

Anthropoetics II, no. 1

Special Issue on René Girard

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Table of Contents

Eric Gans - [Introductory Remarks](#)

1. **René Girard** with Markus Müller - [Interview](#)
 2. **James Williams** - [René Girard Without the Cross? Religion and the Mimetic Theory](#)
 3. **Thomas Bertonneau** - [Two Footnotes: The Double Necessity of Girard and Gans](#)
 4. **Matthew Schneider** - [Mimetic Polemicism: René Girard and Harold Bloom *contra* the "School of Resentment" - A Review Essay](#)
 5. [Benchmarks](#)
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Introductory Remarks

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Generative Anthropology and *Anthropoetics* owe so much to **René Girard** that a special issue on his thought seemed only the least we could do. I am therefore very happy to be able to include **Markus Müller's** exclusive interview with Girard in this issue. I am also most grateful to **James Williams**, Executive Secretary of the *COV&R*, for his participation. And I am always proud to present the work of **Tom Bertonneau** and **Matt Schneider**, two of the original GA Seminar participants, whose writing illustrates the fertilizing power of these ideas on first-rate minds.

I had originally thought of commenting on these articles in detail, but it seemed more in the spirit of this issue to clarify very briefly how I conceive the relationship of Girard's thought to the mode of thinking I call *generative anthropology*. If the latter is taken not as a euphemism for my own work but as an exploration of humanity as a generative phenomenon--which allows us to leave out of consideration as ultimately meaningless whether the generation is accomplished by humanity itself or by an agency that transcends it--it then becomes clear that Girard is himself a generative anthropologist and that the difference between his thought and mine lies in the nature of the articulation we make between *mimesis*, Girard's central conceptual legacy, and human generativity, that is, our incessant reappropriation of the traces of our origin.

The Girardian element in GA is well known. But few have remarked on the Derridean element, which may perhaps be better appreciated now that the fashion of deconstruction has been subsumed into Foucault's social nihilism. GA brings together "mimetic theory" and deconstruction, *mimesis* and *différance*, in its characterization of the human by *the deferral of violence through representation*.

Societies of higher animals possess means of differentiating the portions of their members. But at some point in primate evolution, these means prove insufficient to restrain the power of mimesis to break down distinctions; mimesis leads to violence through *indifferentiation*. In the Girardian scenario of "hominization," the violence of mimetic rivalry is controlled anew by the murder of a scapegoat or emissary victim which (Girard would say, *who*) by becoming the first "signifier" institutes a new means of founding intracultural differences. The victim "signifies" by his transcendent power to focus violence, and thereby to end it. As he is perceived as the destroyer of the differences on which the self-reproductive activities of life depend, the communal energy normally devoted to these activities becomes absorbed in his killing. As a consequence, with his death, the victim is perceived as bestowing on us these differences and the activities that depend on them, henceforth understood as dependent on his good will. The human order, as opposed to the animal order that preceded it, is made dependent on the sacred as defined by its own violence; we are the only species to which mimetic violence poses a greater

threat than the extraspecific natural world.

2

But human differences differ from animal differences precisely because they are formulated in *language*. This is the one aspect of mimesis that Derrida understands better than Girard. The advantage of the linguistic sign is expressed in the parable of the loaves and fishes that, like the word of God, may be multiplied indefinitely. If, as Girard claims, the original "signifier" were a corpse, language would be an expensive affair indeed. The corpse of the victim becomes the foundation of human culture not as the first sign, but as the *referent* of the first sign.

This was the thesis of *The Origin of Language*. Since then, I have situated the murder or *sparagmos* of the central being in a different stage of the originary scene. But the heart of the originary hypothesis is its motivation of the originary sign as an *aborted gesture of appropriation* that becomes a *representation*, that is, an "imitation" not of one's fellow potential appropriators, but of the central being itself. The discovery of the sign is the discovery that our capacity for mimesis, the basis for our rivalrous sharing of desire, can also become the basis for the peaceful sharing of significance: we can imitate each other's gesture as the sign of what is differentiated from us as the sacred.

It is undecidable, and therefore ultimately immaterial, whether the sign sacralizes the object or the sacred object compels the sign. But it is the world of signs that is the source of our understanding of the world of transcendence. This insight is not, as James Williams fears, incompatible with a religious perspective. I have insisted on the subsistence of the sign as a signified or Idea as the model for our understanding of the immortal and the transcendent. But one may just as well claim that the existence of human language, incommensurable with animal signal-systems and inexplicable by positive science, as its efforts to reduce it to an "instinct" or a product of unconscious evolution never fail to demonstrate, is only possible as a divine gift. That the first human word is the **name-of-God** is a hypothesis that, it seems to me, unites us all.

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Neither Generative Anthropology nor my own career would be what they are without my teacher René Girard. Although our personalities and thinking styles are very different, he has always served me as a model, above all in the grandeur of his intellectual ambition and in his unshakeable confidence in the superiority of real thinking to fashionable thought-play. As the one true anthropologist, Girard is living proof that the cultural self-reflection of the Humanities offers a better model for thinking the human than the positivism of the social sciences. No one could serve as a better mimetic model for us all.

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Interview with René Girard

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Q: Prof. Girard, the forthcoming issue of *Anthropoetics* is devoted to your work and I would like to take the opportunity of this interview to establish a dialogue between your work and **Generative Anthropology**. Let me start with what one could call a basic definition of **GA**: "The deferral of violence through representation". This definition brings together in a unique way key elements of modern thinking: the notion of violence, which is central to your work, and deferral, an essential Derridean concept. **GA**, finally, focuses on representation as a paradoxical tool which not only defines the human but also proposes a means to defer violence. How do you evaluate this new way of thinking?

A: I evaluate it positively. I think the differences between Eric and myself are much less important than the similarities. There are many essential ideas in **GA**: the idea of the originary scene and the deferral of violence are important concepts to me. However, the main difference is that, from my perspective, there is a missing link in **GA** as conceived by Eric. I have great admiration for his intellectual power, you know, for his ability to define problems. He has a first class philosophical mind which is very unusual in departments of French, it's very unusual in departments of philosophy as well. It is especially remarkable because, as far as I know, he had no formal training in philosophy. There is real power and authority in what he says, so my criticism of him will always be subordinate to my admiration.

So, what do I mean by missing link? Representation is essential and I think that Eric is right to say that I have not talked enough about these problems. You know, my whole idea of representation, which is already present in *Things Hidden since the Foundation of the World*, is treated in a very cursory fashion because it played a minor role in my thinking at the time and, curiously, it is one of the aspects of that work which has provoked the greatest amount of comments and interest. So, I agree that I have neglected up to a point the problem of representation. But to me the problem of representation is second to the sacred. Eric is a philosopher and he likes what he calls minimal thinking which is really the same thing as what scientists call the elegance of real theory. I like all this but he is not enough of an ethnologist, to my taste, in his version of **GA**.

It seems to me that his version resembles too much that of social contract theorists because the deferral is a free and deliberate decision on the part of both individuals, it's a mutual agreement. In my view the sacrificial crisis is a mimetic escalation and it is of such a nature that it takes a tremendous shock, something tremendously violent itself, to interrupt the scapegoat mechanism. And the scapegoat mechanism, in order to be effective, must be *une grande chose*, in other words people must really project their tensions and aggressions against the victim.

Q: Sorry if I interrupt you here. You mean to say that scapegoating cannot be done effectively if we are conscious of it?

A: Exactly, there is no such thing as conscious scapegoating. Conscious scapegoating is a modern parody of this scapegoating which is of the order of propaganda, because it implies prior representation. But for me the first representation is really the sacred because if scapegoating works, that is, if you are not aware of the projection against the victim and if the scapegoating is unanimous, if the mimetic impulse is rigorous enough to make it unanimous, which may happen only after a great deal of violence and after a phase of what I would call partial scapegoatings... I think that **Shakespeare** has something to say about that in *Julius Caesar*. You know there is the phase of the conspiracy against Caesar and the various factions fighting each other that culminates in civil war. It's only at the end that you have a complete and unanimous scapegoating. To make a long story short, the first representations to me would be false representations of scapegoating, which are the **sacred**. And scapegoating really means that we are genuinely reconciled. We are reconciled by what or by whom? The only possible answer, if you do understand scapegoating as genuine, is that we must be reconciled by that same **victim** that divided us. Therefore this victim is both extremely bad and extremely good. The sacred is right there as a powerful experience that precedes representation but constantly moves towards representation. And at a certain stage which of course cannot be defined it must become a kind of representation.

Q: Thus you would disagree with the hypothesis of an originary scene from which language and the sacred emerge simultaneously?

A: Moving towards representation would be an extremely slow process and one cannot say anything about it in a concrete historical way, to be sure. It would be a long series of "scenes." Before representation, rituals and prohibitions would be born. What are prohibitions and rituals? Prohibition tells us not to do again what the victim did to put us in trouble; which really means the same as to separate ourselves from each other, to have the people who were divided, move away from each other so that they will not start fighting again. And nevertheless, trouble seems to loom again. If mimetic disruption comes back, our instinct will tell us to do again what the sacred has done to save us, which is to kill the scapegoat. Therefore it would be the force of substitution of immolating another victim instead of the first. But the relationship of this process with representation is not one that can be defined in a clear-cut way. This process would be one that moves towards representation of the sacred, towards the definition of the ritual as ritual and of prohibition as prohibition. But this process would already begin prior to representation, you see, because it is directly produced by the experience of the misunderstood scapegoat. The misunderstood scapegoat must lead to separation and at the same time to repetition of the scapegoat mechanism for the purpose of avoiding another crisis.

Proof that ritual does this lies in the fact that it begins with a mock crisis; in other words, it tries to reenact the whole process once again, but what interests me most in this genesis of ritual and prohibition is that it does not demand full representation yet, just as the sacred does not demand an understanding of scapegoating. In other words, and this is not clearly defined in *Things Hidden since the Foundation of the World*, in some way the process of the sacred and the process that moves towards representation could be one and the same, but we would need countless repetitions of rituals to bring it about and then, of course, the initial representation would be more or less of the same type as Eric's. The question is to defer violence but to me, the idea that the sole consciousness of a violent conflict ahead would be sufficient to cause its deferral is not convincing.

Q: You talk here about the **originary scene** where the participants recognize the sign as the *aborted gesture of appropriation*?

A: That is correct. To me there must be more than one originary scene. It is the originary scapegoating which prolongs itself in a process which can be infinitely long in moving from, how should I say, from instinctive ritualization, instinctive prohibition, instinctive separation of the antagonists, which you already find to a certain extent in animals, towards representation. How this process of representation actually occurs, I do not know, I cannot define it, but I think there are many things in Eric's analysis which are very helpful in moving toward that goal. Because ultimately people become aware that ritual and prohibition defer violence. Therefore the tendency to visualize and represent what is going on is getting stronger and stronger. But what I would like to see is a more genetic engine of representation rather than a scene which to me is too philosophical, too conceptual to start with. What I like about the scapegoat genesis is precisely the fact that it avoids the philosophical dilemma of a sudden shift from non-representation to representation. You understand, the main thing here is that ritual and prohibition in their most elementary form *precede* representation. They slowly become representable and finally they are represented. The problem for me with Eric is that he never talks about archaic material; rituals in particular. Ritual, myth and prohibition are interpretable through the scapegoat theory, which I think has never happened before. So everything Eric says rightly in **GA** should be said, I believe, in the context of archaic religion.

Q: This focus on archaic ritual and myth in your work and on the modern in **GA** leads me to another question which is that of external and internal mediation. We could say that the ritual and the archaic are the preferred mode of external mediation whereas the modern world is the world of internal mediation. It seems that both forms of mediation have their advantages and disadvantages. Could you elaborate on this?

A: Ritual and the archaic are the deferral of violence; religion is the main deferral of violence but the means of this deferral, prohibition and ritual, are not inexhaustible; they tend to wear out, they become useless because they lose their power. This is, by the way, the reason why anthropologists almost never discover the power of ritual; they observed ritual mostly in situations where ritual had lost its power, if only by the fact of their very presence. The few exceptions to this would be situations that we cannot appraise very well, like the very few people who were in a position to observe the **Aztec** culture such as the Spaniard **Bernardino de Sahagún**, for example, who wrote a full account of their rituals.

But let me return to the initial question of **external mediation**. External mediation is a function of society in religious terms, a society in which ritual and prohibition still effectively defer violence. Later on more and more mimetic rivalry comes in and people become more and more disenchanted with their religion and tend to move back into a mimetic crisis, into what I call an internal mediation, the doubles and so forth, but there is always a historical process there. So, archaic religions have a tendency to lose their power and then to renew themselves in a new crisis and a new scapegoat mechanism. In modern history, we can see some of that, but very little, because modern history is influenced by religious systems which move against or disintegrate the scapegoat mechanism for good. For me, these religious systems are primarily **Judaism** and **Christianity**. But to a certain extent all religions move against the sacrificial system, and it can be seen very clearly in India in the great mystical period, or in **Buddhism**, but the process is always less complete, I think, than it is in Judaism and Christianity.

Q: How about the efficiency of external and internal mediation in regard to the deferral of violence. Isn't there the illusion in ritual and external mediation, considering God as an external mediator, that by engaging in rituals violence can be deferred for good from a given society?

A: External mediation only solves the problem of violence temporarily and imperfectly from our ethical viewpoint because it solves it with victims, and even with victims it solves it less and less. So, if you look at the beginning of the **Bible** you have the **Cain** and **Abel** story. The murder of Abel is, in fact, the first scapegoat business. If you look carefully it is a collective story and not an individual one. Cain says "Now that I killed my brother everybody will kill me". This "everybody" makes very little sense if you interpret this story as a dual scene between two brothers. But then you have a law against murder which emerges directly from this first murder: every time Cain will be killed, the killer will be killed seven times. In other words you have something that regulates vengeance. Seven victims is not infinite vengeance, but if you continue in the story you can see that the successors of Cain become more and more violent and need more and more victims. There is the song of Lamech saying: Cain killed seven times and I killed seven times seven and ultimately it ends in another crisis which is the big flood.

At the beginning of the Bible you have the Adam and Eve story which is a story of mimetic desire because desire never comes from the subject but always from someone else. Eve's desire is inspired by the serpent, Adam's desire is suggested by Eve. The story of Adam and Eve is obviously a mimetic story. When God asks them what has happened, Adam says it was Eve's fault and Eve's says it was the serpent's fault; and they are not completely wrong in the sense that they both borrowed their desire from someone else. But then you have Cain and Abel, the real consequences of this mimetic desire which is the scapegoat mechanism and the foundation of the first culture. Then you have this first culture, which, bad as it is: seven killings for one, gets worse and worse until it collapses entirely in the great flood.

Q: Your comment on the Cain and Abel story as the real consequence of the Adam and Eve story emphasizes this problem of external and internal mediation. The intriguing aspect of internal mediation is precisely the fact that there is no external mediator, the serpent, Satan, God, that can be blamed.

A: External mediation means that there is a transcendence and that the rules of the culture are respected.

Q: Why is there a shift from external to internal mediation and how does this shift occur?

A: In internal mediation, you move towards more and more violence and then ultimately, in archaic societies, you have another scapegoat business and the rebeginning of the culture. What ancient cultures, especially the Hindus and the pre-Socratics, call the *eternal return*, for me is a series of cycles of the scapegoat mechanism.

