".[7] While it may be obvious, because imitation is linked to learning in general, learning can only take place in community. A particular way of learning emerges in community.[8] Situated learning is

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[5] R. Girard, *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel*, cit., p. 38.
[6] See M. Carmill & K. Brown, *Being Human Means that 'Being Human' Means Whatever We Say it Means*, in "Evolutionary Anthropology", 21, 2012, p. 183.
[7] *Ibid*.
[8] J. Kendal, *Cultural Niche Construction and Human Learning Environments: Investigating Sociocultural Perspectives*, "Biological Theory", 6, 2011, pp. 241–250.

a process where there is no such thing as a "master learner", but instead the focus is on the communal learning that takes place. As Girard also argues, there is nothing in human behavior that "is not learned, and all learning is based on imitation. If human beings suddenly ceased imitating, all forms of culture would vanish".[9] Seen in this light, mimetic desire is positive, productive, and indeed necessary for human flourishing.[10]

But mimetic theory doesn't simply shed light on the positive aspects of human nature. Hidden beneath the surface of the mechanism of desire lies a profound and troubling anthropological truth. It is to this second component of mimetic theory that we now turn.

Mimetic Rivalry

While mimetic desire is fundamental to who we are as human beings, it can lead to some disastrous consequences. Consider the fact that human beings desire what others, who are perceived as more prestigious or more valuable, desire. The higher social position of a mediator is responsible for one's desire for a particular object, and in fact infuses the object with value. As Girard argues, "the mediator's prestige is imparted to the object of desire and confers upon it an illusory value. Triangular desire is the desire which transfigures its object".[11] The reason Girard uses the word "illusory" here is because what is actually, subconsciously being desired is not necessarily the *object,* but the mediator him- or herself. And herein lies a fundamental insight of mimetic theory: desire for an object is actually desire for the mediator's *being.* It is always "a desire to be Another".[12] This of course implies a dissatisfaction with oneself; a kind of "insuperable revulsion for one's own substance".[13] If we are actually desiring to be another, we must also be subconsciously unsatisfied with our own lack of being. This insight helps to explain why it is that once a subject acquires the object of so-called desire, the object ceases to satisfy. There is always an insatiability because there is a fundamental poverty of ontology.

This lack of awareness of one's own inherent ontological poverty is the ground upon which rivalry, competition, and eventually violence is built. As stated above, mimetic desire is fundamental to how human beings

[9] R. Girard et al.*, op. cit*., p. 7.
[10] R. Adams has done extensive work in unpacking positive mimesis throughout her career. She refers to positive mimesis as "loving mimesis". See *Loving Mimesis and Girard's 'Scapegoat of the Text': A Creative Reassessment of Mimetic Desire*, in W. Swartley (a cura di), *Violence Renounced: Ren*é *Girard, Biblical Studies, and Peacemaking*, Pandora Press, Telford, PA 2000, pp. 277-307.
[11] R. Girard, *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel,* cit., p. 17.
[12] Ivi, p. 83.
[13] Ivi, p. 54.

have evolved and has contributed to cultural and social advancements. Yet because the subject is unaware that his or her desire comes from another, and remains focused on the "object", he or she will begin to view the other as a competitor for the object. The closer that the subject is to the mediator, the higher the probability that rivalry will occur. When the model becomes an obstacle, subject and object can become "monstrous doubles" of one another. The only thing that matters now is for the rival to be destroyed. This puts humanity on the brink of destroying itself, for the violence can easily become contagious in nature. What are human beings to do in this scenario? Why haven't they destroyed themselves entirely thus far? This brings us to the third feature of mimetic theory: the selection and expulsion of the scapegoat.

Scapegoating

When the level of animosity increases between two parties, the risk for violence intensifies. This is especially the case in larger groups, where one group becomes the rival of another group. What ultimately saves a group from destroying the other is the selection of an arbitrary scapegoat. The group must believe that another outside person is responsible for the conflict in the first place. When a scapegoat is selected and then destroyed, a certain degree of peace and tranquility washes over those involved.

Understanding the interplay of scapegoating and human survival is not necessarily novel or controversial. But Girard takes this analysis and applies it to the formation of human culture and ancient sacrificial systems and institutions. In *Violence and the Sacred,* Girard begins his turn toward an anthropological analysis, and deduces that if we can see this dynamic at play today, perhaps there is evidence of the scapegoat mechanism in the stories that ancient cultures narrate about themselves, and the foundation of their own cultures. Through this analysis of myths, especially foundation myths[14], Girard takes mimetic theory to an entirely new explanatory level and argues that the human understanding of the sacred was born from the scapegoating mechanism itself.

Sophocles *Oedipus the King* provides perhaps one of the clearest ways in which Girard's theory applies to myth. In the beginning of the story, a plague threatens the City of Thebes. According to the Oracle, the plague

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[14] A "foundation myth" simply refers to those myths that describe the origin of a particular culture or religion. For instance, the "foundation myth" of Rome is the story of Romulus and Remus. It should also be noted that Girard mostly focused on the Greek mythology. However, he did begin to explore other non-western cultures.: see *Sacrifice Breakthroughs in Mimetic Theory*, Michigan University Press 2011, where Girard interprets the Brahmans of Vedic India through mimetic theory.

has been brought upon Thebes because the murderer of its King, King Laius, has not been brought to justice. As Girard points out, the "oracle itself explains matters: it is the infectious presence of a *murderer* that has brought on the disaster".[15] Girard draws his attention back to the plague itself and argues that underneath the surface of the chaos is a social crisis. A plague signifies death, destruction, and chaos (similar to the crisis that unfolds with mimetic rivalry and the scapegoating mechanism). We must notice that there is, from the very beginning, a desire to find the culprit – a reason for why the plague has been unleashed. Rather than confront the idea that the plague is random, those in the myth seek a reason for the plight their city is facing. The hero, Oedipus, is determined to find this murderer and bring him to justice.

Of course, the irony is that Oedipus turns out to be King Laius' murderer without realizing it. One important part of Girard's analysis is that the myth doesn't exonerate Oedipus for this murder, even though Oedipus had no idea it was his own father. In fact, *all of the* blame is placed upon Oedipus for the City's woes even though "everybody shares equal responsibility, because everybody participates in the destruction of cultural order…Each party progresses rapidly in uncovering the truth about the other, without ever recognizing the truth about himself".[16]

Notice that a sinister masking occurs here in this analysis. The blame is placed upon a single individual's shoulders who does not deserve it. As Girard states:

> When a community succeeds in convincing itself that one alone of its number is responsible for the violent mimesis besetting it; when it is able to view this member as the single 'polluted' enemy who is contaminating the rest; and when the citizens are truly unanimous in this conviction – then the belief becomes a reality, for there will no longer exist elsewhere in the community a form of violence to be followed or opposed, which is to say, imitated and propagated.[17]

When everything comes to light, and when Oedipus realizes that *he* was the murderer of his own father long ago, he is driven out of Thebes, and in this driving out, Thebes is saved from the plague. Oedipus curses himself and the myth seems to imply that he deserves his expulsion: he is guilty of murdering his father, and therefore for bringing the plague to Thebes. In other words, the myth itself portrays the scapegoat mechanism, while also retaining the false idea that the scapegoat is guilty: "Oed-

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[15] R. Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*, Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore 1979, p. 76.
[16] Ivi, p. 71
[17] Ivi, p. 82.

ipus is responsible for the ills that have befallen his people. He has become a prime example of the human scapegoat.[18]” The myth concludes that Oedipus deserves his fate and cannot escape it. He is the cause of the plague without even realizing it, and his expulsion leads to the solution.