Q: Could we talk about modern society where we do not have, or try to move away from, such rituals and more towards internal mediation?

5

A: Because we have no absolute way to get rid of internal mediation or mimetic rivalry, we have more and more mimetic rivalry but, at the same time, we have abstention from mimetic rivalry because the biblical influence is even more positive than negative. We live in a world where mimetic crises are always threatening but they don't run away in the sense that they do in archaic societies. We have wars and all sorts of conflicts which should be studied mimetically, and we are trying to prevent them without resorting to too much victimage, but this rejection does not go without saying, of course, and implies a

lot of violence which are the vicissitudes of history that Eric sees just as clearly as anyone else.

Q: Let me talk a bit about your book *Deceit, Desire and the Novel*. At the end of this book, you talk about **Dostoevsky's** *Underground Man* who is portrayed as the modern man of resentment. From my reading of these passages in your book, I got the impression that you have a somewhat apocalyptic idea about modernity, about the world of internal mediation.

A: Well, that idea is always present, but in *Deceit, Desire and the Novel*, it is of course very different from the later books because it is a book that precedes the discovery of the scapegoat mechanism and the genesis of religion which is absolutely fundamental to my system. This book is incomplete since it deals only with the modern period; therefore what we have there is a *dérive*, a kind of sliding more and more into the crisis but never completely, never in the sense of the scapegoat mechanism, which would be impossible anyway because the scapegoat mechanism cannot be, by definition, perceived, in the sense that if you are able to perceive it you succumb to it and you become a believer in the guilt of the victim. Therefore the scapegoat mechanism should never be revealed because either people resist it and then there is no scapegoat mechanism, or they succumb to it and then it becomes a unanimous event.

This is the reason why the biblical texts are exceptional. In them you have a little minority, a *remnant*, which victoriously resists the scapegoat mechanism. At the same time, the gospels show you that Jesus's disciples are almost sucked into the scapegoat mechanism. This is the reason why Peter's denial of Jesus is theoretically one of the most important texts, because Peter is himself caught in the scapegoat mechanism. Peter's denial should *not* be read as a reflection on the psychology of Peter, on the personal weakness of Peter, it should be read as the revelation of the scapegoat mechanism. We should have no revelation of it since even Peter, the best of the disciples, joins the mob. And this is very different from the death of **Socrates**. Because if you look at the death of Socrates, you will see that the philosopher never succumbs to the scapegoat mechanism. The philosophers always see that Socrates is innocent and always defend him against the city. To me that's the main difference between **Plato**, who is a great religious thinker nevertheless, and the **Gospels**. The supreme paradox of the Gospels is that the revelation should never happen. And therefore Plato's work is not a revelation of the scapegoat mechanism since philosophy is immune to it.

The idea of grace in Christianity or Judaism is precisely that the truth cannot be known by human means because it is always buried by the mechanism of **Satan**. What is the idea of Satan? How can Satan cast out Satan? Satan casts out Satan through the unanimity of scapegoating, which forces absolutely everybody not to see the victim as the scapegoat any more but as the weird combination of guilt and salvation that a primitive god is. Whereas, in Judaism and Christianity, you have a totally different type of God who is not dependent on the victimage mechanism.

6

Q: Here the positions of the victimizer and the object of desire and rejection, the victim, are rather clearly defined and stable. This does not seem to be the case in internal mediation, where we can no longer distinguish between victim and pursuer.

A: Right, it is a circle. Internal mediation implies what I call double mediation; in other words, the model becomes the imitator of his imitator and the imitator becomes his model of its model; that's what mimetic escalation is. It is a storage of violent energy which tends towards explosion and this explosion takes place all the time, of course. In order for this violence to be deferred, there must be a collective

transference against a collective victim that can be completely arbitrary and against whom all tensions are projected, the scapegoat. If all believe in its guilt, the destruction of that victim will leave the community without an enemy. It is this state of being without an enemy, attributed to the victim, which brings about the mystery of the sacred. Because the scapegoat embodies all evil and the next second, it embodies all good, so the sacred would be there and the sacred would be the first to be represented, after a long apprenticeship with prohibitions and rituals.

Q: Earlier, you mentioned religion as the most important means for the deferral of violence. One can say that the market system, as it is defined in **GA**, assumes many of the functions of religion in regard to the deferral of violence. What is your opinion in regard to the market's capacity of replacing religion?

A: The market and the multiplication of goods should be regarded as part of the sacrificial mechanism. In other words, the message of mimetic rivalry is that we all want the same things, and the market allows us to have the same things. So, the market can be considered a religion, I would say a substitute religion, but one should not overdo it because in its best aspects, the market is not rationally intelligible. But you could say that there are no victims in the market, there are only beneficiaries. People make money, people consume and exchange and so forth but this is not necessarily sacrificial. First, this is questionable; there are many *losers*, many victims. Second, the market is to a certain degree like all sacrificial means and the proof is that it has a limited life span.

Consider for example the people who, at the end of the war would devote their entire activity, their energy to the possession of washing machines, dishwashers, or automobiles-- they are no longer satisfied with that, they take it for granted. The market is ignorant as to what we really want or need. Nowadays you hear for example that we need computers, we are not even sure that computers can satisfy our desire in as wide a way as other things but the computers kept the economy going, at least for a while. Therefore the market maybe is more self-sustaining than many other systems but it is not completely so: its efficiency participates in historicity. And there is also a mimetic escalation which has counterproductive effects for the ecology and all sorts of things. So, I would agree to a certain extent with a positive view of the market but I would say in many respects it's the same old thing and that there is no absolute solution to the problem of man who, however unfashionable it may be to say at this time, yearns for the absolute.

Q: At least in principle, the market system implicitly has faith in its endless capability of deferral

A: of renewal

7

Q: of renewal and deferring the potential violence inherent in mimetic desire.

A: Yes, at the same time, I don't want to be too pessimistic, but, at this very moment, there are some disturbing aspects in the down-sizing mania, for instance, which bring out the negative aspects of mimetic rivalry. It seems to me that the market, fundamentally, like all modern institutions, is a complex combination of an archaic sacrificial basis combined with aspects of Jewish-Christian revelation and, as you say, its better than anything we had before, and I don't want to sell it short. But at the same time, it constantly gives signs of crisis. So far it has had the ability to renew itself but it has also had moments of great crises which have led to monstrous events. One can see that the totalitarian crises of the 30s and 40s and the whole communist system were in a way problems caused by a collapse of the market and these problems are still with us. Therefore, without denying the theoretical capacity of the market to renew

itself, we can have serious doubts about the ease with which it will do it.

Q: One point about the market which I consider quite interesting is the fact that it allows the victim to turn its victimary position into a value. **Affirmative Action** would be one example.

A: Affirmative Action seems to me to be another sign of the fact that even the mystique of anti-scapegoating can turn into other forms of scapegoating; the main purpose of PC thinking, which is a perversion of Affirmative Action, is not to defend victims but to make victims once again by accusing certain people of being victimizers. Therefore, here again, we are always on the razor's edge but the importance and the relevance of **GA** in regard to these problems is the fact that we can talk about it in a more efficient way than anyone else and in a way that is *economical* and *minimal* in the scene defined by Eric. It enables for us the constant rehashing of first principles which has never been possible before. So I agree with Eric that sooner or later these ideas will be discovered and widely used.

Q: I think we still have to say something about the question of scapegoating and the end of history.

A: Yes, I read Eric's comments on **Fukuyama** and the end of history. And he says quite rightly that it has very little to do with the end of history as conceived by Hegel because the end of history today would be the result of the violent threat that hangs over humanity. But you see, here we can see that there is a value in talking about religion, of integrating archaic texts on the one hand into our reflection, and Judaic and Christian texts, on the other hand. All these texts include, as you said, an **apocalyptic** dimension. There is apocalypse in our future. And what does apocalypse mean? It means revelation: *apocalypso* means to *open up* and to *show the truth*. But it also means absolute violence, so the apocalypse is a violent revelation and a revelation of violence and immediately you see the relevance of this.

8

The religious dimension pushes all mimetic paradoxes to their logical extremes. Most people believe that the apocalyptic dimension of Christianity was just some kind of mad effervescence. But today you can see that this is not true. In societies where the sacrificial protections are gone, certain forms of knowledge become possible, technical knowledge, the world is emptied of magical powers and can be tampered with in a way that was not possible earlier. Therefore the world is under a threat coming from man, which is a total threat, and humanism does not measure up to that threat, has nothing to say about it, is forced to deal with it by using concepts coming from a rationalism for which what we are talking about is unthinkable. And suddenly these concepts that appear completely crazy, like for instance apocalypse, make complete sense in that context. They are in a way the most economical concepts because they show you that the revelation of violence and the nuclear threat are one and the same thing. Therefore they are part of the most economical and efficient thinking that Eric sees rightly, in my view, as the real goal of social science, not the falsifiability principle of **Popper**. When you include religion in the game, far from losing internal coherence, you gain more because you have concepts, like the apocalyptic, which suddenly demonstrate their rationality. We can also show that, far from being a mad fantasy, Satan makes sense if you view him as the mimetic paradox which is on the one hand disorder and violence and on the other hand the scapegoat mechanism and thus the return to order. The Satan of order used to expel the disorderly Satan but cannot do any more. He is *unleashed*. There again, far from displaying insanity, you have a hold of reality which we did not have before.

Q: I would like to return for a moment to this question of runaway violence. It is obvious from what you said that we cannot escape from a certain amount of scapegoating violence if we want to avoid an overall

war. Given the technological possibilities and the fact that the world is getting smaller and smaller, the threat of escalating mimetic violence seems to be becoming a reality. Do you see any ways of coping with this phenomenon?

A: It is difficult to answer your question. There are two main types of runaway violence, at the individual level and at the collective level. The second kind produces such phenomena as Lebanon, or Bosnia. Political scientists have tried to explain why these things happen, but they do not have the appropriate concepts. Once the escalation has started, nothing can end it; this was especially true in Lebanon. However, the interesting thing about Bosnia so far is the fact that foreign intervention has ended it and foreign intervention is now being accepted by the international community. This is an absolutely new phenomenon. The idea that there can be a military intervention which is not for reasons of imperialism, we do not realize how new that is. For me, that is one of the hopeful elements in the developments of our time and obviously the end of the cold war has something to do with it. I think the end of the cold war was very interesting from the point of view of mimetic violence because it was really the understanding by one or several, probably a quite large group of people, and primarily **Gorbachev** himself, that a certain type of imperialism was outmoded; the competition for territory, the gathering of as many African satellites as possible, meant no increase of power for the Soviet Union. I think that the end of the cold war was the understanding of that, which had never happened before in history.

Q: One could argue that the end of the Cold War is the understanding of the mimetic process as these people seem to have realized that a continuation of their mimetic behavior would lead to a global catastrophe. In this regard, the mere threat of violence would have been enough to bring an end at least to this particular crisis. I think that your talk at **UCLA** about religion and the global village went in that direction.

9

A: Today we have more and more deferral of violence of the kind Eric is talking about. Archaic religion is becoming outmoded. There are remnants of it, there are aspects of collective idolatry but they are prone to cause violence. But this is becoming an archaic phenomenon in our world, and one may hope that Lebanon and Yugoslavia are phenomena that cannot happen in Western Europe or in this country, but I'm not sure.

Q: We have talked about external and internal mediation, the scapegoating mechanism and the deferral of violence. At this point, I would like to shift the focus of our discussion towards the question of representation in general and language in particular. **GA** argues that the sign, and consequently language, is born in the originary scene under the threat of violence and I think that **Nietzsche** has an interesting comment in that regard. In an essay called "On Truth and Falsity in their Ultramoral Sense" (1873), Nietzsche says that because humanity wants to live socially and gregariously together, because it wants to avoid the "*greatest bellum omnium contra omnes*," it invents an arbitrary yet binding system of language and consequently also of laws to fix "truth."

A: This is a fascinating quote. What bothers me there is what bothers me a little bit with **GA**, as this process implies foresight. It implies thinking and one of the purposes of the scapegoat business is to have a genesis of culture that makes this completely unnecessary; that it is really a mechanism, you know, that it is a transition between a biological mechanism and culture. All social contracts, in my opinion, are unbelievable. But Nietzsche is an interesting case in regard to questions of scapegoating and victimization. We live in a world where we cannot accuse people directly, we have to accuse accusers,

we have to persecute persecutors. So, I would say there is always a perverted Christian problematic inside our conflicts. And I really think that if Nietzsche had the views he had, that combination of extreme insight and complete foolishness, it is that he was the first to react against **PC**. **PC** was at its beginning, it was nothing compared to what it is today.

Nevertheless, if you read Nietzsche carefully you can see that, from my point of view, he mistakes the caricature of Christianity for the real thing. He sees the origin of Christianity, the idea of all the weak getting together against the strong, as some kind of super **PC**. This in my view doesn't make any sense, because Nietzsche is blind to the principle of the mob, whereas the early Christians were obviously a small minority fighting the mob. And Nietzsche sees **Dionysus** as the opposite of the mob, the *individual*, whereas it is obvious from **Euripides** and from everything we know, and the most elementary common sense, that Dionysus is the mob, is that *mania*, that homicidal fury of the lynch mob that the tragedy portrays. So he is both the most lucid and the most blind in regard to **GA**. He's a total cultural mystery, he is indispensable because he discovered, I think, the difference between the archaic and the Christian when he said that the latter are *for the victims*, but instead of finding that good in principle, he says it's bad.

Q: Do you want to say that you put Nietzsche *on his feet*?

A: In a certain way that's what I do, the reversal of Nietzsche. In Nietzsche, there are unpublished passages that say outright that we need human sacrifice. He accuses Christianity of making human sacrifice impossible by defending the victim. This is out in the open in Nietzsche. And it is extremely profound; it is greater than any theologian of the 19th and the 20th century, but it is also the most perverse conception, because to be against **PC** and to be *for victimization* are two entirely different things. We are against **PC** because we are against victimization and because it is the most insidious and hypocritical form of victimization. And this is indeed how Nietzsche interpreted Christianity: as **PC**.

10

Q: Could you elaborate a bit more on the relationship between language and the sacred?

A: What Eric says on the subject suits me fine if it is preceded by a long experience of the sacred which is pre-representational. I don't see what you lose by going through the sacred, and the textual gains are enormous, unless, of course, you reject the preeminence of religion for ideological reasons. In my view, our encyclopedia of archaic cults responds to the scapegoat genesis of religion in such a positive way that this possibility cannot be disregarded. It simply works too well and results present all the specifics that Eric mentions as necessary for a good theory. In addition, this solution provides the drama, or the urgency, which is necessary in order to avoid the unbelievability of social contracts in any form. Once again, I think that Eric's schema is too close to a social contract because violence is deferred from the start. And I think that all religious texts militate against that. You are going to tell me that religious texts are recent texts, even the oldest ones we have but, at the same time, they are much more suggestive than any text of contemporary culture of the scheme which could generate the sacred. The sacred in archaic society is something really dreadful and destructive and dangerous like atomic power on the loose, you see, and in order to have that you need to have the full crisis. Most contemporary anthropologists do not agree, of course, but they have surrendered to nihilism and, sooner or later, young people will realize how sterile and boring the current theoretical stagnation really is.

Q: Violence, not only the perspective of it ...

A: Right. Because why should this perspective of violence defer the crisis. Its effects are just too great for the lack of drama you have there. The idea of tragedy is very important here; you see, it is not tragic enough to force people into unity.

Q: In the originary scene, the designation of the object is also the emergence of the sacred ...

A: ... and this object, because it is sacred, is also taboo. This taboo, however, is constantly transgressed in ritual. So, the question is, how can you reconcile the two? With the scapegoat, you can, as there is a double imperative which comes with the scapegoat: do not do what I did to put the culture in trouble, but if and when the culture is in trouble, do again what I did to put the culture out of trouble. Follow the example of my redemptive death and kill me again in order to bring back the peace. I don't see the possibility to get rid of this. My scheme is primarily an interpretation of archaic religion. The birth of language, or the very idea of substitution cannot come unaided. The victim is first a sign when the repetition occurs. So, the victim is a sign of the originary event which is itself the same violence; this is why the victim is sacred. And this victim, if you look at ritual, is very polluted and polluting before the immolation occurs. The immolation transforms its status instantaneously, it becomes holy. The only type of ritual where this is not true is probably some of most archaic rituals, scapegoat rituals properly speaking, where you literally load the dirt onto the victim and then you cast it out. But in classical sacrifice, you can keep the victim because the victim gets worse and worse as you get closer to the killing and the killing makes it edible and transforms it into a good thing. This is, of course, very important for my reading of the sacred because it cannot be a pure fiction, a fabrication. Its universality and its combination of unity and diversity testify to a reality which is never interpreted exactly in the same way but which is always the same in its main outline.

11

Q: We are talking here about the concept of the *sparagmos*, the communal devouring of the sacrificial animal which at one point replaced the human victim?

A: Yes, and many similar examples as well. The phenomenon of the *sparagmos* is extremely important as it is tied to representation. In many societies (Greece, Australia) the naming of geographical entities, inside the community, is tied to pieces of the victim. You can see it even in *Phèdre*. When Hippolytus is killed, pieces of his body are scattered here and there and they provide the places where they fall with an identity. It is pretty amazing to find this also in Australia where body pieces of sacred animals or human beings are used for the naming of places and other things.

And of course it is present as well in India, at the most archaic level. You know in India, the holy scriptures of Hinduism are very complex. But it begins with the *Rg-Veda*, and the *Rg-Veda* section 10 #90, the most famous myth of all Indian literature, is the myth of **Purushia**, the primordial man, who was killed by a multitude of sacrificers, holy men and so forth, and from his body the three main castes are born. From his head: the priest, from his chest: the warrior and from his legs: the craftsmen. There again you have the naming not only of local entities but of social units, and you will find that relationship between pieces of the victim and language all over the world. I see the origin of language must be ultimately there. But it must be preceded by pre-human stages in which sacrifice is practiced and prohibition are observed prior to the birth of language.

And this fits neatly with the modern theory of evolution, because one thing we know, one great characteristic of man is what they call **neoteny**, the fact that the human infant is born premature, with an

open skull, no hair and a total inability to fend for himself. To keep it alive, therefore, there must be some form of cultural protection, because in the world of mammals, such infants would not survive, they would be destroyed. Therefore there is a reason to believe that in the later stages of human evolution, culture and nature are in constant interaction. The first stages of this interaction must occur prior to language, but they must include forms of sacrifice and prohibition that create a space of non-violence around the mother and the children which make it possible to reach still higher stages of human development. You can postulate as many such stages as are needed. Thus, you can have a transition between ethology and anthropology which removes, I think, all philosophical postulates. The discontinuities would never be of such a nature as to demand some kind of sudden intellectual illumination.

Q: One kind of criticism brought up against your work and Eric Gans's **GA** is that both of you are too "practical" in the way you use literature, that there is too much of a purpose. How do you react to this?

A: I don't regard myself as a literary critic. Therefore I do not say that the mimetic problem exhausts literature. I would say that there are many types of literature which are either too mimetically ignorant or too fooled by mimesis in order to be revelatory in any way. And there are other ones which, to a certain extent, are alien to it, such as certain forms of poetry. To me, the objection of literary critics who say *you do not give a full account of literary works* seems irrelevant. Why should all of us give a full account of the literary works we are talking about? If one does cultural theory, one is entitled to discuss only the problems one is interested in. I don't attach much importance to that sort of literary objection because there is something completely artificial and ritualistic in the bad sense about the idea of the total literary critic who is accounting fully for the work of art. This is especially artificial in our present academic world. Let's face the fact, there are many literary critics there, and very few readers. So, we are absolutely free to do what we want because we do not have responsibilities toward the *average reader* who does not exist. In the academic world, we are dialoguing among ourselves. For me, the most important literary text is tragedy, that is Greek tragedy. The most important cultural text is the ensemble formed by man, ritual and prohibition, which cannot be regarded as literary in the usual sense of the word.

12

Q: This problem of literature leads me to another question. You started out with *Deceit, Desire and the Novel* and then turned to anthropology with *The Violence and the Sacred* and *Things Hidden since the Foundation of the World*. What caused you to go back to a more traditionally and literarily oriented study in your book on **Shakespeare**?

A: When I wrote *Deceit, Desire and the Novel*, instead of following the formalist and subjectivist fashion of the time, which is still the fashion of our time, my instinct was more "scientific": I looked for *similarities* among these books and the main similarity that I found was that of **mimetic desire**, mimetic rivalry. I was very impressed by the fact that it was the great literary works which reveal the mimetic problematic in a way which social sciences never discovered. Even philosophy cannot do this and I assume Eric agrees with that. Then I started to read anthropology because I hoped to find something about mimetic desire in it. So I read it avidly, and in this sense there was a purpose to my search. In fact, my work is divided into three stages: the mimetic desire stage which is purely literary, then the archaic religion stage which is that of *Violence and the Sacred*. Finally, there is the Judeo-Christian stage which is *Things Hidden since the Foundation of the World*. The reason I later went to Shakespeare is because in

Shakespeare, unlike what happens in the great novels, I found all these stages together. Of course, the critics accuse me of always saying the same things, but Shakespeare has them all. He goes beyond the Greeks in the revelation of the scapegoat mechanism.

I'll give you one example. In Greek tragedy, the scapegoat mechanism is always at the end of the play and is never represented on the stage, and that is part of the difference between tragedy and sacrifice. In *Julius Caesar*, the collective murder of Caesar is treated as the foundational event of the Roman Empire, and it occurs on the stage, at the center of the play. The spotlight is on the murder. And then there are sentences which are really a definition of the founding murder. On the morning of the murder, when one of the conspirators comes to fetch Caesar, to bring him to the Senate, Caesar does not want to go because his wife, who had a dream about his being murdered, had scared him into staying home. But Shakespeare added a reply to the arguments of Caesar's wife against his going and this argument is very strange because it is precisely not that he should not go; instead it says: "From thee great Rome shall suck reviving blood." Therefore, Shakespeare reveals the pride and the vanity of Caesar. The conspirator does not reassure Caesar. He does not say: "You are not going to be killed." Instead he says: "your murder will be the greatest thing that will ever happen to Rome." In Shakespeare you have these amazing insights into generative anthropology which pushed me towards him. You also have definitions of mimetic desire more explicit than anywhere else, such as "To choose love by another's eyes", or "love by hearsay." **Shakespeare** is the most formidable revealer of the whole mimetic cycle of all the writers I know.

Q: Wouldn't **Dostoevsky's** *Eternal Husband* reveal the same mimetic desire?

A: No doubt, but there you don't find the scapegoat mechanism as a foundational event. If you read **Plutarch** you will see that he is very profound but Shakespeare completes Plutarch in the direction of the founding murder. He also links the founding murder of Caesar to an earlier one, the expulsion of Rome's last king, which was the founding violence of the Republic. Brutus is the descendant of one of these conspirators. This idea reveals Shakespeare's awareness that all great historical forms are rooted in a founding violence.

13

Q: Professor Girard, thank you very much for sharing your thoughts about **GA** and other related issues with us. Your observations have foregrounded the similarities in essence and the differences in development between your work and Eric Gans's **Generative Anthropology**.

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René Girard without the Cross? Religion and the Mimetic Theory

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Eric Gans' work in developing a generative anthropology is appealing to me, for two reasons. First, it is a stimulating hypothesis about how culture--and specifically language--begins. The emergence of the sign by which the victim is represented carries with it the dawning awareness of the position of those gathered around and against the victim, and this sharing of the sign enables those involved to substitute it for the victim and defer violence. My fundamental question about this originary scene, to be developed in part 4 of the essay, is whether it is necessary to posit a crisis issuing in the actual lynching of a human victim in order to imagine not only the necessary, but also the sufficient condition for the emergence of language and culture (so Girard); or whether sign-sharing and substitution could be accomplished without actual violence. Or is it the case that the emergence of language through the deferral of violence is what defines human being, whether or not the central object for the hypothetical hominids is real or imaginary? And if the central object is real, does it matter whether it is animal, human, or some other object, the gaining or eating of which must be deferred in order for language and culture to emerge?

Second, Gans takes religion with great seriousness in his version of generative anthropology. He says in *Science and Faith*, "The originary hypothesis is an attempt to understand the birth of the transcendental domain of representation."^[1] The emergence of signs or language is the model for understanding the originary scene, and at the heart of this signifying capacity is a coterminous representation of a central object, deferral of violence through substitution of the sign for the object, and an experience of agreement or consensus which results in collective peace. Language is thus what is distinctively and primordially human, but the event that brings about the human, which is the same as "the transcendental domain of representation," is revelatory, having the status of sacred reality in the center of things. What we now categorize as "religion" is the ongoing transmission of acts, symbols, and stories associated with that revelation, that opening up of a transcendental domain of representation.

I will return later to Gans' concept of generative anthropology, for there is an important issue at stake in his concept of language as originary supplement which defers violence. At this point I want to turn to an overview of Girard's anthropology and the religious, specifically biblical and Christian roots of Girard's mimetic theory. The upshot of this twofold structure of Girard's work is the mimetic predicament of humanity and the revelation of this predicament, a revelation which is simultaneously transmission of the power of mimesis as love and divine-human community. Or to put it in traditional theological terms, this twofold structure of Girard's work may be understood as original sin and salvation, as viewed from the standpoint of the theological implications of mimetic anthropology. After having reviewed Girard's

mimetic anthropology, I will ask whether it is possible to separate the religious and specifically Christian aspects of the mimetic theory from Girard's own thinking and body of work while still remaining anchored in the mimetic theory. This question will involve a review of the role of religion in the work of three of Girard's former students, Paisley Livingston, Tobin Siebers, and, as already mentioned, Eric Gans.

1. Mimesis: the Predicament

Interpreters of various perspectives and with varying commitments would agree that Girard's view of the human condition is radical. That is, if we go to the root of matter along his lines of thinking, we encounter an originary event (or series of events) which marks the transition from pre-homo sapiens, to homo sapiens--the transition he calls "hominization" in *Things Hidden*.^[2] This originary transition is the source of incomprehension or "misrecognition" (*méconnaissance*) and deception, which is built into every form of representation. Whatever the distinctions made between forms of desire, for Girard all desire is properly speaking mimesis or mimetic desire. He has emphasized the acquisitive aspect of desire in identifying cultural and personal crises, and this acquisitive desire (*la mimésis d'appropriation*) is the precipitating dynamic in the founding scenario. Its initial functioning is prior to all representations; but since it is, even in its embryonic stage, evoked by the other who becomes the model, it easily becomes unstable when pressures on the human grouping, or any particular relations within it, accelerate an anxious groping for certainty and order. It is in some such situation that acquisitive desire leads to conflict and rivalry, issuing then in violence.

2

The damage control achieved by lynching a victim and preserving this unanimity of the lynchers by repeating the event (the origin of ritual), forbidding the alleged crime that precipitated it (the origin of prohibition), and surrounding and remedying the event through narrative (the origin of myth) is, so to say, a disguising of truth. The truth of ritual and mythical representation, which are the basis of all representation, is mimetic crisis and collective violence. The collective violence in particular may almost be completely disguised--but usually not quite.^[3] The moment of sacrifice in ritual and the moment of the "good" violence in myth are both alike the doses of poison that must be taken and properly monitored (enacted, recited, thought) in order to counteract this very poison in its destructive forms of conflict, violence, and social disintegration.^[4]

If we turn to Girard's "interdividual" psychology and focus on the development of the self, we see that he likewise conceives the individual, who is always inherently social or intersubjective (thus "interdividual"), as in a predicament analogous to the predicament of the social-cultural order.^[5] The child has no inherent, biogenetic mechanism for distinguishing between good and bad forms of behavior. The behaviors and rules he learns are basically imitations of what adults do and say, although what other children say and do, both older children and peers, undoubtedly has considerable influence. The child has no innate way of knowing that you can go too far with imitation: if it gets too acquisitive it begins to interfere with the model and the repercussions are not pleasant. But one of the most important functions of culture and religion is to furnish differences--roles, rules, institutions, etc.--which will alleviate this potential harm to relationships. In modern Western, as contrasted to archaic societies, these functions have become increasingly weakened, so the child has no sure way of knowing that the imitative behavior

applauded on one occasion may be discouraged or even rejected on another.[\[6\]](#)

The master-disciple relationship is analogous to the parent-child relationship and is always influenced by the latter to some extent. Girard points out that the master may be delighted that the disciple is taking him as a model, but "if the imitation is too perfect, and the imitator threatens to surpass the model, the master will completely change his attitude and begin to display jealousy, mistrust and hostility." He will try to "discredit and discourage his disciple." But the "disciple can only be blamed for being the best of all disciples." Precisely because of the mimetic relationship with his master, who is the source of norms and the obstacle he cannot surpass, he is unable to gain critical distance and perspective on the relationship. The disciple's situation is worsened by the model's tendency to reinforce his follower's blindness and "to hide the real reasons for his hostility."[\[7\]](#)

If I understand Girard correctly, then the potential for conflict in the master-disciple relation is basically a variation on what the child experiences in his relations with models and mediators. That is to say, mimesis is not simply one very important phenomenon and relation alongside others, but the constitutive basis and dynamic of all relations. It is not that it cannot turn persons toward freedom, love, and non-violence, for it is also what constitutes the possibility of salvation or liberation (more on this below). But in whichever direction one's life turns, it always proceeds in and through mimesis. Learning what to desire from someone else is not a dynamic confined only to the "sick," to "those who push the mimetic process too far to be able to function normally; it is also, as Freud acknowledged, a feature of the people we call normal."[\[8\]](#)

In the New Testament Gospels this universal human predicament is associated with the work of demons, and particularly with the work of the arch-demon, the prince of this world, the arche or principle of the world constituted by mimesis and the scapegoat mechanism. According to the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke, Jesus was tempted by Satan or the Devil for forty days in the wilderness. Satan in the Hebrew Bible, *shatan* or *satan*, means accuser or adversary. The Greek *diabolos* means much the same thing, accuser or slanderer. The classical Greek *diabole* would thus mean (false) accusation or slander. Its use in Socrates' long defense in the Apology gives us, perhaps, a deeper sense of its connotation. Socrates says, "Now let us take up from the beginning the question, what the *kategoria* is from which the *diabole* against me has arisen...." (19 AB). Here the *kategoria*, from which our word category, is the formal accusation, while the *diabole* is what supports and exacerbates the accusation. The Loeb translation renders it "false prejudice." Since the indictment alleged Socrates' corruption of the youth by calling into question traditional belief in the gods, the ostensible issue was disruption of civic order and tradition, but anxiety--perhaps also envy?--about his influence on a great number of young men informed the charge against him. If we translate this into the mimetic terms of this discussion, then *diabole* is identified with mimetic rivalry both as its cause and its result.