According to Girard, this dynamic conceals the reality that all human beings possess within themselves violent and murderous tendencies yet seek to blame others for what is inherent to them. In the move to separate "all" versus "one", the "all" becomes blind to its own complicity and guilt. Knowledge of oneself becomes buried underneath this process of separation: "the formidable effectiveness of the process derives from its depriving men of knowledge: knowledge of the violence inherent in themselves with which they have never come to terms.[19]” It is important to recognize that behind these myths is not some kind of pure event, or pure fabrication, but is an account that has been "distorted by the efficiency of the scapegoat mechanism itself, a mechanism that myth tells about in all sincerity but that is necessarily transfigured by the tellers, who are the persecutors".[20]

As mentioned from the outset, Girard himself does not use the language of "sin" to describe the above dynamic, but theologians have engaged mimetic theory with their theologies of sin for obvious reasons. Mimetic theory offers theologians a way of understanding the darker side of human nature; one might suggest that it is yet another way of conceiving of original sin. While this engagement has been immensely fruitful, there is an even more direct connection to be had with feminist understandings of sin. Feminist theologians have argued that for most of Western Christianity's history, when it comes to understanding sin, there has always been a scapegoat. The Church Father, Tertullian said it best in the 2nd century:

> And do you not know that you are (each) an Eve? The sentence of God on this sex of yours lives in this age: the guilt must of necessity live too. *You* are the devil's gateway: *you* are the unsealer of that (forbidden) tree: *you* are the first deserter of the divine law: *you* are she who persuaded him whom the devil was not valiant enough to attack. *You* destroyed so easily God's image, man. On account of *your* desert – that is, death – even the Son of God had to die.[21]

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[18] Ivi, p. 77.
[19] Ivi, p. 82.
[20] R. Girard and M. Treguer, *When These Things Begin Conversations with Michel Treguer*, Michigan State University Press, Michigan 2014, p. 22.
[21] Translated by S. Thelwall. Book 1, Chapter 1, From *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, Vol. 4. Edited by A. Roberts, J. Donaldson, and A. Cleveland Coxe, Christian Literature Publishing Co., Buffalo, NY 1885. Revised and edited for New Advent by K. Knight. http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/0402.htm.

Feminist theologians have rightfully critiqued this understanding of original sin and have offered accounts that have challenged and enriched traditional teachings of sin. It is to their understandings of sin that I now turn before demonstrating the more direct connections with mimetic theory.

Part Two: Feminist Theologian's Re-Configurations of Sin

Rosemary Radford Ruether

While many feminist theologians distance themselves entirely from notions of sin and original sin, Rosemary Radford Ruether re-configures it. According to her, sin has been understood as a "perversion or corruption of human nature, that is, of one's good or authentic potential self".[22] This corruption implies that there was a capacity *not* to sin – and hence, the entire notion of sin is predicated on human freedom. This notion of freedom sets the human being apart from the rest of the created world – our freedom is our distinct identity. A part of this freedom relies upon the capacity to draw distinctions between what *is,* and what *ought to be.* Sin has been understood as not living up to our capacity to do what ought to be done.

Even though this understanding of sin has dominated the Christian tradition, feminists "feel that the good-evil dichotomy is not one that feminists should accept".[23] The reason they should not accept this dichotomy is because this dialectical thinking stems from a patriarchal framework. It is steeped in binaries: right/wrong, us/them, good/evil. This dualism has damaging consequences for marginalized groups because oftentimes the marginalized groups are seen in opposition to what is deemed good by the majority.

Ruether is clear: "these dualisms of the polarities of human existence scapegoat the 'evil' side as 'female.' Sexism is the underlying social foundation of the good-evil ideology".[24] Now, it is not the case that Ruether dismisses the notion of evil altogether. Feminism insists that patriarchy itself is an evil, so feminist theologians must maintain some sense of sin in their theological reflections. The key for Ruether is that sin stems not from individual freedom but from distorted *relationships.* This distortion oftentimes happens at the group-level; when one group understands itself as superior to another group of people (the classic us vs. them mentality),

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[22] R. Ruether, *Sexism and God Talk,* Beacon Press, Boston 1983, p. 160.
[23] *Ibid*.
[24] *Ibid*.

then this original relationship of mutuality and equality is destroyed and replaced by one of power, manipulation and control. Herein lies a complex interplay of projection and exploitation.

The superior group projects its own insecurities onto the other group, which allows the "us" of the dominant group to then become separate from the inferior "them". An even greater danger emerges here that the inferior group will internalize those projected insecurities. Projection becomes reality. As Ruether describes it, "The element of projection leads to irrationalities that exceed merely the self-interest of the dominant group. Genocidal campaigns, witch-hunts, and pogroms go beyond the self-interest of the powerful into a fantasy realm in which the dominant group imagines that by purging society of the 'other', it can, in some sense, eradicate 'evil.'[25] Oftentimes women are the ones blamed for the woes of the world. Perhaps no myth has captured this sentiment more than the Christian reception of the Genesis myth of the fall, wherein Eve is blamed for the fall of mankind and for original sin.

Feminist theologians like Ruether argue that the real sin here is the process of projection and exploitation. The groups labeled as evil aren't actually evil, but the process of naming those groups as evil and inferior is. As she argues, "The very process of false naming and exploitation constitutes the fundamental distortion and corruption of human relationality. Evil comes about precisely by the distortion of the self-other relationship into the good-evil, superior-inferior dualism".[26] Sin is understood as both the capacity to set up these distorted relations, and the acceptance of them. Importantly, there is no grounded self in Ruether's analysis. She insists that in all of this, the primary "subject" is the identity of the group. This analysis relies upon the group's feeling of insecurity at not actually having a self: "the hostility of the male group ego toward inferiors is also based on the insecurity of lacking a grounded self".[27]

Rita Nakashima Brock

Rita Nakashima Brock's work begins with an acknowledgement of suffering. "We live in a broken-hearted society", she writes. Historically, she argues, Christianity's response to this suffering was to advocate that we fully embrace it and hope in the Resurrection. Many may be suffering here and now, but the Christian message has pressured its followers toward a "passive piety" in which they simply wait for heaven, where every

[25] Ivi, p. 163.
[26] *Ibid.*
[27] Ivi, p. 164.

tear will be wiped away. Brock considers this a false hope. The Resurrection is to be experienced here and now and not put off into some distant future. Her goal, in other words, is to finds ways in which suffering can be alleviated now.

Writing from the perspective of her own abuse in childhood, she critiques understandings of sin and salvation that focus on the death of Jesus as some sort of sacrifice that appeases an angry God. At the core of her critique is that these so-called "atonement doctrines" imply the necessity of a savior that perpetuates a "hero" motif, which instills a sense of dependence upon some authority (oftentimes father) figure. We become "dependent upon the perfect father to show us the way to a restored relationship with him and each other".[28] But this father, according to atonement doctrine, is punitive in nature, demanding punishment for sin committed against his honor, specifically the sacrifice of his own beloved son. As she states, the "patriarchal father-god fosters dependence and, in his latent, punitive aspects, haunts many atonement doctrine".[29] Even Trinitarian formulations are a target for Brock – for their connection to doctrines of atonement "stress the sacrifice of the father-god in taking on mortal life, so that he also suffers through the crucifixion"[30] This, for Brock, amounts to abuse.

Brock levels critiques against the idea that the Father has to punish his only Son in order to forgive his other children, and also the idea that the Father sits back and watches as his Son suffers the consequences of sin. In this second version of the atonement doctrine, the Father's refusal to interfere with human freedom somehow allows for the salvation of all through his Son's death on the cross. This then leads to a belief that "the sacrifice of this perfect son is the way to new life with the father of all those who, in their freedom, choose to believe someone else's suffering can atone for our flawed nature".[31] Ultimately, these atonement doctrines that involve the Son on the cross and the Father's allowing for it to take the blame, do not result in a grace that is life-giving, but in a "sense of relief from escaping punishment for one's failings".[32] Her final conclusion is that "such doctrines of salvation reflect by analogy, I believe, images of the neglect of children or, even worse, child abuse, making it acceptable as divine behavior – cosmic child abuse, as it were".[33]

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[28] R. Brock, *Journeys By Heart: A Christology of Erotic Power* Crossroad, New York 1988, p. 55.
[29] *Ibid*.
[30] *Ibid*.
[31] *Ibid*.
[32] Ivi, p. 56.
[33] *Ibid*.

This assessment of the problematic nature of atonement doctrines allows her to move away from the language of sin. Instead of sinfulness, she proposes the language of "broken-heartedness". The key theme of her work, *Journeys by Heart: A Christology of Erotic Power* develops this insight further. The image of the heart captures the emotional, intellectual, affective, and sensory capacities of human beings. To talk about broken-heartedness, then, is to speak about the brokenness of the entire structure of what it means to be human in relationship to other human beings. The self is constituted by internalized relationships; "the self is the relationship-seeking activity".[34] The possibility of a false self emerges when the relationships become so distorted that it fundamentally leads to a broken-hearted self that is overly reliant on others for its sense of meaning and worthiness. In other words, for Brock, even though the self is a relationship-seeking activity, it can easily fall into the trap of seeking out damaging relationships and placing its entire sense of worthiness on others (oftentimes without being consciously aware).