3

So Satan, as Girard says, "is the mimetic model and obstacle par excellence."[\[9\]](#) We can see this particularly clearly in the Gospel of Matthew, where Jesus has spoken of his suffering, death, and resurrection, and Peter rebukes him for saying he will suffer and die. Jesus in turn rebukes Peter: "Get behind me, Satan! You are a skandalon to me...." (Matt 16:23)--you are a scandal, an obstacle, a hindrance to me. Girard observes that Satan is "deconstructed" here in being equated with the mimetic principle, whereas in other texts he is depicted in a personified supernatural role.[\[10\]](#) In this chapter of *Things Hidden*, entitled "Beyond Scandal," Girard goes on to argue that the concept of scandal is rooted

in the Old Testament and the struggle against idolatry, and that the Cross is the supreme scandal that reveals and exposes scandal and its operation through the scapegoat mechanism.

So it does not matter whether one believes in a supernatural person, Satan, or views Satan as the principle of order working through mimesis and an unconscious scapegoating process which clicks in when the cultural system, through any of its tributaries in society, government, or economy, is threatened or thrown off balance. From this standpoint, the only thing worse than believing in Satan is not believing in Satan. I don't know whether Girard has ever said exactly that in published writings, but I know from personal conversations that he agrees with it. And this means that all human beings in all circumstances are always either subject to, or close to the edge of, scandal and the relationship of doubles. Those trapped in the relationship of doubles are truly "possessed"; for them, short of a marvelous deliverance, the violence of desire tends toward death, either the death of the model-obstacle through murder or the death of the possessed person through suicide. When Girard speaks of desire tending toward death or says, as at the beginning of the last chapter in *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel*, that the "ultimate meaning of desire is death...", [\[11\]](#) he is not talking about all desire or desire in all its manifestations. He means rather desire as it so fixes itself on the the mediator's supposed desire, and more fundamentally on the mediator himself, that it takes on an independent metaphysical reality for the desiring subject. What he is pointing to is not the necessity of desire resulting in scandal and the relationship of doubles, but the inevitability of this development, i.e., there is no absolute necessity that this occur, but the human condition is such that it is practically impossible to avoid. The human achievement on a universal scale has been to overcome disorder by means of limited disorder; or, if you will, to counteract the poison of violence by injecting only a small amount, enough to enable human life to tolerate it but not so much that the sociocultural system becomes fatally ill. The operation of some sort of generative scapegoat mechanism allows most cultures to work most of the time. Put in terms of Satan, Satan the principle of order (the "prince of this world") casts out Satan the principle of disorder, that great "spirit of self-destruction and nonexistence," as Dostoevsky's Grand Inquisitor calls him. So in the sense of the power of Satan as just indicated, we exist either under the sway of the fascinating rival or, in Kafka's striking image, as those who try to walk along a rope stretched just above the ground. "It seems more designed to cause stumbling than to be walked upon." [\[12\]](#) This is ordinary human existence, or existence "according to the flesh." But there is the possibility of becoming "the adherents of non-violent imitation." [\[13\]](#) To that we now turn.

2. Mimesis: the Release or Redemption

I get these terms, release and redemption, from two Gospel texts. In Mark, followed by Matthew, Jesus tells his disciples, "For the Son of Man also came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many" (10:45). "Ransom" is a translation of the Greek word *lutron*, whose root meaning is a "freeing" or release. Ransom, with the connotation of a sacrificial ransom, is probably an accurate rendering. In the Septuagint or Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible it translates typically sacrificial words such as *geulah*, redemption, and *kofer*, ransom. However, in the context of Mark it is practically synonymous with the Son of Man's humbling of himself to become the servant, a model the disciples are to follow. The pronouncement about the Son of Man as a ransom is in response to the disciples' anger at James and John for asking to become Jesus's chief lieutenants when he comes into his glory. It addresses mimetic rivalry, in other words. The same quarrel had erupted earlier when the disciples disputed among themselves who was the greatest. There also we find the saying, "If anyone would be first, he must be

last of all and servant of all." Then Jesus took a child and placing him in their midst, said, "Whoever receives one such child in my name receives me; and whoever receives me, receives not me but him who sent me" (Mark 9:33-37). In Matthew the saying includes not only receiving but also being like the child: "Truly I say to you, unless you turn and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven" (Matt 18:3).

4

So freeing or release from mimetic rivalry has much to do with the freedom of being able to imitate like the child. The freedom, that is, to imitate the Son of Man or to imitate anyone who imitates God the father.

Luke includes the dispute among the disciples, but places it at a different point in the gospel story. Jesus and the apostles are at table for the last supper. After Jesus and the apostles share the wine and bread, a dispute arises as to who among them should be regarded as the greatest. Here also Jesus instructs them that the greatest, the leader, is the one who serves, but he says nothing at all about giving his life as a *lutron* for many. It is likely that the author of Luke dropped that term from his account, for in general he avoids any obvious indication of sacrificial atonement.

Another important passage for this subject is Luke's account of the two disciples walking to Emmaus after the crucifixion of Jesus. A "visitor" or "stranger" falls in with them and begins talking to them. It turns out to be Jesus, but they do not recognize him until the end of the journey when he sits down at table and breaks bread with them (Lk 24:13-35). Along the way they tell the stranger that Jesus "was a prophet mighty in deed and word before God and all the people," and that they had hoped "he was the one to redeem Israel" (24:19, 21). The verb translated "to redeem" is *lutrousthai*, rare in the New Testament, but a form of it is used frequently in the Septuagint with a clearly sacrificial meaning. But it should be noticed that although the two disciples use this word, Jesus does not. He interprets the Scriptures to them (24:27), he becomes "known to them in the breaking of bread" (24:35), and before his ascension he "opened their minds to understand the Scriptures," teaching them again of his suffering and resurrection and that "repentance and forgiveness of sins should be preached in his name to all nations" (24:45-47).^[14] The sacrificial word is avoided in this sequence of the story of salvation. The same point could be underscored time and again in Luke and Acts. There is basically nothing about sacrifice and redemption in the classical biblical or universal religious meanings revolving around catharsis and atonement gained through the spilling of a victim's blood.

So we find in the Gospels not only that Jesus exposed mimetic rivalry, but that he himself is its antidote, the means of release or liberation from this predicament. If Matthew and Mark maintain a language of strong sacrificial connotations, Luke moves away from this kind of language, evidently deliberately, in order to underscore the imitation of Christ, the servant of all, through whose name--the power of the Christ-representation in the apostles--a conversion could occur which begins with repentance and forgiveness of sins. "And there is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven among men by which we must be saved" (Acts 4:12).

This conversion cannot take place on the basis of a religious or moral choice which is taken by considering rational alternatives. "[N]o purely intellectual process and no experience of a purely intellectual nature can secure the individual the slightest victory over mimetic desire and its victimage delusions. Intellection can achieve only displacement and substitution, though these may give individuals the sense of having achieved a victory. For there to be even the slightest degree of progress, the

victimage delusion (*méconnaissance victimaire*) must be vanquished on the most intimate level of experience...."[15] This *méconnaissance*, translated "delusion" in the English text, is the unconscious or preconscious refusal of the knowledge of the scapegoat mechanism and one's own complicity in it. The defeat of this misrecognition must cause to collapse, or at least shake, all interindividual oppositions--"everything that we can call our ego," our personality,' our temperament,' and so on." [16]

The key to significant human change is therefore a conversionary imitation. The Gospels "recommend imitating the sole model who never runs the danger--if we really imitate in the way that children imitate--of being turned into a fascinating rival." [17] To follow Christ entails a kind of renunciation, a relinquishing of that mimetic desire which seeks and searches on a path whose outcome is only the dead end of the obstacle, the wager that is always lost, the tomb that contains only the dead. [18]

Of course, Girard can obviously not speak of a healthy, nonviolent imitation and yet hold that it is necessary to give up mimetic desire in all its forms, which is absolutely essential to his anthropology. As he clarifies in an interview with Rebecca Adams, he does not mean "the renunciation of mimetic desire itself, because what Jesus advocates is mimetic desire. Imitate me, and imitate the father through me, he says, so it's twice mimetic...So the idea that mimetic desire itself is bad makes no sense." Girard's use of "mimetic desire" in the negative sense means only the type "that generates mimetic rivalry and, in turn, is generated by it." [19]

5

All victims of mimetic desire encounter the obstacle of the model-rival, and short of the gift of release from this bondage the outcome is death. "Every obstacle is a kind of tomb." [20] For the stone to be rolled back and the tomb to be found devoid of a dead body, a conversion is necessary--an overcoming of the victimage delusion on the most intimate level of experience.

3. The Mimetic Theory without Religion

My argument in part 3 of this essay is that to the extent one draws upon Girard's work but rejects the evident twofold structure of Girard's thought, the dialectic of mimetic predicament and the conversionary imitation of divine love, it is necessary to modify one's own thinking in the direction of the principal features of the Enlightenment heritage. In using the term "Enlightenment heritage" I have in mind especially the apprehension about religion or religious transcendence that first emerged forcefully in the 18th century and that had become thoroughly secularized by the 20th century, to the point that religion, particularly Christianity, is dismissed or ignored in intellectual settings and in discussions of public policy in which the claims of "enlightened" reason and morality are upheld. It follows that the Enlightenment heritage results in a certain rationalism, usually of a pragmatic or utilitarian sort. This utilitarian rationalism typically tilts in favor of viewing the individual person as autonomous and as possessing "certain inalienable rights," to quote a well-known document, but it usually has a corresponding social-political tendency to favor government programs that protect and enhance individual rights. [21] The possibility that this modern notion of the autonomous self has been influenced by the biblical understanding of God as the absolute subject, [22] or that the tradition of individual rights is rooted in biblical anthropology, is ignored or dismissed.

Here I will consider the approach of two critics influenced by Girard, both former students of his: Paisley

Livingston and Tobin Siebers. Both, at least in their work as thinkers and scholars, reject the Cross in Girard's thought. In *Models of Desire* Livingston proposes to begin the project of gaining a better grasp of desire as it is related to and rooted in human agents, attitudes, and social and historical contexts. Girard, he avers, has engaged in inconsistent discourse about mimetic desire. He tends to conflate all sorts of desire as "mimetic," although in certain instances he has distinguished a precultural form of desire, *la mimésis d'appropriation*, but this is not properly speaking mimetic desire. He quotes Girard's statement, "We might well decide to use the word 'desire' only in circumstances where the misunderstood mechanism of mimetic rivalry has imbued what was previously just an appetite or need with this metaphysical dimension."^[23] Livingston's concern in analyzing and refining the notion of desire is of a piece with his insistence that a psychology of mimesis should include taking into account a subject as moral agent who is not completely subsumed by mimetic attractions which are not conscious and rational, but who has meaningful attitudes and dispositions.^[24]

Livingston's delineation of a moral agent whose reflective input is an important part of life changes that can accurately be described as "decisions" or "choices" is an expression the two fundamental criticisms of Girard's psychology of mimesis that he proposes: (1) The mimetic system operative in all human societies and cultures is not as closed as Girard thinks. (2) The part of Girard's model that includes revelation and eschatology is not needed for an adequate psychology of mimesis. "...I do not need Girard's hypothesis that the scientific project is a byproduct' of the subterranean' Revelation being wrought by the Holy Scriptures."^[25] Concerning the first point, Livingston says that it "certainly has not been established that [the error of *méconnaissance* of scapegoating] was a universal feature of human cognition until the advent of Jesus Christ."^[26] As for the second point, the biblical tradition and specifically the Christian revelation have not brought about the transformation of our mimetic inheritance to the extent that Girard contends. He observes that there are many examples of this very *m,connaissance* in the contemporary social world, beginning with the economic institutions that are supposed to be a by-product of the Christian revelation."^[27]

6

I have my doubts as to whether Livingston is right about blindness to delusion and deception operative in economic institutions. I don't doubt that they are operative, but I don't think they go unrecognized. Not only Girard himself, but Jean-Pierre Dupuy, Paul Dumouchel, Eric Gans, Cesareo Bandera, and others have taken cognizance of the banished object, money as the excluded commodity, and the parallel displacement of desire to other goods, services, and human agents. In other words, we are more or less "onto" the scapegoat mechanism, but this knowledge has spread and informed public life less slowly than, say, the rights of the victim.

What I am most concerned with in Livingston's approach to the psychology of mimesis is his claim to be able to appropriate the main analytic thrust of Girard's mimetic anthropology without taking seriously his interpretation of of the relation of the Gospels to mythology. In fact, religion has no place at all in Livingston's proposal except as a limited social-psychological factor. The result is twofold. (1) He cannot view the existence of societies and individuals as caught up in a mimetic predicament. The individual, when all is said and done, is in principle a rational agent, at least to the extent that a "descriptive and explanatory program of meaningful attitudes" is possible.^[28] And human cultures and cultural expressions retain, in principle, a kind of openness which does not necessarily reproduce a victimary mechanism. There is no original sin. (2) Nor is there a need for revelation or transformation

from some source outside the human self or the human social order. He evinces a basic trust in our capacity to critique and "forestall the kind of sacrificial error that the [mimetic] theory identifies." [29]

There is no (original) sin and no need for salvation in any traditional religious sense. That much seems evident from Livingston's Enlightenment program of thought. Our human situation is somewhere in the middle, operating between problem/irrationality and solution/rationality. The possibility of this solution is immanent within the human species as it evolves and develops. This all seems clear. But so what? That is, isn't this the way it should be, especially for thinkers and researchers who have honed their particular talents to analyze the human condition and offer reasoned proposals for the good of their fellow human beings? Yes, affirms Livingston, it is the way it should be. Girard's original insights are logically separate from his theological claims [30] ---which is to say, one can have a sort of Girard without the Cross.

The upshot of this is not only to challenge Girard's version of his mimetic model by saying, in effect, "Our situation is not as bad as you say," but also to counter that "We can do something about our problems through the analytic and synthetic functions of reason."

But what does this position actually offer in the face of cycles of desire and revenge? I am not familiar with Livingston's textual example in *Models of Desire*, Brennu-Njalls Saga. However, the positive element of moral action that he draws from it has little to offer: Gunnarr refuses to seek compensation, putting a temporary halt to the cycle of vengeance, and Njall voluntarily offers compensation so that his friend would not be dishonored by lack of parity. This is indeed "a cooperative form of mimesis," but that is the way sacrificial and retributive systems have always worked when individuals act nobly within them. Noble and morally sensitive individuals use the system either to keep its retributive or scapegoating machinery from clicking into motion or to minimize the damage done. But I don't see a thing in the saga as he describes it that really calls the system into question; there is a certain fatalism about it. And, as Livingston himself notes, the halt in the rivalry, doubling, and revenge is but temporary. There is, in short, a lack of anthropological depth in Livingston's analysis and a lack of any sense of what would inspire a moral agent to break away from a system, or what would move an individual in a lynch mob not only to drop the stone he is about to throw but to proclaim to others that so-called "good" violence is not the right remedy for "bad" violence.