The process of becoming aware of this dynamic of over-dependence leads toward healing. Those who have hurt the self cannot heal it, and so therefore Brock encourages all to turn inward: "we must take responsibility for recognizing our own damage by following our hearts to the relationships that will empower our self-healing".[35] Paradoxically, we cannot depend on relationships that exist outside of us for our own healing, but must turn inward in order to find that our most authentic "self" is connected to everyone. The value is therefore not placed on us by an Another, but the Other is found within, as is our sense of worthiness and love. As she writes, "to be born so open to the presence of others in the world gives us the enormous, creative capacity to make life whole".[36] This radical openness leaves us vulnerable to being manipulated and overly reliant on the whole for the formation of our selves. We must constantly return to the foundation of the self, which is the love of grace. This is what Brock means by finding one's heart – the core of who we are is a self, divinely given. In order to uncover this true self, we must face the pain that has lead to the creation of the false self.

It is important to underscore that Brock's rejection of the language of sin does not dismiss the reality of suffering and evil. She states, "I take human evil and suffering and their consequences seriously, but I do not believe most doctrines of sin go deep enough to the roots of our abil-

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[34] Ivi, p. 9.
[35] Ivi, p. 16.
[36] Ivi, p.17.

ity to hurt ourselves and each other".[37] It is through the recognition of our "profound interrelatedness" that we can begin the journey toward healing. The goal is not to place blame on our natures as the doctrine of original sin might have it, but rather to recognize our own primordial goodness, and heal our broken relationships through this recognition.

Her theology moves away from thinking of the human being as an isolated subject prone to commit sin against God and moves toward thinking of the human as a being that is always in relationship with others in a community. Importantly, the power that animates, sustains, and enlivens human communities is the "erotic", which involves a constant going out of oneself to the other in mutual love and respect. She states that "erotic power creates and sustains connectedness – intimacy, generosity, and interdependence".[38]

Delores Williams

Contemporaneous to these feminist theologians, Delores Williams and other womanist theologians began to take issue with its predominantly white nature. In her 1985 article "The Color of Feminism" published in *Christianity and Crisis,* Williams argues that Ruether's work is "as exclusive and imperialistic as the Christian patriarchy she opposes".[39] This is because Ruether only gives concern and attention to white, non-poor feminist women. She mentions nothing about classism or racism. If the North American Church is solely focused on sexism, "it remains a diseased, sinful institution registering no concern for poor women, black women, and other women of color".[40] Patriarchy is not the only evil; white supremacy needs to be dealt with.

In *Sisters in the Wilderness,* Williams exegetes the biblical story of Hagar and traces the way in which Hagar's experience serves as an analogy for the experiences of African-American women. Framing Hagar's story as a wilderness experience marked by homelessness, motherhood, and surrogacy, Hagar's life provides a narrative that confirms and validates the experiences of African-American women. Sarah's abuse of Hagar is similar to how white women have been complicit in the violence against African American women, a form of personal and social sin. This participation in violence is seen especially in surrogacy.

Surrogacy moves well beyond simply carrying another's child. Historically, there were two kinds of social-role surrogacies: coerced and

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[37] Ivi, p. 8.
[38] Ivi, p. 37.
[39] D. Williams, *The Color of Feminism*, in "Christianity and Crisis"*, 45, April 1985, p. 164.
[40] *Ibid*.

voluntary.[41] Coerced belongs to the pre-Civil War period where black women were forced into roles that would normally be filled by others. One example is when black slaves had to provide care for white people's children. As Williams describes it, the "mammy" role was reserved for black slave women to "nurture the entire white family".[42] It also involved them working in positions that would normally be done by men at the time (like repairing roads). A more degrading form of coerced surrogacy was filling the role of the slave master's wife whenever he pleased. While coercive surrogacy is no longer an issue in America, many black women are faced with social pressures that put them into surrogacy roles, what Williams calls "voluntary surrogacy". Because of poverty, many black women must take on roles that many in power simply have the privilege of not doing – farm labor and service industry jobs. Black women today are still substituting their own energies for white men and women. Their own needs and desires have become second to the needs and desires of the ruling class.

This system of oppression is "distinct from that of the Anglo-American woman. The AfroAmerican woman's sexuality, procreative powers, even the capacity to nurture, are appropriated by the white ruling class, providing economic benefits and personal comforts for white men and women. The continual violence, physical and psychological, destroyed the bodies and spirits of black women".[43] Williams describes the history of surrogacy, the violence that has been inflicted upon black women as America's "social sin".[44] This oppression, like we have seen with Brock and Ruether, leads many black women to internalize violence and has led to a sense of unworthiness. This sense of unworthiness and the constant confrontation with this structure of sin leave many black women in a "wilderness experience…where one is exhausted and spent and needs an infusion of faith, a shower of God's grace".[45] Importantly, even black women can participate in this guilt when they "do not challenge the patriarchal and demonarchal systems in society defiling black women's bodies through physical violence, sexual abuse, and exploited labor".[46] Here,

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[41] Id.,, *Sisters in the Wilderness: The Challenge of Womanist God-Talk,* Orbis Books, Maryknoll 1993, p. 54.
[42] Id., *Black Women's Surrogacy Experience and the Christian Notion of Redemption*, in M. Trelstad (a cura di), *Cross Examinations: Readings on the Meaning of the Cross Today,* Augsburg Fortress, Minneapolis 2006, p. 20.
[43] Id., *Sisters, cit.*, p. 62.
[44] Id., *A Womanist Perspective on Sin*, in E. M. Townes (a cura di), *A Troubling in My Soul: Womanist Perspectives on Evil and Suffering.*, Orbis Books, Maryknoll, New York 1993, p. 66.
[45] D. Williams, *Way Out Yonder, Longing for Home,* "The Other Side", 32 (March-April 1996), p. 32.
[46] Id., *Sisters,* cit., p. 146.

"sin" is understood not only as an active evil that is committed, but also a passive response to injustice. Liberation for most African-American women involves becoming a "self" in a world that has denied selfhood to them; in Williams words, becoming a "somebody".[47]

Conclusion

The reader may have already noticed some similarities between mimetic theory and the theological reconfigurations of sin thus far. We may categorize some of these similarities into two key understandings: sin is relational and sin involves the exploitation and the projection of guilt onto to another. This twofold understanding of sin is further fleshed out by the feminist and womanist perspectives presented above. It is my contention that mimetic theory is not only compatible with these theologies of sin but *must* take them into account in order to continue developing the theory further and to give it concrete expression today.

Sin is Relational

Perhaps most importantly, all three theologians distance themselves away from notions of sin that have at their center an individual who sins. Thus, for these theologians, sin does not stem from individual freedom. Articulated in their own way, each theologian offers a reflection on human nature that embraces a kind of relational ontology. This is strikingly similar to mimetic theory's greatest insight that the notion of an autonomous self does not really exist; it is a Romantic Lie. Thus, whatever "sin" is, it cannot be the result of one's autonomous freedom, but is instead the result of being thrown into a condition that limits freedom. As mimetic creatures, human beings form themselves in relationship to other selves that limit their freedom.

Ruether's understanding of sin as distorted relationship manifests most acutely in the form of sexism. The dualities between "male" and "female" that have existed in human history are dangerous, for they stem from a patriarchal framework where one group (oftentimes men) is superior to another group. Recall that this difference involves a projection of one group's own insecurities onto another group. Not only is the dichotomy false, but it involves a failure to recognize one's own flaws. This is similar to mimetic theory's insistence that every person has within him-or herself the capacity for violence, but blames others instead of facing this truth.

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[47] Ivi, p. 145.

Ruether's analysis makes this dynamic specific and concrete by solely focusing on how *men* have projected their own insecurities onto women. The rivalries formed between human beings have oftentimes been those between men and women, where women are the ones arbitrarily selected as scapegoats and seen as "rivals". Of course, this recognition of the false dichotomy between "male" and "female" allows room for a relational ontology in which human beings are not constituted by individual "I's", but rather by the group in which they relate to other members.

Similarly, for Brock the self is not constituted as an independent subject in a world that exists separately from itself but is rather the culmination of the relationships that help form it in an ongoing activity. In other words, the self is a verb. This of course implies that sin can only exist as relational. To have a broken-heart is to be a self formed by other wounded selves, which ultimately constructs a "false self". Recall that for Girard, knowledge of oneself is buried underneath the process of separation from other selves. The key to discovering the authentic self-in-relation is to acknowledge this fundamental relationality, to rediscover the capacity for positive mimesis that does not lead to the creation of false selves trapped in mimetic rivalry.