Tobin Siebers is an interdisciplinary literary critic whose particular forte is to locate himself in the "and" of literature and anthropology, literature and ethics, literature and politics. His thinking is not driven by Enlightenment rationalism in the same measure that Livingston's is, but he definitely casts a suspicious eye on the specific, and avowed, religious concerns and themes in Girard's proposals. To be sure, he thinks it is a major mistake for critics to deny the importance of religion and refuse to think about it. To expel religion would be to fail to recognize the "dynamic relation between acts of expulsion and the evolution of the sacred." He observes that it "is no accident that the metaphysicians of presence, who quest to eradicate the last survivals' of the sacred in language, place all language under the aegis of ,criture, the word for Scripture." [31] In fact, Siebers goes so far as to affirm that "Literary criticism should uphold a reverence for our inner lives." [32]

7

However, it is precisely the affirmation just quoted that indicates a shift from religion to literature for Siebers--or a shift from the Judeo-Christian tradition to literature approached with a certain secular vestige of religious devotion. He holds that Girard contradicts himself. Girard points out that Nietzsche's

madman in *The Gay Science* says humans have murdered God themselves, thus human beings, in this context, have both created and murdered gods. However, in his conclusion to *The Scapegoat* he holds that the "murderers...believe that their sacrifices are virtuous. They do not what they do, and we must forgive them." [33] The contradiction, for Siebers, evidently lies in the affirmation of the possibility of forgiveness, which has a transcendent source and inspiration, while adhering to the anthropological knowledge of human ignorance and guilt. The two cannot really coexist. And for Siebers this means that the religious dimension of Girard's work is an obstacle which should be bracketed. "Girard's personal beliefs should not blind us to the enormous power of his intuitions, especially within a community of scholars who advocate free thinking and pluralism." [34] The general, contextual antidote to Girard, in other words, is a community of "free thinking and pluralism." And essential to this context, if not the most important factor, is the role of literature and narrative, which Siebers describes religiously. Literary criticism should uphold a reverence for our inner lives. Literature "stirs astonishment, thoughtfulness, and memory," all traditionally associated with myth and ritual. In the sense of connection to life-experience, there "is no story that is not true." [35] Literature for Siebers takes over the very definition of Adam/Anthropos, which is rooted in the wellsprings of Western religion and philosophy. "To be human," says Siebers, "is to tell stories about ourselves and other human beings....The finally human is literature." [36]

There is no question that literature is important for understanding what human beings are, and the human propensity for telling stories and living in and out of them is especially significant. But literature cannot bear the weight that Siebers places on it. He holds to an ethics of literary criticism which supports a reverence for the life of the individual self within a more or less democratic, pluralistic society. He believes not only that we are story-telling beings, but that "memory and judgment" require us to keep on telling certain stories, such as those coming out of the Holocaust. [37] But Siebers does not offer his own anthropology beyond our linguistic, narrative existence which can so easily break out into mimetic rivalry and violence. He eschews a religious perspective on human beginnings and endings, so he leaves unanswered the question of whether we humans are caught in a predicament or not. He seems to believe not, because he does not propose that we do anything except to tell important stories and examine them critically and ethically for the challenges and possibilities they offer. It is a narrowly circumscribed position. Although he comes across as appreciating the importance of the fact of religion, historically and psychologically, he must finally take a position similar to Livingston's: there is no human predicament, rather a series of problems, above all the problem of violence; and there is no salvation or liberation, rather a criticism of language and literature that might shed some light and bring us closer together. This amounts of course to a severe dilution of Girard's mimetic anthropology, which is thoroughly radical in the sense that we humans are mimetic beings who are inevitably and characteristically trapped in mimetic rivalry, but who may be saved through mimesis, the mimesis of conversionary imitation of Christ, or of any model-mediator who reveals and enacts the love of God. There is no way that memory, judgment, and reason can rise above the *méconnaissance* of their own representations, except if their stories, precedents, and principles are converted to the standpoint of the innocent victim. When Saul/Paul the persecutor of Christians was traveling on the road to Damascus, the voice he heard was not his memory telling him to examine and appreciate Christian stories; it was not his judgment asking him to reconsider the cases of those whom he viewed as heretical or blasphemous or "wannabe" Jews; it was not his reason challenging him to become a better critic of his and others' moral actions. No, it was the voice of Jesus saying to him, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?" (Acts 9:4). In Paul's own account of his conversion, he says that the gospel he preached was not one he received from a human source, nor

was he taught it, "but it came through a revelation of Jesus Christ" (Galatians 1:12).

So where is the human source to turn us from our violence? Who will teach a new being, a renewed humankind, and what will this teaching be? Could it be a rationalist psychology of mimesis, or a narrative ethics of criticism? Girard's mimetic theory is radical, which means it must be religious. And this means that to get at its implications, to consider any alternatives which shed light on the human condition and human freedom, it is necessary to go through the Cross. One cannot go around it, over it, or under it; it is necessary to go through it.

8

4. The Mimetic Theory with Transcendental Revelation

Eric Gans takes religion seriously and does not formally dismiss or bracket it. However, whether it amounts to anything other than part of the formal structure of his theory of "generative anthropology" is an open question for me. Although he emphasizes the importance of the "material referent," the victim,[\[38\]](#) and has referred in his *Anthropoetics* columns to the diasparagmos or dismembering and dividing up of the victim, I am not sure that this is necessary to his theory.

The scene Gans describes in *Science and Faith* is that of a group of pre-humans whose appetites are excited by the animal that has just been felled by their blows. They each notice the appropriative movements that all the others are making and so each one aborts his gesture lest a battle among themselves erupt. This abortive gesture is the ostensive designation of the desired object. The ostensive gesture is imprinted in their memories and is the beginning of representation through language. This initial pointing to or showing of the designated object simultaneously contains the seed of the distinction between "it" or "that" and "us," and so is the first stage of human community properly understood. It implies the two further structural forms of language which would evolve. The designated object implies the imperative, the grammatical form of command, saying in effect that you must cooperate and you must not fight over the object. But for human being as *homo sapiens* to emerge it was necessary to reach a third structural form, the declarative, the grammatical form of statement, saying in effect that there is something other than the designated object--gods, community, prestige, property, power, ritual, story, etc.--everything associated with representation, that is, with language and culture, by which human beings protect themselves from the originary danger and attempt to find meaning.

This is an interesting and meaningful originary hypothesis, and its structure is the same as Girard's model.[\[39\]](#) Of course, Gans would certainly not want to restrict the originary scene to a hunting situation. But a reasonable inference from what he says in *Science and Faith* and many of his *Anthropoetics* columns is that the designated object could be anything. He has lately mentioned that he will return to focus on the dividing up of the victim, but the material consequences of this for the formal argument of his theory are not apparent. On the other hand, for Girard the originary scene must center on the human victim as designated object. Only this hypothesis would account for the power of the cultural system based on supplements or substitutions. The universal taboos revolve around murder, particularly parricide and incest, the two most threatening dangers to the order and peace of human community. It is simply more hypothetically reasonable and elegant to hold that in sacrifice, for example, an animal could

be substituted for a human victim, or that a gift could be devoted in place of animal or human, but the other way around is difficult to conceive. Why would a human community increase the danger to itself by substituting one of its members for a non-human victim or object?

It is significant that Gans predicates two and only two fundamental revelations: "that of the event at the origin of man and that of the burning bush, which gave birth to the conception of the one God that is shared by all Western religions and their secular derivatives." [40] The revelation at the burning bush (Exodus 3) presupposes the ostensive dimension of language and includes the imperative and declarative. The revelatory advance it achieves is "the separability of the exchange of representations from the exchange of things." [41] The "big man" had always been necessary in human culture. As the given community's representation of the designated object as well as the source of imperatives and expressions of sacred truth, he had been the one who, in principle, divided up the goods. He was, of course, both divider and divided, ruler and scapegoat whose power and authority lay in a delayed sentence of execution, as Girard has noted. He was the sacred center of presence and absence, of actualization and deferral. In the burning bush episode a new revelation enters human history: the "big man," God, or God through Moses, is no longer needed to divide up the goods. My own way of putting this is that the revelation of *ehyeh asher ehyeh* to Moses ("I am who I am" or "I will be what/who I will be" or "I will become what/whom I will become") as the one who commissions him to lead the Hebrews out of Egypt is a negative witness against the *méconnaissance* of the basis of culture. The signs and symbols of Israel would henceforth register a "No!" to all systems of the visible sacred in order to affirm a vision of human liberation and human community based on covenant and law.

9

There is a Talmudic story about the role of the sages in relation to revelation and supernatural intervention. As the rabbis were arguing over a topic, some appealed to miraculous intervention. Rabbi Eliezer went all the way and called upon "heaven" (God) to prove he was right, and a heavenly voice said "The Halakah [the oral-Mishnaic law] is always with him." Rabbi Jeremiah, unfazed, said, "The Law was given us from Sinai. We pay no attention to a heavenly voice. For already from Sinai the Law said, By a majority you are to decide." [42] Rabbi Jeremiah's dictum was a homiletical "stretch," as we say, based on Exodus 33:2, but its logic is implicit in the burning bush revelation as interpreted by Gans. The separability of the exchange of words from the exchange of things means that there should no longer be a "big man," the god or hero/scapegoat, charged with sacral power and interfering in human responsibilities. Human responsibilities for Israel are grounded and circumscribed by the Torah.

Thus the Christian revelation centered in Christ and the New Testament Gospels is simply a further working out of what had already been fully revealed. Christ is a reminder of the victim in the originary scene, and through Christianity the disclosure of human equality, understood as mutual access to language, is spread throughout the world. But I am uneasy about revelation in Gans' theory: it remains at the level of the transcendental. That is, the elegance of "minimality" is based on the a priori of language which is not internally and necessarily connected with what is real. Or to qualify the last statement, the emergence of language is real but it is not tied to human victimization or to any specific object; any object of desire will do, so it seems. The scenario of its emergence simply follows the necessity of reason to supply reasons or principles from language itself. To put it formulaically:

(1) Something means (2) Something is meant (3) Something = (1) Signifier (2) Signified (3) Referent.

Another way to put it: **(1) Object (2) Mediation through sign (3) Uttering of sign = (1) Victim (2) Sign as sound-image (3) Utterance which defers desire for object-victim.**

The revelation is only in the most formal sense tied to a real event or series of events stemming from a predicament. The revelation of the originary scene reveals the predicament and overcomes it at the same time. The deferral of violence through language already contains the revelation of the detachment of words from things and universal access of all to language; but what is contained in the twofold sense of content, initially implicit, and being kept within limits, is released in the founding revelations of Judaism and Christianity. The problem of mimesis becomes much less significant, although it does help to explain the hold of Christ on Christians, whereas the Jews have had the revelation through Moses and the Torah to enable them to sort out and control mimesis.

In my conclusion concerning the work of Livingston and Siebers I asked whether the perspective and implications of Girard's own development of the mimetic model could be properly understood and appreciated apart from a real engagement with its religious foundation. It is a radical theory, i.e., religious. Although Gans is a critic of religion who has very constructive things to say about the history, texts, symbols, and ideas of Judaism and Christianity (e.g., the doctrine of the Trinity), I wonder whether his generative anthropology has lost the really powerful roots of Girard's mimetic theory by transcendentalizing, in effect, the originary scene. The dialectical poles of Girard's thinking are mimetic predicament and mimetic liberation. Has Gans supplemented them with the signified as imagined object of desire and the signifier as word-concept which points to absence and defers desire and violence? For him too is there no salvation because there is no predicament, but simply a series of problems to be solved against the backdrop of language?

11

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2. Girard, *Things Hidden Since the Foundation of the World*. Research undertaken in collaboration with Jean-Michel Oughourlian and Guy Lefort, trs. S. Bann and M. Meteer (Stanford: Stanford University, 1987), 84-104.[\(back\)](#)
- 10
3. An exemplary scapegoat myth which is only thinly disguised are the versions of a Venda myth about Python and his two wives, analyzed by Girard in "A Venda Myth Analyzed," in Richard J. Golsan, *René Girard and Myth* (NY: Garland, 1993), 151-79. A myth in which collective violence is somewhat less obvious is that of the supernatural, anthropomorphic beings who are the ancestors of the Ojibwa clans. It is reproduced in Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Totemism Today* and discussed by Girard in *Things Hidden*, 105-12 and in "Generative Scapegoating" in R. Hamerton Kelly, ed., *Violent Origins* (Stanford: Stanford University, 1987), 95-103.[\(back\)](#)
4. See James G. Williams, "On Job and Writing: Derrida, Girard, and the Remedy-Poison," *Scandinavian*

Journal of the Old Testament 7 (1993), 34-39 for discussion and critique of Derrida's analysis of the *pharmakon* in Plato.[\(back\)](#)

5. Except that the individual has a potential for liberation from the mimetic predicament which is much greater than societies and traditions, whose unconscious scapegoat mechanisms are precisely what binds them and makes them cohere in a system. This will be taken up below.[\(back\)](#)

6. Girard, *Things Hidden*, 291.[\(back\)](#)

7. *Ibid.*, 290.[\(back\)](#)

8. *Ibid.*, 413.[\(back\)](#)

9. *Ibid.*, 419.[\(back\)](#)

10. *Ibid.* In fact, in many of the psalms of the Hebrew Bible the *shatan* or *satan* is simply the human accuser or adversary, the one(s) persecuting the speaker.[\(back\)](#)

11. *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel. Self and Other in Literary Structure*, tr. Y. Freccero (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1966), 290.[\(back\)](#)

12. Kafka, *Hochzeitvorbereitungen auf dem Lande und andera Prosa aus dem Nachlass*, ed. M. Brod (NY: Schocken, 1970), 42 (#26).[\(back\)](#)

13. *Things Hidden*, 430.[\(back\)](#)

14. The word translated "forgiveness," *aphesis*, is similar to *lutron* in that the root meaning is "release."[\(back\)](#)

12

15. *Things Hidden*, 399; emphasis mine.[\(back\)](#)

16. *Ibid.*, 400.[\(back\)](#)

17. *Ibid.*, 430.[\(back\)](#)

18. *Ibid.*, 430-31.[\(back\)](#)

19. "Violence, Difference, Sacrifice: A Conversation with René Girard," *Religion and Literature* 25.2 (1993), 23. See also *Quand ces choses commenceront... Entretiens avec Michel Treguer* (Paris: arl, a, 1994), 70-71, 76.[\(back\)](#)

20. *Things Hidden*, 431.[\(back\)](#)

21. These features of Enlightenment thinking and attitudes are the ones most prominent in 20th century U.S. and western European cultures. However, in the 18th century the "enlightenment" was often associated with rejection of Descartes' thought and absolute rule, particularly if an absolute sovereign could "reduce the power of the Church, encourage religious toleration, get rid of Jesuits and other monks, abolish torture and the death penalty," etc. Derek Beales, "The Enlightened Despot," a review of Kenneth

Maxwell, *Pombal: Paradox of the Enlightenment* by Kenneth Maxwell (Cambridge: Cambridge University, nd), *New York Review of Books* 43,7, April 18, 1996, 34.[\(back\)](#)