As we've seen above, Williams argues that black women must strive to become "somebodys". At first glance, this insistence might conflict with mimetic theory's claim that there is no autonomous self. However, this "somebody" is not necessarily the same kind of autonomous self that the Romantic Lie denounces. The somebody formed is a somebody in community and someone who bears responsibility for participating in systemic racism. Here is where womanist and feminist theology can offer a helpful corrective to mimetic theory. Mimetic theory has maintained that the notion of an individual self is a lie but does not do enough in terms of re-claiming those marginalized voices who have had their "selves" taken away. One of the risks of mimetic theory is that it can silence those struggling to find their voices on the margins of society precisely because it seeks to erase the idea of autonomous selves. Williams offers us a helpful reminder that mimetic anthropology need not erase identities entirely, it needs to emphasize the relational formation of these identities. For African-American women, who are constantly scapegoated and victimized, it is absolutely crucial that they re-claim their self in relation to other selves in a positive way.

Sin Involves Blaming the Marginalized

As articulated, the scapegoat mechanism is a complex system of blame and victimhood. Oftentimes, the targets of the scapegoat mechanism are marginalized members of society that are already on the fringe. Girard

oftentimes lacks the actual perspective of the victim in his theory. Even though he spells out the innocence of the scapegoat, it is an entirely different thing when the victims are given a voice. Ruether, Williams, and Brock give concrete voice to the victims of the scapegoat mechanism. As we have already seen above, Ruether's understanding of the dynamic of exploitation and projection seems to line up perfectly with the scapegoat mechanism. The very dualities and binaries that Ruether rejects are similar to the kinds of polarities that mimetic theory highlights as being responsible for mimetic rivalry.

Now, the notion of surrogacy as found in William's work can offer some interesting points of comparison with Girard's understanding of the scapegoat mechanism. William's analysis of surrogacy allows mimetic theory to make even more explicit the harmful effects of the scapegoat mechanism. The victim is chosen somewhat arbitrarily according to mimetic theory, but Williams offers a helpful lens with which to examine how the mechanism oftentimes selects those who are on the margins of society, class, and race. The so-called arbitrariness is countered by the presence of systemic racism with which the United States is still coming to terms. The scapegoat mechanism is also inherently social, and nearly everyone has a part to play in it. Williams, too, does not claim that black women are immune from collective guilt. When patriarchal and racist hierarchies are left unchallenged, a certain kind of sin is committed by anyone who does not act.

Finally, Brock's rejection of atonement doctrines that place blame upon the shoulders of Jesus helps us to recognize the dark side of the scapegoat mechanism. The atonement doctrine that she criticizes argues that Jesus takes on the entire sin of the world, and God punishes Jesus in our place, the ultimate scapegoat. This represents the clearest (and arguably most distorted understanding of Christianity) account of the scapegoat mechanism. Mimetic theory, along with Brock's critique of the atonement as a form of cosmic child abuse can condemn this atonement theology as nothing other than the scapegoat mechanism divinely sanctioned.

While it is not necessary to claim Girard as a feminist theologian, it is necessary that scholars put his work into dialogue with feminist and womanist theologians. These theologians are allowing us to hear the voice of the victims of the scapegoating history. Hearing these voices is arguably one of the important features of bringing the two together. Girard's original insights as found in his earlier works such as *Violence and the Sacred* need the explicit and concrete voices put forward by these feminist and womanist theologians. If mimetic theory does not engage these voices on the margins, it runs the risk of covering what it proclaims to reveal – the victims of the scapegoat mechanism.

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*Damiano Bondi**
"MAN IS HOW HE EATS.
Vegetarianism and animalism in a religious perspective"

1. What if Feuerbach were alive today

The contemporary Western society shows a schizophrenic attitude towards food. On the one hand, there is a complete – and often intentional – ignorance about the provenience of what we eat. The rise of this ignorance is co-relative to the decrease in self-cooking practices, such that we are becoming mere "food consumers" and is exemplified by the cropping up of companies such as *JustEat* – the purpose of the company being evident in the name itself. On the other hand, the availability of every kind of food for many people, and a general spread of what we could call the "environmental awareness", has raised many ethical issues concerning what we choose to eat, in terms of impact, sustainability, quality, and wellness. This has had such a societal impact that a new disease has been born: *orthorexia*[1]. In this study we will focus on this second "hand" of the contemporary man, trying to provide a religious-philosophical hermeneutic for some "othorexist" movements (starting from the conceptual similarity between "orthorexia" and "orthodoxy", for example); but, in order to do that, we have to begin from the first aspect.

Considering food in terms of a pure satisfaction of materialistic needs (of sustenance or pleasure) seems in line with Feuerbach's famous aphorism: "Man is what he eats". Those who have not read the original essay can interpret this motto as a recognition of the "animality" of the human being; we are nothing but material needs and desires: therefore, *just eat!*

There is also a symmetrical interpretation, provided by the wellness-vegan side: Feuerbach meant that, in order to stay healthy, we have to eat well. But this reading is only partially correct if we have reference to

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[1] See S. Bratman, D. Knight, *Health food junkies*, Broadway Books, New York 2000; L.M. Donini, D. Marsili, M.P. Graziani, M. Imbriale, C. Cannella, *Orthorexia nervosa: A preliminary study with a proposal for diagnosis and an attempt to measure the dimension of the phenomenon*, in "Eating and Weight Disorders", Vol. 9 (2), 2004, p. 151.

the very first occurrence of Feuerbach's maxim. More properly taken, Feuerbach first highlighted the importance of eating healthy in order to have the strength to make revolutions. He says these words in 1850, while reviewing an essay by J. Moleschott entitled *Lehre der Nahrungsmittel: Für das Volk* (*Doctrine of Food: for the people*): "If you wish to improve the people, then give them better food, instead of declamations against sin. *Man is what he eats.* If he eats only vegetable food, he is only a being which vegetates, and he has no energy"[2] (the anti-vegetarian conclusion should be especially kept in mind, today). However, twelve years later, Feuerbach uses the same expression in a completely different way, and in relation to the *leitmotiv* of his thought: the problem of religion. In fact, "man is what he eats" is the *subtitle* of an essay whose main title is really emblematic: *The mystery of Sacrifice (Das Geheimnis des Opfers*, 1862)*.

Reading this work, it clearly emerges that the true meaning of Feuerbach's aphorism is the very opposite of a mere reductionist interpretation: man eats what he sacrifices to the gods, and in this act he declares at the same time that he is both separated from and in communion with them. "Man is what he eats" means "man yearns for God", and he expresses this yearning through sacrifice and ritual food consumption. Human beings divinize materiality: this, according to Feuerbach, is the essence of religion, and at the same time the most extreme expression of his radical materialism, which is inherently not a secularized one.

In the same line, the Italian philosopher Adriano Fabris writes that in the religious rules for food "the manner of fulfillment of a material *need* is based on its transformation into *desire*, emphasizing its symbolic and immaterial value"[3]. Sacrifices, cooking practices, common meals, storage modalities… these all are ways in which human beings *transfigure* food: from need to desire, from instinct to cultures, from matter to symbol. The original, trivial interpretation of "man is what he eats" thus is not only incorrect: *it is Feuerbach's polemic objective itself.* In our "just eat" global culture, we don't cook, we consume without conserving, we eat alone; and the only sacrifices we can make are self-sacrifices in the name of gods called Beauty, Thinness, Trend and Imitation – terrible gods

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[2] L. Feuerbach, *Die Naturwissenschaft und die Revolution*, 1850.
[3] "Il bisogno trova regolate le modalità del suo soddisfacimento a partire da una sua trasformazione in desiderio, dall'accentuazione del valore immateriale e simbolico di ciò che viene desiderato" (A. Fabris,*"Cibo e consumo,* in *A tavola con Dio e con gli uomini. Il cibo tra antropologia e religione*, ed. G. Colombo, Vita e Pensiero, Vita e Pensiero, Milano 2016, p. 135, my translation). In the beginning of his essay, Fabris writes that "beside a 'philosophy of food' – serious or ironic, always innovative, like that of *Food & Philosophy*, F. Allhoff and D. Monroe eds., Blackwell, Malden-Oxford-Carlton, 2007 –, it can be developed a "philosophy of religions" concerning this aspect" (ivi, p. 133). With this contribution I would like to take up this challenge.

which often desire our flesh[4]. Although we starting by consuming food, we are now consuming ourselves: we are indeed what we eat, and – as we will see – *how* we eat.

In this framework, vegetarianism, animalism, and ecology in general, represent a strange phenomenon in the resurgence of non-egoistic and non-self-oriented hard ethical stances: one sacrifices something which could be *good* for him, in favor of an *environment* whose ethical value is conceived as paramount, equivalent, co-essential or (at least) not-accessory compared to the human life. Furthermore, environmental ethics is often conservative and anti-technocratic, since it establishes moral constraints on technological development and on the advancement of scientific research, and it cares about the safeguarding and protection of ecosystemic goods and balances. In the end, today's ecological ethics is perhaps the most powerful form of heteronomous ethics, in which the norms governing human action come from neither an autonomous choice of the subject (self-determination), nor a pure theoretical-rational reflection, but, at least partially, from external factors to which human beings relate.

However, when these kinds of ethics are asked to present solid arguments, they often fall into vicious and paradoxical circles, thus revealing their *religious* and *meta-ethical* roots. I cannot deal here with the main contemporary ecological movements[5]; let us focus here, then, on vegetarianism and animalism.

2. Animalism as a form of metaphysics

The most famous "animalist" philosopher, nowadays, is undoubtedly Peter Singer, author of *Animal Liberation* (1975), professor at Princeton University, vegetarian, included in 2005 among the *Time's*

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[4] See for example R. Girard, *Anorexie et désir mimétique*, L'Herne, Paris 2008, (tr. *Anorexia and mimetic desire*, Michigan State University Press, East Lansing 2013).

[5] See E. H. Reitan, *Deep Ecology and the Irrelevance of Morality*, in "Environmental Ethics", 18, 1996, https://www.pdcnet.org/pdc/bvdb.nsf/purchase?openform&fp=enviroethics&id=enviroethics_1996_0018_0004_0411_0424; K.A. Jacobsen, *Bhagavad-Gita, Ecosophy T, and Deep Ecology*, in "Inquiry", 39, 1996, pp. 219-238; W. Fox, *Toward a Transpersonal Ecology*, Shambhala Publications, Boston 1990); Luc Ferry, *Le nouvel ordre écologique*, Grasset & Fasquelle, Paris 1992; R. Dubos, *A Theology of the Earth* (1969), in *Western Man and Environmental* Ethics, ed. I. G. Barbour, Reading, MA, 1973; F. Doolittle, "Is nature really motherly?", in "CoEvolution Quarterly", 29, 1981, pp. 58-63; R. Bondì, *Blu come un'arancia. Gaia tra mito e scienza*, UTET, Torino 2006; see also D. Bondi, *Fine del mondo o fine dell'uomo? Saggio su ecologia e religione*, (Verona: Edizioni Centro Studi Campostrini 2016.

100 most influential people of the world[6], and defined by Colin McGinn in *The New Yorker* as "maybe the most influential philosopher alive"[7]. We will take him as the paradigmatic example of the links between animalistic and vegetarian ways of thought, rationally expressed. Singer popularized the lucky term "speciesism" (coined by Richard Ryder), defined as "a prejudice or attitude of bias in favor of the interests of members of one's own species and against those of members of other species"[8].

The key-word of this definition is "interest". If Singer is often accused for his endorsements in favor of infanticide, euthanasia, sex between humans and animals, or vivisection, it is because he strives to be coherent with his basic philosophical position: interest utilitarianism. In *Animal Liberation* he openly declares harking back to this tradition, and especially to Jeremy Bentham, who incidentally was the first to give a philosophical depth to the concept of "animal rights", based on the *capacity to suffer*:

> The day may come when the rest of the animal creation may acquire those rights which never could have been withheld from them but by the hand of tyranny. The French have already discovered that the blackness of the skin is no reason a human being should be abandoned without redress to the caprice of a tormentor. It may one day come to be recognized that the number of the legs, the villosity of the skin, or the termination of the os sacrum are reasons equally insufficient for abandoning a sensitive being to the same fate. What else is it that should trace the insuperable line? Is it the faculty of reason or perhaps the faculty of discourse? But a full-grown horse or dog, is beyond comparison a more rational, as well as a more conversable animal, than an infant of a day or a week or even a month, old. But suppose the case were otherwise, what would it avail? The question is not, Can they reason? nor, Can they talk? but, *Can they suffer*?.[9]

Developing this argument – which is certainly *not* exempt from criticism[10] – Singer identifies the capacity to suffer and enjoy as the *conditio sine qua non* to have rights, or rather (since he doesn't particularly like

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6   http://content.time.com/time/specials/packages/article/0,28804,1972656_1972712_1974257,00.html
7 M. Specter, *The dangerous philosopher*, in "The New Yorker", September 6, 1999.
8 P. Singer, *Animal Liberation*, New York, Avon Books 1975, p. 7.
9 J. Bentham, *Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation* (1789), second edition 1823, chap. XVII.
10 For instance, why taking the capacity to suffer and not the capacity to talk, or to grow, or to change, or to fly? Who traces the "insuperable line"? Always a human being, reasoning, talking, writing, and moving from his/her own capacities and questions: the problem of "who is an animal?", or "which is a living being", is purely a *human* one.

the legal language of rights), to have an intrinsic dignity. In fact, what cannot suffer has no interests, what can suffer has interests:

> The capacity for suffering and enjoying things is a prerequisite for having interests at all, a condition that must be satisfied before we can speak of interests in any meaningful way. It would be nonsense to say that it was not in the interests of a stone to be kicked along the road by a schoolboy. A stone does not have interests because it cannot suffer. Nothing that we can do to it could possibly make any difference to its welfare. A mouse, on the other hand, does have an interest in not being tormented, because it will suffer if it is.[11]

Humans and animals share the capacity for suffering and enjoying, and *therefore*, even if *de facto* we can notice some differences between them, they are all equal *de jure*. The utilitarian moral principle which derives from this conception is the following one: act in order to eliminate as much pain as possible for as many animals as possible (human beings included), and to provide as much joy as possible for as many beings as possible. It is matter of calculating, each time, the cost-and-benefit of an action, in terms of potential suffering for some, and enjoyment for others. How many hens suffer, and how much do they suffer, in battery cages? It is a reasonable price in order to enjoy a few extra eggs? Obviously, in this evaluation one should take care of the *specific* features of different animals: for instance, a man sentenced to death suffers more than a pig shipped to the slaughter, because human beings can mentally anticipate the moment of their own death; vice versa, a wild animal in cage suffers more than a human prisoner, because it cannot understand the possibly temporary nature of detention.

Even if we were to agree with Singer's basic stance about the suffering and interests of living beings, it is not sufficient to explain the practical ethical principles he presumes derive *directly* and *only* from it.

For example, why should we not kill a living being, if we can do it without providing any suffering to it? Singer would probably answer that

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[11] P. Singer, *Practical Ethics* (Cambridge, 1979), chap. III. There are some surprising links between this "teleological" conception of interest and Robert Spaemann's position about the living beings in *Natürliche Ziele: Geschichte und Wieder-entdeckung des teleologischen Denkens*, Klett-Cotta, Stuttgart 2003. In a very summary, following Aquinas, Spaemann says that every living being is characterized by a *finis cuius*, an "end" that is the "form of the thing", indistinguishable from it (the Greek term *entelekheia* suggests the idea of an "intrinsic end"). Living things have normative requirements, obligations, limits. We can also call them "instincts". A cat that is hungry "must" eat. Also without the prospective concept of "duty", it does everything it can to eat. The end is the "limit" condition of a being: it circumscribes a living being, forming it and permitting it to express its own "nature".

the potential capacity to suffer, and not the suffering in effect, is the discriminant point. This could open a wide bioethical debate about his endorsement of euthanasia, but, as far as we are concerned, we should ask here the extreme question provoked by the entirety of Singer's thought: why does the capacity to suffer of a living being have to be considered as a sufficient condition for not killing it without any reason, or for not making it suffer? This can be seen as brutal, but not more than several of the conclusions Singer himself often draws from his "purely rational" utilitarian system. In short, we can find in Singer's moral philosophy an example of (what G. E. Moore called) the "naturalistic fallacy"[12]: the wrong transition from a phenomenal description into a moral prescription. The fact that a living being has an *interest* is not sufficient to justify the prescription to take this interest into moral account.