22. See Girard, *Resurrection from the Underground: Feodor Dostoevsky*, tr. James G. Williams (NY: Crossroad, forthcoming).[\(back\)](#)

23. Girard, *Things Hidden*, 296; Livingston, *Models of Desire. René Girard and the Psychology of Mimesis* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University, 1992), 103.[\(back\)](#)

24. Livingston, *ibid.*, 172-4.[\(back\)](#)

25. *Ibid.*, xviii.[\(back\)](#)

6. *Ibid.*, 134.[\(back\)](#)

27. *Ibid.*[\(back\)](#)

28. *Ibid.*, 174.[\(back\)](#)

29. *Ibid.*[\(back\)](#)

30. *Ibid.*, xviii.[\(back\)](#)

31. Siebers, "Language, Violence, and the Sacred: A Polemical Survey of Critical Theories," in *To Honor René Girard*, ed. by members of Dept. of French and Italian, Stanford University (Saratoga, CA: ANMA LIBRI, 1986), 217. See also Siebers, *The Ethics of Criticism* (Ithaca: Cornell University, 1988): "The expulsion of religion for its apparent narrowness and intolerance repeats the crime of which modern thought accuses religion" (155).[\(back\)](#)

32. *Cold War Criticism and the Politics of Skepticism* (New York: Oxford University, 1993), 157.[\(back\)](#)

13

33. Girard, "Dionysus versus the Crucified," *Modern Language Notes* 99 (1984), 828-35, and *The Scapegoat*, tr. Y. Freccero (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1986), 212.[\(back\)](#)

34. *To Honor René Girard*, 217.[\(back\)](#)

35. *Morals and Stories* (New York: Columbia University, 1992), 210.[\(back\)](#)

36. *The Ethics of Criticism*, 240.[\(back\)](#)

37. *Cold War Criticism*, 141.[\(back\)](#)

38. *Science and Faith: The Anthropology of Revelation*, 3-4.[\(back\)](#)

39. *Things Hidden*, 84-138.[\(back\)](#)

40. *Science and Faith*, 73.[\(back\)](#)

41. *Ibid.*, 37; emphasis his.[\(back\)](#)

42. Baba Metsia 59b, quoted in C.G. Montefiore and H. Loewe, eds., *A Rabbinic Anthology* (NY: Schocken, 1974), 340-41.[\(back\)](#)

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Two Footnotes: On the Double Necessity of Girard and Gans

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The first man who, having enclosed a piece of land, thought of saying, "this is mine" and found a people simple enough to believe him, was the true founder of civil society. How many crimes, wars, murders; how much misery and horror the human race would have been spared if someone had pulled up the stakes and cried out to his fellow men: "Beware of listening to this impostor. You are lost if you forget that the fruits of the earth belong to everyone and the earth itself belongs to no one." --Rousseau, *On the Origin of Inequality*, Part II

Hence the rigid Socinians take our four gospels to be clandestine works, fabricated about a century after Jesus Christ, and carefully hidden from the gentiles for another century: works, they say, crudely written by coarse men, who for long addressed themselves only to the common people. [...] This sect, though fairly widespread, is today as obscure as were the first gospels. It is more difficult to convert them in that they believe only in their reason. The other Christians fight them only with the sacred voice of the scriptures: so it is impossible for the two parties, being always enemies, ever to be reconciled. --Voltaire, "Gospel," *Philosophical Dictionary*

I

This essay arises from the call for a discussion of Girard vis-a-vis Generative Anthropology, from the chance encounter with Girard's name in some random reading, and from some comments about Girard recently registered in the electronic forum of the Anthropoetics circle.

Let me say right away that I cannot conceive of a useful Generative Anthropology that is not conjoined with Girard's discovery of the scapegoat mechanism, nor can I conceive of the scapegoat mechanism arising except out of the prior existence of Gans' abortive gesture of appropriation. Together, Fundamental Anthropology and Generative Anthropology tell the story of human consciousness. That consciousness begins in the abortive gesture of appropriation and it passes through the production of the scapegoat mechanism in the sacrificial crisis. Modern consciousness contains the traces of both of these events. Both Fundamental Anthropology and Generative Anthropology are therefore necessary for a

complete understanding of modern consciousness. But the intuitions of the scapegoat mechanism and of the abortive gesture of appropriation belong together in yet another way: both lay claim to a positive cognition about human nature and both therefore breast the tide of post-Enlightenment thinking.

2

The *philosophes* and their intellectual progeny, as I hope that the citations from Rousseau and Voltaire adequately suggest, tend to express themselves in remarkably sacrificial language. Rousseau, to take him first, cannot account for the origin of civil society without creating a paradigmatic victimary scenario: the malefactor duped his contemporaries, Rousseau claims, who failed to understand that he was making victims of them; meanwhile, Rousseau is making a victim of the malefactor and is urging what amounts to a retroactive immolation. He got it. It was called the French Revolution and it included Robespierre's Terror. Voltaire's *Philosophical Dictionary* (1764) strikes me as an excuse to attack Christianity with witty but pointless satire. The other subjects serve the function of making it appear as though Christianity is not the only subject. Thus Voltaire, like Rousseau, finds it difficult to philosophize without victims. *Polemos* cunningly displaces *Logos*. No one, I think, who has read *The Scapegoat* (1981) with an open mind, can read the *Dictionary* without feeling a bit embarrassed by Voltaire's certainty that the Gospels are merely another form of superstition. Reason and superstition can never be reconciled, says Voltaire. But "reconciliation" remains an ironic lexeme in Voltaire's account of the Evangelists; not, however, in the way that Voltaire himself intended. One might ask, is Voltaire's cult of an unassailable reason itself reasonable? Or is it simply dogmatic anti-dogma with little real philosophical content? I suspect that Voltaire has been drawn into a stichomythia with the institution of religion in which, absorbed by the confrontation, he has forgotten to philosophize.

On the other hand, Voltaire's usage of the label "Socinian," insofar as it means people who are all at once gnostics and skeptics, covers the contemporary academic mindset rather well, and thus has a value for other discourses than his own. Rousseau is a "Socinian" in Voltaire's sense and so is Voltaire himself. I might say then that the Enlightenment "Socinians" got what they wanted, the Revolution and the Terror.

Two other thinkers central to the Enlightenment also begin with what amounts to a sacrificial gesture, although they seem not to rely on it quite so much as Rousseau or Voltaire. I am thinking of René Descartes' evil spirit, who performs the same function in Cartesian epistemology as the malefactor does in Rousseauvian sociology. The Cartesian Ego finds certainty and stability by locking horns with the evil spirit and expelling it. I am also thinking of Immanuel Kant's Transcendental Ego, "Das Ich-Denke," from which every genuinely *human* characteristic has been carefully expelled, making of the Kantian critique a bizarre attempt to solve the problem of human specificity by the reduction of the human to the non-human, to a thing without appetite, without desire. Rousseau's naïve spectators likewise seem bereft of appetite and desire and in this sense resemble the sessile-vegetable "Ich-Denke" of Kant, since they never imitate but simply submit to the consummated gesture of appropriation. Rousseau wants his readers to imitate him in liquidating the malefactor, a program which implies that he thinks of his readers the same way he thinks of the spectators in his primordial tableau, namely, as lacking appetite or desire until he himself endows them with these. (Rousseau thus sees himself as uniquely human.)

3

Descartes, on the other hand, confirmed Scripture as a value, practiced thinking as a kind of desire, and invited others to verify his conclusions by applying his method. There is something chatty, gossipy, and positively human about Descartes' books, so that the philosophy, however abstract it becomes, always

remains in continuity with ordinary life. Descartes' books exhibit passion (does this seem a strange thing to say?) and show a pronounced reluctance to jettison tradition without first examining it. Stephen Toulmin says, in his *Cosmopolis: The Hidden Agenda of Modernity* (1990) that Descartes had been deeply shocked, while still a student, by the assassination of Henry IV in 1610. The assassination, coming in the context of the fierce religious wars of seventeenth century Europe, motivated the philosopher to seek non-dogmatic foundations for knowledge. We can understand Descartes as seeking a type of certitude that would not issue in the politics of murder. Voltaire, in this context, resembles Descartes without any residual respect for religion and with the thirst for certitude converted into a manic penchant to negate.

All of which tempts me to quote Blake, and so I shall:

Mock on, Mock on Voltaire, Rousseau:
 Mock on, Mock on, 'tis all in vain!
 You throw the sand against the wind,
 And the wind blows it back again.

The contemporary scene, against the nescient dogmatism of which Girard and Gans stand conjoined, accommodates so many Voltaires and Rousseaux that hardly any room remains for anyone else. Postmodernism, as the academic avant-garde currently names itself, far from being the cutting edge of anything, only amounts, as I see it, to so much Voltaire and Rousseau redux. Let me offer a case in point, that of William Irwin Thompson, whose *At the Edge of History* (1972) and *Passages about Earth* (1973) were among the earliest accounts, by an American writer, of what would soon take the name of postmodernism. My discussion of Thompson will lead to my discussion of Girard. Ihab Hassan and various North American clones of Jean-François Lyotard have gotten the credit for inaugurating the discourse of postmodernism in the United States, but Thompson came first and deserves the honor. Indeed, Thompson's themes have long since become clichés, if, that is, they were not already clichés - of neo-Marxism and Theosophy - when he first deployed them; thus even when they achieve the perception and eloquent expression of a Thompson, the postmodernists strike me as a bit seedy and outworn. For Thompson, in any case, Tradition is breaking up; knowledge is not what it used to be back when Newton monopolized the description of the universe. Authentic wisdom is no longer to be sought in the West, which long ago forfeited its legitimacy; it is to be sought in the East, and particularly in the East, whether of the mind or of the world, as communicated to us by R. D. Laing and Joseph Campbell. Ignoring the fact that, at the end of her quest Thomas Pynchon's protagonist Oedipa Maas finds a paradigmatic sacrificial scene, Thompson recommends *The Crying of Lot 49* (1966) as a just representation of the post-historical predicament in which, as in Heisenberg, the obtrusion of the self alters everything and, as in Heraclitus, no river is ever for two moments the same. *Ipsa eo*, everything today constitutes a crisis to which no real solution exists; the only certitude is that there is no certitude, and nothing remains stable except the appropriation of the earth by the industrialist scions of the malefactor. More recently, looking for a means of resolving the crisis, Thompson (who thus resembles half of the faculty in any English department) has embraced the Gaia hypothesis and has flirted with a burgeoning goddess worship.

4

In *Imaginary Landscape: Making Worlds of Myth and Science* (1989), as he did in *The Time Falling Bodies Take to Light* (1981), Thompson once again discovers a great store of Theosophical wisdom in myths and fairy tales. Such narratives give us a history of consciousness in which the present, by

reimmersing itself in the ritual forms of the past, redeems itself from an epoch of violence and repression, redeems itself from alienation. The widespread popular interest in myth, exemplified by Joseph Campbell's success on PBS in the 1980s, indicates a massive dissatisfaction with existing explanations of life and the world. That many people today are turning to ancient sacred narrative to find their way out of the labyrinthine impasse of civilization constitutes, from Thompson's viewpoint, an entirely healthy sign. Why then, given the market-success of its topoi, does the New Age Neo-Marxist utopia not appear? It does not appear because vested interests (Rousseau's malefactor again) want the wisdom of ancient sacred culture to remain inaccessible to the contemporary consciousness; worse yet, these repressive voices want modern people to think that the origin, which Thompson would recover, was not idyllic, as Rousseau said that it was before evil appeared, but replete with its own special violence. "And so," Thompson writes, "literary anthropologists like Robert Ardrey or René Girard like to see the act of killing as the essential culture-creating act" (145). These apologists for the old regime *like* to see things this way.

The linkage of murder and culture strikes Thompson not only as erroneous, but as downright conspiratorial and evil. Any anthropology that challenges the orthodox "emergence" theory of culture, to which Thompson in his own theosophical way subscribes, strongly scandalizes him. The idea that culture begins with murder thus constitutes, from this perspective, the illegitimate projection of twentieth century violence, by apologists of a corrupt regime, backward into a past that, somehow, escaped violence.

At last, then, a solution to the contemporary crisis of an inherently violent order does suggest itself, namely, a revisitation of originary pacificity. And the way forward turns out to be the way backward. Thompson's argument goes something like this: While innovation is unavoidable, it fosters crisis. Industrialism and now cybernetics acquire a momentum of their own and deliver a modicum of good to the societies in which they occur, but they also circumscribe life in drastic ways which, however, remain unknown to those who are dazzled and lulled by novelty and material abundance. Industrialism and cybernetics thus make people unhappy but leave them in ignorance about the source of their unhappiness. Crisis thus provokes consciousness by making people dimly aware of their secret unhappiness, but also deforms it, restricting it in a concentrated dogmatic vision which fails to grasp the linkage between material satisfaction and spiritual depletion. Of course, this is simply Marx's idea of false consciousness given a New Age twist. Humanity has, in effect, yielded itself, its autonomy and its creativity, to its machines. What will ultimately bring the machines back under the control of their creators, Thompson argues, is a revival of the primitive mentality that predates mechanistic and cybernetic civilization. Indeed, the *real* future entails a deemphasis of the technical and a revival of the spiritual. We must stop thinking in Newtonian, linear terms, such as those which still dominate modern thought even in cybernetics, the most advanced science of our age: We must "back into [...] innovation," Thompson says, and we will do this by "work[ing] to reachieve consciousness in the context of unconsciousness by going into trance" (146).

5

The artist especially is an adept of trance-like states of consciousness, and in his role as shaman, the artist has really only one message for the present: "*We slay with technology and save the victim with art*" (146). And myth is art *par excellence*. Thompson places his faith in Campbell at his most theosophical, in Carlos Castaneda and the Yaqui way of knowledge, in the Doris Lessing of *Shikasta*, in Marija Gimbutas' theory of a pre-Indo European matriarchy, and in the "Deep Ecology" movement. Ardrey and

Girard upset the idyll by daring to put art in complicity with slaying; Girard in particular proclaims "a linguistic and technological emergence in which unconscious and instinctive killing, the chemical cannibalism of one microbe by another or the eating of one animal by another, becomes conscious and articulated in image and sound, art and ritual" (146). And this, for Thompson, my living representative of contemporary attitudes, is intolerable.

Thompson interprets Girard, on the basis of his cursory and dogmatic understanding, as an apologist for, even an advocate of, the originary murder. In a footnote, Thompson does to Girard what Rousseau does to the malefactor in *The Origin of Inequality*, Part II. In 1987, writes Thompson, he visited a conference on "Origins" at Stanford, where "Professor Girard talked about 'the lie that is mythology'" (145). This would have been the conference that gave rise to Robert G. Hamerton-Kelley's *Violent Origins* (1987), where Girard confronts several severe critics of scapegoat hermeneutics. Girard, Thompson claims, "is quite literal, fundamentalist, and inflated in his presentation of the self, for he sees symbolism as a code that only he has cracked. Like many literary code-crackers, Freudian or otherwise, he tends to see the same story in all stories. [...] His is a very Catholic philosophy in which all pre-Christian mythologies are inadequate and murderous. It is a philosophy that describes itself, for mythology is the victim, and in killing it, he gives birth to the culture of his school" (145). Thompson adds irately that "the hidden agenda of the conference was to contribute to the apotheosis of Girard" (145). The claim of knowledge - this is the instinctive and stereotyped response of the contemporary mentality to any positive assertion not clothed in the rhetoric of one of the fashionable isms - is tantamount to a plan for self-apotheosis. All claimants to knowledge are Oedipus, and like good Thebans, contemporary orthodox Socinians are duty-bound to expel them, to take down all the parvenus. (I recall that Jonathan Culler uses similar vituperative language in his passing accounts of Girard in *On Deconstruction* [1981] and *Framing the Sign* [1987?]: for Culler, Girard is pestiferously a "priest." But what then is Jonathan Culler?)