Now, if we move on from Singer to a wider horizon, we can look at his conception as an archetype of a deeper way of thought, shared by a large part of vegetarian and animalistic movements. This common way of thought is based on the idea that the *ontological equality* of the living beings is a good rational support for vegetarian/animalistic/environmental *ethical issues*. This idea is simply wrong, as its paradoxical outcomes shows: in fact, if I have the same "right to interest" of a wild pig, why should I not kill and eat it? Why should I sacrifice my pleasure for that of other animals? (Beyond the fact that I could make this moral act, while wild pigs cannot be subjected to the same prescription or indication). On the contrary, the biological "egalitarian" argument could be useful in order to explain and support "speciesist" acts, such as taking care of our own children, eating anything which is available and good for our own organism, defending the life of beings of our same species more than that of other species, searching for pleasure, aiming at reproduction rather than just sexual pleasure… indeed, acting just as all other animals do.

In other words, the presence itself of vegetarian and animalistic sensibilities, far from pointing out the equality between humans and other animals, is the proof that human beings can transcend their instincts and

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[12] The expression as it is known was coined by G.E. Moore in the *Principia Ethica* (1903). In Moore, it had many meanings, while later it was used univocally as the logical critique against moral heteronomy, above all against the juxtaposition used by R. Hare of the Moorian "naturalistic fallacy" and the *is/ought question*, or "Hume's law" – a law to which Hume, as we have seen, would probably not have subscribed. For more on this topic, cf. W.D. Hudson, *The Is/Ought Question. A Collection of Papers on the Central Problem in Moral Philosophy*, Macmillan London 1969; E. Berti, *A proposito della "Legge di Hume"*, in A. Rigobello (a cura di), *Fondazione e interpretazione della norma*, Morcelliana, Brescia 1986.

interests. *Only the human species has the capacity to be anti-speciesist.* It is neither the pleasure nor the interest which forms the foundation of moral action, but exactly the human possibility of acting in a *disinterested* manner, in a very free way, which makes it necessary to have certain criteria to guide this freedom. Animalistic and vegetarian ethics openly show the attempt of human beings to look at the otherness as an "in-itself", independent from the subject-oriented point of view. A cat cannot see in the mouse anything else but a prey, and particularly it is unable to see itself in eyes of the mouse. The cat looks at the mouse only from its own point of view, and doesn't see it as a being "in itself": therefore, the cat cannot even consider the idea of being "one" entity among the others. Every other thing refers to it, and has no value in itself. Only human beings are capable of what Plessner called the "eccentric position":[13] the knowledge of being irreducible and limited experiential poles, makes them capable of imagining a transcendence of being beyond their own limited experience.

Therefore, the conceptual framework of animalism and vegetarianism is not the physicalist materialism, but the very opposite: it is the subject of metaphysical spiritualism, it is the subject of "beyond matter". The optimistic illusion (and therefore the inner weakness) of these doctrines lies in the belief that this transcendence could be reached here, in this world, in the domain of immanence. The holistic eschatology of several environmental movements implies the overcoming of humanity by humans themselves, and that is why contemporary ethics of ecology can be linked to the post-human philosophy. We can retrace the mystical-religious roots of these forms of ethics by exploring their history. In particular, also, the analysis of the animalistic philosophical stances has led us to enucleate some of their logical paradoxes and deep ontological questions, the survey of a few focus points in the history of Western vegetarian doctrines will help us to highlight their religious-spiritualistic grounds. This line of research is fully in line with the anthropology of the sacred developed by René Girard, according to which even the most presumed "secularistic" cultural phenomena are rooted in (and could be seen as) ritual practices of survival of a society, through the symbolic expression of violence and mimetism.

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[13] Cfr. H. Plessner, *Die Stufen des Organischen und der Mensch*, De Gruyter, Berlin-New York 1975, p. 288.

3. Vegetarianism as a form of spiritualism

We could start from the Greek sorcerer-mathematician-philosopher Pythagoras, leader of an esoteric sect, which is described by Ovid as a man able to speak both with animals and gods, and also as the first vegetarian of the Western world: "Though the gods were far away, he visited their region of the sky, in his mind, and what nature denied to human vision he enjoyed with his inner eye […] the first voice, wise but not believed in, to say, for example, in words like these: "Human beings, stop desecrating your bodies with impious foodstuffs. There are crops; there are apples weighing down the branches; and ripening grapes on the vines; there are flavorsome herbs; […] The earth, prodigal of its wealth, supplies you with gentle sustenance, and offers you food without killing or shedding blood […]. How wrong it is for flesh to be made from flesh; for a greedy body to fatten, by swallowing another body; for one creature to live by the death of another creature!"[14].

In this quote the *impurity* of animal food derives openly from its proximity to violence and death, *therefore* to the matter, to the world of difference, limit and finitude.

Now, the end of the quote *seems* as much extreme as naive. As it is presented, it would be very critical, like several contemporary arguments which are based on a supposed "naturalness" of vegetarianism: if the fact that we are animals is enough to make us refuse animal food, then the fact that we are material bodies should make us refuse any material food – and someone goes to this extreme outcome, as we will see.

Another simple objection would be to point out that some non-human "creatures" live, actually, by the death of other creatures: why should humans, if they are merely creatures like all the others, do otherwise?

In the case of vegetarianism, like in many others domains, the naturalistic-reductionist arguments often fall into a paradox: in fact, if men are naturally herbivores, then there is something "unnatural" in them that made them become carnivores (let's call this something "culture", "sin", "freedom"…); vice versa, if they are naturally carnivores, then vegetarianism is an unnatural ethics.

In both cases, naturalistic issues end up recognizing in human beings an element which departs from pure naturalness.

But Pythagoras was not nearly as inconsistent as many activists of contemporary vegetarianism. His apparent naturalism can only be fully understood if we take into account his belief in *metempsychosis.*

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[14] Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, XV, 72-93.

"We are not merely flesh, but in truth, winged spirits, and can enter into the family of wild creatures, and be imprisoned in the minds of animals" he explains, according to Ovid[15].

We can find the belief in metempsychosis in several historical spiritualistic religious movements, often linked to vegetarian practices. Let us take, for example, the influences of Manichaeism in the Western World, especially in Catharism. Manichean *Elects*, men and women, carried out the *Seal of the Mouth* – they did not eat meat or eggs, nor did they drink wine – and the *Seal of the Hands* – they did not kill animals and did not cultivate the land. Together with sexual abstinence, such acts were avoided *not* for love of nature, but for the very opposite: because matter was made by dark gods, by Darkness, which imprisoned the Spiritual Light in the world of corporeality. Human beings have to free the divine sparks, which are entrapped in the material body: therefore, they must not be contaminated with anything material, but nurture pure asceticism. It seems that in some Manichaean communities, which believed in the transmigration of souls, the Elects were a sort of "ritual machines": with their stomach activities, they released the particles of light imprisoned in the fruits and vegetables they ate. Anyway, "eating meat would have meant weighing the body with other matter, postponing the moment of the liberation of the divine, spiritual Self"[16].

The influence of Manichaeism in Europe is a debated topic among historians, but today there is a substantial agreement in recognizing Manichaean traces within the gnostic sect of the Bogomils, a dualist Christian heresy which arose in Southeast Europe in the 10th century, under the parallel influence of Paulician Marcionism. Bogomils – according to the monk Euthymius Zigabenus – believed that also the devil, named Satanael, was the Son of God-Father, indeed the firstborn, and therefore more powerful than Christ. They were docetists, i.e. they refused the reality of the bodily suffering of Christ: Christ wore a flesh that had a material human appearance, but in reality it was immaterial and divine. Only apparently was he subjected to human passions, crucified, died, and resurrected. The Eucharist itself was nothing other than a metaphor

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[15] Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, XV, 453.
[16] See E. J. Mannucci, *La cena di Pitagora. Storia del vegetarianismo dall'antica Grecia a Internet* (*Pythagoras's dinner. History of vegetarianism from ancient Greek to Internet*) Carocci, Roma 2008, pp. 33-35. See also C. Spencer, *The Heretic's Feast. A history of Vegetarianism*, University Press of New England, Hanover 1995, pp. 108-179. Spencer argues that since 4th century, in the Western World, vegetarianism began to be interpreted as a sign of heresy by Catholic Church. In the Synod of Ancyra (Ankara), in 314, it was imposed on priests who wanted to refrain from eating meat to eat it one last time, on pain of exclusion from the clergy.

to indicate the four Gospels (Christ's body) and the Acts of the Apostles (His blood), which are the only authentic gifts Christ has given humanity. Condemning every materiality as the principle of evil, "Bogomils strictly abstained from sexual intercourse, and from any food that came from a sexual act: meat, cheese, eggs"[17].

Some Bogomil sects in Constantinople converted groups of French crusaders during the Second Crusade (1147). Returning to their homeland, these crusaders founded the first Cathar Churches[18]. Catharism spread like wild fire in southern France and northern Italy between the 12th and 13th centuries, until it was hushed up by a special Crusade (culminated with Siege of Montségur in 1243-1244) and by the parallel dissemination of Franciscanism and other new religious orders.

According to the Cathar cosmogony, the entire material world was not created by God, but by the Devil: the "God" of the Jews is nothing but Evil, therefore the Pentateuch was excluded from the Cathar Sacred Text. Flesh is generated from sin and by sin, and the human being must strive to free the spirit from this demonic prison, through practices of asceticism and meditation, and through abstinence from all that is carnal (sex and food included). In fact, those who had received the spiritual baptism (*consolamentum*) were strictly forbidden to eat meat or have sexual intercourse. Finally, the spirit of those who had died without receiving the *Consolamentum* could reincarnate in other animals. In his *Summa* against the heretics, Peter Martyr (1206–1252) argues that a Cathar has made this confession: "Clenched by your objections, I will reveal a secret that even few of our members know. We affirm and believe that the essential reason why we do not eat beef and birds is that some spirits destined for salvation may have been in their bodies"[19].

4. Sacrifice of the body and transmigration of the soul

What we are touching upon, here, is a very decisive point: there is a kind of affinity between a (dead) human being and a (destined to death) animal. Connecting this belief with the widespread archaic ritual practice of animal sacrifice, and taking our cues from the theory of victimization

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[17] F. Zambon, *La Cena Segreta. Trattati e rituali catari* (*The secret dinner. Cathar texts and rituals*), Adelphi, Milano 1997, p. 37.
[18] Cathars received directly by Bogomils the most important of their apocryphal texts, the *Interrogatio Iohannis* or *Secret Dinner*: this text, which was recently found, was in fact brought by Bulgaria to Nazarius, the heretic bishop of Concorezzo.
[19] Quoted by Zambon, *La Cena Segreta*, cit., p. 91. See also Pseudo-Giacomo de Capellis, *Summa contra haereticos*, in I von Döllinger, *Beiträge zur Sektengeschichte des Mittelalters*, II, Dokumente, Munich 1890, pp. 274-277.

provided by René Girard, we can even venture out this thesis: the belief in *metempsychosis* itself, which supports several vegetarian doctrines, derives from the fact that in the sacrificial rituals animals were used as substitutes for the original human victims. In this way, the vicar animal victim embodies the spirit of the sacrificed human being, who therefore lives a sort of "second sacrificial existence" in the animal, which is killed in his place.

Obviously, the first link that comes to mind is the traditional religious model of Indian culture, in which the cow is "sacred" because it was originally "sacrificed" (from *sacrum-facere*, "to make something sacred"). In this regard, the scholar Alberto Pellissero, professor of Sanskrit at the University of Turin, confirmed that "in the Indian tradition there was animal sacrifice – from 1500 to 500 BC […] The animal was considered a vicar victim of the sacrifice: one kills an animal because in this way a life is extinguished, but not that of the sacrifice's customer"[20].

Girard's theory is more sophisticated: the polarization of social violence toward a single human being, who is considered guilty and then killed, is a collective psychological mechanism that allows a society to survive by transferring its own violent potential on a single victim, a scapegoat which with his cathartic death brings peace to the whole community. Since this mechanism works, it also represents the first stage in the birth of religion: the first victim is divinized because with her or his own death peace was brought back to the community. The violent origin of this primordial divinity can be found in many cosmogonic myths: regarding the religions of India, for example, Girard mentions the famous myth of Purusa[21], the "Cosmic Man", a God-Man which, in the beginning of time, was sacrificed and dismembered, to give rise to the entire material and social world.

Following this theory, whenever a society falls into a crisis, the original mechanism is re-activated, but in a secondary and derivative modality, which is religiously mediated: the God of peace and violence requires a new victim to appease his anger. This would be the root of any sacrificial ritual, which initially was a human one: with the evolution of society, in fact, the sacrifice becomes increasingly symbolic, starting from the living beings which are more "symbiotic" with humans, i.e. animals. Obviously, these sacrificed/sacred animals have to maintain some common elements with gods – who in turn are victimized/divinized human beings[22].

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[20] Interview with A. Pelissero, in P. de Benedetti, *Teologia degli animali* (*Theology of Animals*), Morcelliana, Brescia 2011, pp. 38-39.

[21] See *Rigveda*, chap. X-90.

[22] See R. Girard, *La violence et le sacré*, Grasset, Paris 1972; Id., *Le bouc émissaire*, Grasset, Paris 1982. Surprisingly, we find in Feuerbach an absolutely Girardian in-

Now, if we look at the Greek/Mediterranean roots of our Western culture, we can find exactly all these elements, especially with regard to the bull/ox.

In Greek mythology, Zeus himself often takes on the appearance of a bull, which in fact is the "most sacred" animal: its sacrifice is the most important one, and strictly regulated[23]. The bull is the mythical founder animal of Greek culture: Minos was born from the union between Zeus-bull and the oriental princess Europe, who was kidnapped by the "bull-shaped" Zeus and brought to Crete. Here, Minos' wife Pasiphaë and a sacrificial bull mated, generating the Minotaur: in this way (as Walter Burkert states), "the identification of divine progenitor and sacrificial victim seems complete"[24].

Not only is Zeus linked to the bull, but also his counterpart, Dionysos: following the *Dionysiaca* by Nonnus of Panopolis[25], and the *Library of History* by Diodorus of Sicily[26], Dionysos took the appearance of a bull and was dismembered by the Titans, like a Greek "Puruṣa".

In general, Burkert underlines that "the animal in Greek sacrifice seems to be associated in a particular way with man. Again and again, myths relate how an animal sacrifice takes the place of a human sacrifice, or, conversely, how an animal sacrifice is transformed into an human sacrifice; one is mirrored in the other"[27]. The main references are the ritual *Tauropolos*, in which the throat of a man was sliced and offered to the goddess Artemis *Taurica*; or the flagellation of the ephebes at the altar of Artemis Orthia near Sparta; or the myth of the Kerestai (the Horned Ones), who made gruesome human sacrifices to Dionysos[28].

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sight. These are the last lines of *The Mystery of Sacrifice*: "Only the barbarian, whether learned or unlearned, knows nothing of this mediation and thus finds meaning in the proposition: 'man is what he eats' only in formal, actual cannibalism and human sacrifice. But a*s man raises himself to the level of culture*, […] *he then transforms human flesh on the table as on the altar into bread and animal meat*, human blood into 'the blood of the vine, of the olive tree' into water, milk and honey or yet other juices, in just this way, because *now he still knows of their effects on the basis of feeling, even if not on the basis of reason, and eats human flesh and blood in plant and animal protein and in the other nourishments necessary for human well-being* as well, and summons his gods for atonement" (Eng. transl. by Cyril Levitt, 2007).

[23] In one of the most famous Greek myths, Prometheus, deceiving Zeus, institutes the practice of animal sacrifices (meat for human beings, smokes and bones for gods) with the first sacrifice of a bull.

[24] W. Burkert, *Greek Religion: archaic and classical*, Blackwell, Oxford 1985, § 1.4 "Animal and God".

[25] Ivi, pp. 197-205.

[26] Ivi, pp. 75, 4.

[27] Ivi, § 1.4 "Animal and God".

[28] On the animal sacrifice in general in the Greek culture, and on its link with human sacrifices, see M.H. Jameson, "Sacrifice Before Battle", in V. D. Hanson, *Hoplites: The*

The proximity of god and bull in the light of sacrifice is very relevant in another great culture of antiquity: Egypt. Apis is a sacred divinized bull; each Pharaoh brings with himself – as a symbol of divine power – the tail of a bull; in the *Cannibal Hymn* from the Pyramid Text the Pharaoh-God Anus/Wenis is called "the bull of the sky" and also "the Lord of Food-offerings"; and finally Osiris, the dismembered cosmogonic God of Egyptian mythology, is often related to the image of the bull (for example in the Book of the Dead)[29].

Even in the Old Testament, Yahweh's most fearsome opponent is an ox. When the people lose their trust in the god of Moses, they take refuge in old ancestral (maybe Egyptian) idols: they build a gold bull-calf, making offerings and sacrifices to it, dancing, drinking and "celebrating"[30].