Girard himself, who emphasizes not his own originality but rather his immense debt to the Bible, can defend himself against such charges. "Human culture," he writes in *The Scapegoat*, "is predisposed to the permanent concealment of its origins in collective violence. Such a definition of culture enables us to understand the successive stages of an entire culture as well as the transition from one stage to the next by means of a crisis similar to those we have traced in myths and to those we have traced in history during periods of frequent persecutions" (100). Girard notes that knowledge of scapegoating itself becomes the target of expulsion during periods of crisis, such as the one that Thompson and other articulators of the postmodern sensibility claim prevails today. The present, for Thompson, is a reenactment of the mythic battle between Tiamat and Marduk, with Gaia-worshippers and Campbellian revealers of ancient wisdom filling the role of Tiamat and all of the usual suspects - patriarchy and the military industrial complex - filling the role of Marduk. Only this time, the outcome will be reversed, Tiamat-Gaia will win, and the whole vile world of the Marduk-oppressors, as it now appears, will abruptly vanish. Vilifying Girard is one of Thompson's rhetorical contributions to the victory.

6

I find this a pity for a personal reason. Despite my criticisms of him, which are real enough, I have nevertheless been an admirer of Thompson since I read *At the Edge of History* shortly after it appeared. I read him long before I ever read Girard or Gans or had even heard of them. Indeed, I still recommend him as the best of the theoreticians of postmodernism, more informed about history and anthropology than any other. My purpose has not been to cut down Thompson, although I fear I have done so, but only to show that the most respectable of avant-garde thinkers, and one who consistently deplores violence,

can still succumb to the ancient pattern of the stichomythia, and that the chosen partner in that polemic is, strange to say, the author of *Violence and the Sacred*, *The Scapegoat*, and so forth. I find that Thompson's thinking, like Rousseau's and Voltaire's, requires a victim.

I came across Girard's name in another venue, but coincidentally once again in a footnote, at about the same time that I encountered it in Thompson. We all know Milan Kundera as the author of *The Joke* and *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*. I note that *The Joke* especially has the form of a persecution narrative; or rather, it is a Passion-narrative that reveals how persecution operates, how a joke can become, in the eyes of the persecutors, a criminal offense. But in *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, virtue also becomes outcast, and the protagonist, the doctor, again reenacts the Passion. Kundera's "Essay in Nine Parts" called *Testaments Betrayed* appeared in English earlier this year (1995) and consists of a sequence of critical meditations on modern literature and music. Franz Kafka, Igor Stravinsky, and Leos Janacek figure prominently in these meditations, and Kundera focuses on the ways in which these three arch-modernists have been misunderstood and frequently slandered by contemporary exegetes. In a manner of speaking, Kundera even links artistic insight to persecution and shows how this is especially the case in the twentieth century.

Let us take Kafka first. Beginning with Max Brod, Kundera argues, Kafka's critics explicated his work by applying to it various crude allegories that had the effect of assimilating Kafka's achievement to the exegete. Brod, for example, in effect makes the entirety of Kafka a roman-à-clef in which, of course, Brod himself figures prominently. Highly formalized, almost ritualistic commentaries on Kafka ("Kafkology") led to the disappearance of Kafka as himself, as a writer whose work has a specific content which constitutes a commentary on the real world, and to his replacement by various simulacra whose purpose was to make their original understandable to an audience fully determined not to understand him. Freudians and Marxians have dominated those regions of Kafkology left open by the roman-à-clef followers of Brod. (I can remember, from graduate school, a long lecture about "The Metamorphosis" which turned - no pun intended - on the appearance of the word *Verkehr* in the denouement of the story, from which the interpreter spun out the usual theory of Kafka as the recorder of "our" sexual repression. I wonder, what do readers of *Anthropoetics* make, casually, of Gregor Samsa surrounded by his irate and hostile family? What do they make of the apple-missile hurled at Gregor by his sister?)

7

All of the misunderstanding of Kafka - the sacrifice of Kafka to "Kafka" - has a bearing on the shape of history over the last, let us say, three or four hundred years. In order to understand how Kundera's argument comes around finally to a meeting-of-minds with scapegoat hermeneutics it will be necessary to summarize this history. According to Kundera, the modern period has two halves, the first going back to the early eighteenth century, the second having its beginnings in the mid-nineteenth century. The aesthetic of the modern period also has two halves and the first half was eclipsed by the second half.

But commencing with Marcel Proust, certain dissentient writers of the second half rediscovered the first half, thereby inaugurating a third phase, or an ironic epilogue to the second of the two halves. "The great novelists of the post-Proust period [...] were highly sensitive to the nearly forgotten aesthetic of the novel previous to the nineteenth century: they incorporated essayistic reflection into the art of the novel; made composition freer; reclaimed the right to digression; breathed the spirit of the nonserious and of play into the novel; repudiated the dogmas of psychological realism in creating characters without trying to

compete (like Balzac) with *l'état civil*--with the state registry of citizens; and above all: they refused any obligation to give the reader the illusion of reality" (75). The dissentient moderns, the post-Proustians, Kundera is saying, characteristically dispensed with illusions and sought a bedrock of human truths by reviving old techniques which seemed to them freer than the accepted modern techniques. These writers were programmatically opposed to dissimulation and they disobeyed the ritual formulas for novel-writing, which they consciously deritualized.

Kundera identifies the penchant for illusionery with Romanticism. In addition, he sees the social realism of Balzac and the naturalism of Zola as direct outgrowths of Romanticism. This is highly arguable, of course, but it is subservient to what, as it appears to me, is Kundera's real point: that an aesthetic orthodoxy appeared which sought to preserve itself and to repress praxeological divergence.

Dissentient twentieth century composers also rediscovered the aesthetic past, Kundera goes on to say. Contemporary critics consistently misunderstood and frequently attacked these composers, often under the rubric of their supposed formalism. The charge of formalism is paradoxical, of course, since in practice it always refers to the violation of a certain form considered by its partisans to be *de rigueur*. As examples of how the violation of form can provoke ire out of all proportion, Kundera gives the cases of Stravinsky and Janacek. At one point, Kundera summarizes a lengthy diatribe by Theodor Adorno against the musical malefactor Stravinsky. Stravinsky's music was full of violence, Adorno argued; it violated the older music that it appropriated, in scores like *Pulcinella* and *The Fairy's Kiss*, for no other reason than to abuse it. Inhuman would be the term for describing Stravinsky's compositions, inhuman and inexcusably recalcitrant in declaring its sins, in Adorno's vehement opinion. Kundera writes that "Adorno depicts the situation in music as if it were a political battlefield: Schoenberg the positive hero, the representative of progress [...] and Stravinsky the negative hero, the representative of restoration" (65). Kundera records that "the Stravinskian refusal to see subjective confession as music's *raison d'être* becomes one target of Adorno's critique. [...] Stravinsky's desire to objectivize music is a kind of tacit accord with the capitalist society that crushes human subjectivity" (65). Later Kundera gives a direct quotation from Adorno: Stravinsky's works "*in their own way trained men to something that was soon methodically inflicted on them at the political level*" (79). In other words, Stravinsky's music led to fascism, for which the dissonant harmonization of Pergolesi's tunes can therefore be blamed. Worse than this, Stravinsky never poured forth the contrition which every bourgeois owes to the representatives of the progressive cause. The Petersburg aristocrat will not comply with the wishes of his detractors; he will not admit the existence of just criticism. Adorno's ponderous musicology turns out to be the Oedipus myth, with Stravinsky as the cause of the plague.

8

Janacek also suffered misunderstanding and vilification. Like Stravinsky, in Kundera's reading, Janacek undertook a critique of Romanticism as the cult of false expression, of sentimentality. But Janacek "did not reproach the Romantics for having talked about feelings; he reproached them for having falsified them" (184). One of the supreme achievements of Janacek, in works like *Katya Kabanova* (1921) or *The Makropoulos Affair* (1925), is that he shows the *confusion of emotions* that *in life* accompanies tragic events; Janacek is, in other words, an accurate recorder of the dissolution of structure that accompanies a crisis. His operas have a kind of anthropological precision. It is here that Kundera appends a footnote: "At last," he writes, "an occasion to cite René Girard; his *Mensonge romantique et vérité romanesque* is the best book I have ever read on the art of the novel" (184). I am exaggerating the case, of course, but I do find the occurrence of this footnote extraordinary and I am sorely, very sorely, tempted to argue that

this fleeting reference to Girard provides the fulcrum of Kundera's delightfully meandering argument. That would dangerously resemble a deconstruction of Kundera performed by some graduate student from, say, Irvine, but here is my case anyway. The twentieth century has been the century of rigid orthodoxy in all spheres of life, from the political to the aesthetic, and this orthodoxy maintained itself, not only in the totalitarian states but elsewhere too, by various strategic redeployments of the scapegoat mechanism. Hence the spectacle of Adorno lashing out against Stravinsky, a tableau recreated with bloody consequences by the Zhdanovite persecutions of the late 1940s. (Thus while Stravinsky's neo-classicism can hardly be said to have "led to fascism," Adorno's pseudo-moralistic criticism does have a undeniable affiliation to the "anti-formalist" pogroms of Soviet cultural policy.)

Although he uses little or no Girardian terminology, Kundera's thinking is nevertheless quite close to Girard's. Kundera even makes use of his own version of scapegoat hermeneutics. Kundera's name for the twentieth century scapegoat mechanism is "the tribunal," a term he takes from Kafka's *The Trial*. "Tribunal: this does not signify the juridical institution for punishing people who have violated the laws of the state; the tribunal (or court) in Kafka's sense is a power that judges, that judges because it is a power; its power and nothing but its power is what confers legitimacy on the tribunal. [...] The trial brought by the tribunal is always *absolute*; meaning that it does not concern an isolated act, a specific crime (theft, fraud, rape), but rather concerns the character of the accused in its entirety" (227). One might easily apply this analysis to Thompson's footnote about Girard: Thompson will not be satisfied to say that he finds the scapegoat hermeneutic unconvincing for this or that epistemological or sociological reason; he bypasses any particular criticism of the approach and launches, instead, into a condemnation of the interpreter. Girard, with whose character "in its entirety" Thompson appears to be concerned, is guilty of attempted self-apotheosis and of trying "to make up for the injustice of the fact that Derrida has wrongly taken the fame that Girard feels properly belongs to him" (Thompson 146). Perhaps Thompson, who at least recognizes that resentment can motivate behavior, is scandalized by Girard for the very same reason that Janacek's contemporaries once let themselves be scandalized by him. According to Kundera: "From the early years of this century, official Czech musicology disdained [Janacek]. Knowing no other musical gods but Smetana, nor other laws than the Smetanesque, the national ideologues were irritated by his otherness. The pope of Prague musicology, Professor Nejedly, who late in his life, in 1948, became minister and omnipotent ruler of culture in Stalinized Czechoslovakia, took with him into his bellicose senility only two great passions: Smetana worship and Janacek vilification" (195). Girard, like Janacek, is certainly guilty of otherness. I would like to say of Girard what Bill Moyers once said of Thompson during a television interview some twenty years ago, that he is a silver-throated lark among the keening pterodactyls.

9

Once again, Fundamental Anthropology - that is to say, scapegoat hermeneutics - explains all of this, Thompson's blindness and Kundera's insight, the need of Stalinist regimes and campus administrators for emissary victims, even for absurd ones like the music of Janacek. The point that I wish to make before addressing the question of Generative Anthropology is that Fundamental Anthropology *alone* is sufficient for charting the ethical tumult of the twentieth century, just as, *alone*, it can account for the current (recurrent?) scapegoat regime on campus. The fact is that we do not witness any instances of a collapse from civil society into pacific contemplation of non-human appetitive objects, as must have occurred on the originary scene (if only!); what we witness repeatedly - every day - in our beleaguered century and on our besieged campuses are recrudescences of persecution. (Is there any campus today that does not have its Zhdanov?) Nor am I convinced, despite Richard van Oort's persuasive analysis, that

Girard's victimary scene denies humanity to the founders of culture and is therefore an inadequate account of the beginning of human self-consciousness. The victimary scene does produce, by the same mental bootstrapping as the originary scene, the figure-against-ground of a primordial sign. Taking the position of an open-minded outsider coming to Girard and Gans for the first time, I could understand a preference for Girard as offering the most immediately appealing explanation of the genesis and character of culture. (Richard himself once said as much to me in one of his valuable and erudite letters.) Gans undoubtedly has his own, peculiarly Gansian, reading of Rousseau and Voltaire, but I think that the Girardian reading (which any of us can imagine, whether Girard actually has one or not) is stronger and prior. The Gansian reading, of course, is "weaker" than the Girardian *precisely in the scientific sense implied by the comparative*.

That is why I write, in my title, of the *double necessity* of Girard and Gans. We no more have to chose - to decide - between Girard and Gans than we have to chose - to decide - between the Old and New Testaments. We need them both. Let me therefore speak of Gans.

II

By way of offering a moral example, let me note that Girard writes positively of Gans in *Job* (1987), a text written sufficiently long after Gans' work began to appear for any resentment to have surfaced. None is evident. Assessing the dialogues of Job and his neighbors, Girard says that, in them, "mimetic desire is revealed in a great metaphor that expresses equally both the diachronic complexity of the relationships created and their synchronic uniformity and essential impoverishment. A more simple and luminous equivalent of what Eric Gans would call the 'paradox' of these relationships cannot be imagined" (60). A cynic would say that while Job is a late work by Girard, *Pour une esthétique paradoxale* (1978) is an early work by Gans, and indeed a very Girardian work. There are, naturally, more references to Girard in Gans than the other way around, but this in itself is significant. Even when he diverged from Girard by stipulating the priority of the originary scene to the sacrificial crisis, Gans remained indebted, if not dependent, on the vision of his teacher. As a student of Gans, I wish to say that there is no shame in being indebted to one's teacher. Rather than stressing what Girard and Gans keep peculiarly to themselves, I would like, then, in the following paragraphs, to emphasize what they hold in common. I will subsequently try to say what is uniquely valuable in Generative Anthropology as compared to Fundamental Anthropology.

10

Girard and Gans approach closest to one another in *The Scapegoat* and *Science & Faith* (1990). Girard's book could, with equal justice, bear the subtitle of Gans' book, "The Anthropology of Revelation." Both delve into the cognitive content of Revelation and amount to rational defenses of what the modern temperament dogmatically declares - as it has since Voltaire - to be irrational. Both books engage in a deliberate critique of postmodern Socinianism, where that creed takes the specific form of a denial of mimesis.