It would be obviously necessary to dwell on these elements more at length, but we have neither the space nor the competences or the interest here: what we want to say is that the bull (or his little brother goat) represents *animality* as humans *feel* it, i.e. the irrational, material and violent part of themselves. In many religions of the world, this bloody violence finds its expressive form in the practices of ritual sacrifice. Therefore, refusing to sacrifice animals and to eat meat means wanting to expel animality from oneself, and, with animality, violence, matter and death.

Classical Greek Battle Experience, Routledge, London-New York, 1991; see also R. C. T. Parker, *Substitution in Greek Sacrifice*, in *Sacrifices humains / Human sacrifice*, eds. P. Bonnechere, R. Gagné, Presses Universitaires de Liège 2013, pp. 145-152. Parker sees as theoretically problematic the double link, within the sacrificial practice, between animal and god, on one hand, and between animal and human being, on the other. If we accept Girard's theory, this apparent problem is solved, since there is an original identification between human beings and the god themselves. About the substitutional value of animal sacrifice in the Greek culture, and about its strict connection with vegetarian doctrines, Theophrastus himself declared that animal sacrifice was an ὑπάλλαγμα of human, and that the Pythagoreans sometimes sacrificed animals ἀνθ' ἑαυτῶν (ap. Porphyry, *De abstinentia* 2.27, 2.28). See the notes in G. Clark's translation, *Porphyry, On Abstinence from Killing Animals*, Bloomsbury Academic, London 2000, p. 151. For more historical references on practices of animal/bull sacrifices in the ancient Greece, see Xenophon, *Anabasis*, VI 1, 4; VI 4, 22; VI 4, 25; see also Pausanias, *Periegesis*, III 15, 9. I would like to thank the Italian scholars Livia de Martinis and Elena Langella for these precious references and suggestions.

[29] See J. P. Allen, *The ancient Egyptian pyramid texts*, Atlanta, Society of Biblical Literature 2005, esp. p. 47; R. O. Faulkner, *The 'Cannibal Hymn' from the Pyramid texts,* in "The Journal of Egyptian Archaeology", Vol. 10, No. 2, July 1924, pp. 97-103; S. Ikram, *Choice Cuts. Meat production in ancient Egypt*, Leuven, Peeters Publishers, 1995; R. Pirelli, *Towards an anthropology of myth and rituals of offering and sacrifice in Ancient Egypt*, Naples 2002; E. Morris, *(Un)Dying Loyalty: Meditations on Retainer Sacrifice in Ancient Egypt and Elsewhere*, in *Violence and civilization: Studies of Social Violence in History and Prehistory*, ed. Roderick Campbell, Oxbow, Oxford and Oakville 2014. I would like to thank the Italian scholar Ilaria Cariddi for these precious references and suggestions.

[30] See *Exodus* 32.

5. Fruitarians and Breatharians: our orthorexic mystics

From the modern age onwards, even these "religions" were secularized and rationalized. Vegetarianism, for example, was on the one hand related to utilitarianism (as we have seen), and on the other to some form of medical health enthusiasm. The most famous exponent of this second current was probably George Cheyne (1671-1743), a Scottish doctor residing in England, who made vegetarianism a real social trend: something discussed in the reviews, laughed at in comic strips, staged in theaters… not much differently than today. Cheyne himself was a passionate reader of the Jacob Böhme, and it seems that in the last years of his life he believed in reincarnation[31]. But to find some evident resurrection of the original binomial "vegetarianism-spiritualism" we have to wait for the 19th century.

On September 20, 1847 in Kent, Great Britain, the first Vegetarian Society was born; and in 1850 the first American one. In these two early vegetarian societies, we can find health-conscious doctors, writers (such as Branson Alcott) and some famous religious personalities, like the presbyterian shepherd Sylvester Graham, the inventor of the *crackers* (to counteract the "sexually stimulating effects" of refined flour and meat), or the Seventh-day Adventist Harvey Kellogg, creator of the famous breakfast cereals (to replace the traditional bacon-based English breakfast). There were also some members of "dissident" or "radical" religious communities, such as the Bible Christians of Salford, and the followers of Swedenborg's theosophy.

Today, it seems that this gnostic core of food taboos has been lost. Vegetarianism (and animalism in general) is often nothing but a fashion style, much more rampant than in Cheyne's times, and endorsed by politics (right or left) to pick up electoral consensus. The salvation to which these practices had to lead to, has been replaced by physical health, "wellness", following a secularizing trend which started in the early modern period.

And yet, if we look at the most extreme lines of vegetarianism, we find again the same spiritualistic common theme. I am referring to fruitarians and breatharians. "Beyond the spare shore of the vegan world lay the hungry sea of the fruitarians and the voyage out led to the promised land of the breatharians – people who believed that humans in fact don't need to eat"[32]. Fruitarians eat nothing but fruits, and some of them eat

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[31] See S. Tristam, *The Bloodless Revolution: A Cultural History of Vegetarianism from 1600 to Modern Times*, W.W. Norton, New York 2007.
[32] L. Keith, *The Vegetarian Myth. Food, justice and sustainability*, Flashpoint Press, California 2009, p. 62.

only fallen fruits, without picking them: they can thus boast about their illustrious ancestors, the Manichaean Elects. The Italian fruitarian *guru* Armando d'Elia, said that "actually, every time we ingest a food, we are absorbing condensed light, which is enclosed in the solid forms of food that we are going to eat"[33]. Sentences like the latter are merely re-propositions of typical Manichean doctrines: briefly, fruits are the favorite foods because they grow high, on the trees, near the air, the sky, the spirit, as far away as possible from earth and mortal flesh. Following this line, breatharians claim that they (and every human being) can live without eating or drinking, but only absorbing *prana*/solar energy. Among their founding fathers is Roger Crab, a sixteenth-century English haberdasher, initiator of the vegetarian exegesis of the Bible: the exodus of the Jews from Egypt, in this conception, was interpreted as a path of purification from the meat diet, culminating in the consumption of manna, angelic food coming from the sky. Today the main and controversial exponents of breatharianism are the Indian mystic Prahlad Jani (1929) and the Australian essay writer Jasmuheen, pen-name of Ellen Greve (1957). Regardless of any controversy about their alleged evidence of the possibility of living without eating, what we are interested in is what they profess, what they believe. As Lierre Keith says about her fruitarian friend, "there was something in [her] project that I wanted, too: that grace, beyond need and hunger, beyond death"[34]. In our contemporary forms of *orthorexia* there is still a resonance of the human yearning for transcendence, which is the very opposite of the flaunted ontological equality between all the living beings. A yearning for a post-animal existence of peace, free from death, needs, violence, material finitude. A spiritual desire which clashes with our carnal, animal, instinctive existence, condemning it as something "evil".

Beyond any specific practical aspect that the ex-vegan Keith faces with competence (cultivation of cereals, digestive systems of different animals, breeding modalities, destruction of humus and living species by agriculture, fertilization of the soil….), she clearly grasps the central philosophical/anthropological point of the matter. We close this essay by quoting her words:

> I know that you want to be true, vegetarians. You want to open the circle of concern to everything sentient. With all your hearts, you want us humans to be meant for cellulose or seeds or berries or anything that you believe can't

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[33] "In realtà, ogni volta che ingeriamo qualsiasi alimento, ci stiamo nutrendo di luce condensata racchiusa nelle forme solide del cibo che ci apprestiamo a mangiare". (http://neuro-pepe.blogspot.it/2012/10/frutta-e-ortaggi-di-ottobre.html)
[34] L. Keith, *The vegetarian Myth*, cit., p. 62.

feel pain. And I'm telling you the truth: it doesn't work. What you are made of – bones, blood, brain, heart – needs animals. This is not the universe you wanted. But it's the way the world, always alive and always hungry, works. […] I used ideology like a sledgehammer and I thought I could bend the world to my demands. I couldn't. The needs of soil, the truth of the carbon cycle, and the nutritional requirements of the basic human template were a reality of brute, physical facts that would not be moved. I had built my entire identity on death being an ethical taboo, a moral horror, one that provoked a visceral shudder through body and soul. But 'death-free' is not an option that the processes of life offer us. We can rail and cry all we want, but in the end we have to make peace with the world, the good, green earth we claim to love so much but understand not at all. In dreams begin responsibilities, yes, but with understanding comes more. Eventually we see our only choices: the death that's destroying life or the death that's a part of life.[35]

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[35] L. Keith, *The vegetarian Myth*,cit., p. 243, 77.

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