I would like to dwell on that last point for a moment. If Girard is a scandal to the contemporary mentality, Gans is no less so. I have found no immolatory footnotes centered on the name of Gans, but I have been witness to the outrage that his - completely genteel, warmly affable, and deliberately unstrident - presentations of Generative Anthropology inspire. At the Symposium on Generative Anthropology at UCLA in 1990, most of the second day was wrecked, for the participants, by a cantankerous, literally hours-long monologue by a member of the audience who engaged in a futile

stichomythia with Gans over the question of the origin of language and culture. The originary scene could not possibly be postulated as real, the fellow endlessly argued, since there was no way of confirming, in absolute and positive terms, that it took place. Gans had already carefully stipulated that the originary scene was a hypothesis for explaining how humanity achieved sufficient consciousness to imitate a gesture and thereby inaugurate language; the originary scene accounted hypothetically, he had said, for the fact that culture is diachronically continuous through conscious mimesis of a primordial event, and that, paradoxically, mimesis, of the acquisitive type, was precisely what that event had confronted and overcome. The originary scene, or its equivalent, must have happened for Gans and his opponent to be together in a cultural context engaging in what, for lack of a better term, could be called a conversation. If a better hypothesis existed, let the objector produce it. Gans' challenger did not see that his own confrontation with Gans over the object of language reproduced the very scene that he denied, thereby making it plausible. At another presentation by Gans, yet another challenger, this time a Marxist, rose to his feet immediately after Gans had concluded his lecture to accuse Gans of "Romanticism." This meant, for the challenger, that *any* argument about "origin" constituted an attempt to dominate humanity by the prescriptive fiat of defining it in terms of its generation. Romanticism equals totalitarianism. In effect, the challenger accused Gans of the same crime alleged against Stravinsky by Adorno, namely, that Generative Anthropology leads to fascism. *Ipsa eo*, Gans bore his guilt before the fact and, like Rousseau's malefactor, needed to be taken down preventatively. (This is exactly how Brutus justifies the assassination in *Julius Caesar*, Act II, Scene I.)

Matthew Schneider encountered the same phenomenon head-on at one of the regional MLAs when he gave a mixed Girardian and Gansian reading of Wordsworth. A liberator of the people sitting in the back of the room interrupted Matt ten seconds after he had begun to denounce Matt's claim, that there was a definable human nature, as "the ultimate violence." Occurring, as it did, in early spring, this little scene, deeply embarrassing to everyone except its perpetrator, was a veritable *Sacre du printemps*, or at least an attempt at one. I am sure that Girard could tell many similar stories. Girard and Gans incite the same ire because, broadly speaking, they reveal the same mechanism, mimesis, to a class of people, the humanities professors, who, because originality obsesses them, constantly sense the terror of imitation and therefore instantaneously imitate anyone who seems original by vehemently denying that originality. They repress the revelation of their deepest motive. As far as the mob is concerned, Girard and Gans are indistinguishable.

11

In *The Scapegoat*, Girard makes these remarks, which seem to explain the rigid resistance to scapegoat hermeneutics: "We now know how to recognize in religious forms, ideas, and institutions in general the warped reflection of violent events that have been exceptionally 'successful' in their collective repercussions. We can identify the commemoration in mythology of these same violent acts that are so successful that they force their perpetrators to reenact them. This memory inevitably develops as it is transmitted from generation to generation, but instead of rediscovering the secret of its original distortion it loses it over and over again, each time burying it a little deeper" (95). The very science made possible by the Gospel's deflation of magic shrinks down to a scientism that spurns Christianity. And yet, some consciousness of the scapegoat mechanism has emerged over the long centuries, spurred by the Gospel's discovery of persecution in the Passion. The Holocaust, for example, has made it difficult to deny the role of victims in radical politics. Girard believes that this Revelation will continue, for "there is always an outcry [...] against powerful evidence, but such quibbling is not in the least important intellectually" (95). The silence in regard to the Gulag, the dismissal of Solzhenitsyn as a religious crank, the blind eye

turned toward Asian and African massacres: all of this, as Girard argues of any similar repression of the facts, is intellectually *nil*. The knowledge of these events disappears only in a restricted political context, and under a kind of bad faith, neither of which can be eternal. The knowledge circulates elsewhere so that I am able to invoke it here.

In *Science & Faith*, Gans notes that "the strength of ideas is always put to the test in [...] dialogue" and he has this to say about the success of Judaism and Christianity: "The superior religion at a given point possesses a superior truth that manifests itself in practice in the form of a superior *rhetoric*. Nietzsche and his deconstructive followers are correct to assert that, within the dialectic of human relations, the rhetorical is in the final analysis insurmountable. Where they go wrong is in drawing from this truth the unwarranted conclusion that because rhetorical dialogue is not wholly determinable by logical principles it is simply undecidable" (67-68). The four-thousand year success of the Mosaic and Gospel Revelations testify to an anthropology that has been tried in the most rigorous of laboratories, humanity at large, and that has, by naked duration, demonstrated the sufficiency of its "intuition of rightness" (68). Both Girard and Gans have found a clearer, simpler, and therefore more powerful way of saying what Hegel so ponderously said in his *Phenomenology*, that self-consciousness arises from the abjection of the victim. Here again they diverge, on parallel paths, from the occluded mainstream of twentieth century thinking, whose rhetoric, far from embracing clarification, has remained locked in a stichomythia with Hegel and has tried to wrest authority from him by exaggerating the style of obscurity to a new and unprecedented degree.

12

The first to do this, of course, was Marx, who thought that he could turn Hegel on his head by picking up where Rousseau left off in *The Origin of Inequality*, Part II. In Rousseau, the malefactor's appropriation of the earth made him uniquely and intolerably individual, putting him in competition with Rousseau and necessitating his immolation. Both Marx and Engels at various times set out programs for genocide. In *The Communist Manifesto*, Chapter II, for example, Marx explicitly says that the bourgeois individual, whose existence represents the chief scandal for Communism, "must, indeed, be swept out of the way" (99). The infamous essay on "The Jewish Question" identifies capitalism with the Jews and again suggests liquidation as the first step toward a classless utopia purged of the idea of property. Marx says the same thing once again, in heavily jargonized language, in the unreadable *Capital*, in which every sentence functions more or less as a kind of veiled threat. Postmodern rhetoric has never ceased to repeat this thoroughly sacrificial formula (some must die for the good of all), but, following the Marx of *Capital*, has repeated it in ever more arcane and baroque ways. Girard and Gans practice by contrast a non-sacrificial discourse which understands that, once the slave has achieved independence, the master can be rehabilitated and does not have to be "swept out of the way."

Girard writes about the scapegoat mechanism and emissary victims. Gans writes, in more generalized terms, about ethical systems. Both, however, are addressing the anthropological problem of justice and what interests them equally in the Old or New Testament, for example, is the superior justice of Judaism or Christianity in relation to the pagan cults. Superior justice always stems from a clearer perception of the human reality, or from a higher degree of consciousness. Both Girard and Gans emphasize the epistemological difficulty of attaining such clear perceptions and, through them, of consolidating such a higher degree of consciousness. In both *The Scapegoat* and *Science & Faith*, the failure of the apostles fully to assimilate the meaning of the Passion becomes a central topic.

In his chapter on "Peter's Denial," Girard notes how, when Peter follows Jesus to the residence of the high priest, he relapses "into the mimetic behavior of all mankind" (148). This relapse might strike us as somewhat puzzling given that Peter has previously (Matt. 16:13-18) demonstrated that he can distinguish the quality that differentiates Jesus from other sacred persons. Everyone else, in Matthew's account, believes Jesus to be the resurrection - the crudely magical metempsychotic *repetition* - of some earlier prophet, but Peter alone discerns in him the theologically unique "Son of the Living God." Jesus acknowledges Peter's discernment when he says that he will found his church on "this rock," namely, on Peter himself. But, in the garden at Gethsemane, Jesus predicts that Peter will "disown" him three times before the cock crows. Now, in the priestly courtyard, the enlightened apostle is suddenly and grossly "doing what the others are doing" (148). He is warming himself by the fire in company with those who have arrested Jesus and who are abetting his interrogation, his torture, within the priestly domicile. "All Peter wants is to warm himself with the others but, deprived of his *being with* by the collapse of his universe, he cannot warm himself without wanting obscurely the being that is shining there, in this fire, and the being that is indicated silently by all the eyes staring at him, by all the hands stretched toward the fire" (149). (I will return to those "hands stretched toward the fire.") When asked pointedly whether he really belongs where he is, whether he is not in fact one of the followers of Jesus, Peter loudly denies it, and he denies it twice more. The full force of Jesus' teaching has not yet penetrated into Peter's comprehension. He has not exorcised himself of the epochal mimesis that leads to sacrifice. He has not achieved the new level of anthropological self-consciousness which Girard identifies with the Paraclete. The enactment of the Passion will be necessary to insure the thorough assimilation of Jesus revelatory message.

13

In his chapter on "The Christian Revelation," Gans too writes of Peter's incomplete assimilation of Jesus' word, but emphasizes that this incompleteness extends beyond the Passion. Citing the account of Pentecost in Acts, where Peter accuses the people of Jerusalem of direct complicity in the murder of Jesus, Gans notes that, in Peter's speech, the universality of the persecution remains unreconciled with the uniqueness of the resurrection: "In Peter's discourse, these two key elements [...] remain entirely separate. It is the crowd who is accused of the murder; the revelations of the apostles as described in the scene of the Ascension at the beginning of Acts (1.6-11) contain no trace of any such accusation. Yet all four versions of the Gospel narrative emphasize Jesus' solitude in his last moments, as well as his denial by the same Peter who is now so willing to cast the blame on others" (87). In the Gansian reading, which therefore shows some slight contrast with its Girardian counterpart, the apostles never quite succeed in putting the behavioral two and two together to make the ethical four. It would require the conversion of a later persecutor, Saul/Paul, to make this crucial synthesis. We know the story: Saul, on his way to Damascus to harry Christians, sees a light and hears a voice and falls blinded by the wayside while Jesus asks, from out of the light, "Why are you persecuting me?" "The truth that Saul understands, the power of which is figured in the text by his blinding, is that it is the persecution of the person of Jesus that guarantees his presence beyond death and thus demonstrates his divinity. Saul intuits a fundamental connection between persecution and divination" (89). Gans emphasizes that "Jesus had appeared to many others before Saul" so that "it was Saul who finally understood the point of these appearances where the others had failed to do so. [...] [Saul] alone was able to understand the sense of the resurrection" (91).

Thus Gans, like Girard, understands that although Revelation occurs as an event, the universalization of that event may require decades, centuries, or even millennia. Girard formulates the insight in these words: "The Gospel text is somewhat like a password communicated by go-betweens who are not

included in the secret. Those of us who receive the password are all the more grateful because the messenger's ignorance guarantees the authenticity of the message. We have the joyous certainty that nothing essential can have been falsified" (*The Scapegoat* 164). Gans employs more abstract, less ecclesiastically participatory language, whose essential meaning nevertheless remains the same: "Religious faith opposes the significance of particular events to any universal reasoning from empirical data. It links the atemporal truth of man to the temporal truth of revelation, holding structure and history together for so long as rational thought remains incapable of joining them" (*Science & Faith* 113). Faith functions impersonally as a Girardian "go-between" who carries a password without himself understanding it. If faith, like the mediated password, later on turns out to correspond with newly observed or rediscovered facts about humanity, this serves as a guarantee of faith's authenticity. If the discourse of postmodernism is governed by the technique of deferral (or by the technique of a *pretense* of deferral), then the discourse comprised by the texts of Girard and Gans could be said to be governed by the ethics of enduring patience. Despite his "atheology," Gans is a "Paracletic" thinker like Girard. Refusal to assent to the proclaimed doctrine scandalizes the followers of Rousseau and Marx. Girard and Gans, by contrast, do not quibble and furthermore pay no attention to quibbling. Quibbling might be defined as the sacrificial inflation of petty differences and thus as a form of collaboration with sacrifice. The fact that understanding is not immediate, as in Gnosis, but requires the long exercise of reason, does not generate a crisis for them and therefore does not necessitate some new victim; nor does it lead to the cultural relativism that declares understanding an impossibility because there is no truth to be understood. Both Fundamental Anthropology and Generative Anthropology understand human phenomena in the extremely long term.

14

The opposition to cultural relativism also assimilates Girard and Gans to one another. Both Fundamental Anthropology and Generative Anthropology include an epistemology. In both cases, this epistemology defends an intelligence which is positive, as opposed to nescient, without being positivistic. In his chapter on "The Science of Myths," in a continuation of a passage that I have already cited, Girard asserts that "as religions and cultures are formed and perpetuated, the violence [at their origin] is hidden," and it follows from this that "the discovery of their secret would provide what must be called a *scientific* solution to man's greatest enigma, the nature and origins of religion" (95). Knowing that the adjective will scandalize those who regard science as a form of ethnocentrism, Girard subsequently justifies his term: "Even today, many will say that only the scientific mind could have brought an end to witch-hunts. [...] It is significant [however] that the first scientific revolution in the West coincides more or less with the definitive renunciation of witch-hunts. In the language of the ethnologists we would say a determined orientation toward natural causes gradually displaced man's immemorial preference for *significant causes on the level of social relations* which are also *the causes that are susceptible to corrective intervention*, in other words *victims*" (96). The rise of science cannot be isolated from the decline of witch-hunts. Scapegoat-hermeneutics thus comes into conflict with the prevailing epistemology, what I would call *constructivism*, applying the label broadly to structuralism, Marxism, feminism, and multiculturalism, all of which, explicitly or implicitly, reject the supposedly naive idea that representation actually represents an existing, stable, and therefore characterizable world. Constructivism is invariably a form of relativism, but it also has Kantian overtones. Constructivism makes use of the Kantian idea of an inaccessible thing-in-itself when it claims that language does not reach the world. But it then violates this premise by arguing, in Marxist fashion, that the world that language cannot reach and about which we have no absolute assurances can be changed if we only *construct* it differently. Scapegoat hermeneutics reminds

us that the victim is real and that, if language fails to reach him, it is through a malicious design. The deceased victim, moreover, does not spring magically back to life simply because one calls quick what in fact is dead. Scapegoat hermeneutics reveals, that is to say, that the prevailing worldview of contemporary intellectuals - those who live, self-proclaimedly, on the cutting edge of mental life - is still magic. This further explains why persons of the postmodern persuasion react so angrily to Girard: he demonstrates that they resemble the primitives whom they publicly celebrate but privately despise.

Gans also deploys a *reconstructive* epistemology. In *Science & Faith*, this takes the form of a critique of "positive anthropology," which obsessively seeks the key to the human in material facts like skeletal remains that reveal the gradual, biological mutation of the species. But this method treats *Homo sapiens* no differently than zoology treats other, non-sapient species. "The genesis of the human species is not reducible to the general model of biological speciation," Gans argues, because mutation cannot explain the trait that distinguishes humanity from all other animals, "his possession of systems of representation that permit him to transmit to other members of his species large quantities of context-sensitive information that could not be borne by the slow and limited processes" (6-7) of animal communication. The new view that hominization consists of an event, writes Gans, opens the way for a rapprochement between science and religion; but, since positive science has defined itself, since the Enlightenment, in opposition to religion (see Voltaire), Generative Anthropology, with its hypothesis of an originary scene, can only represent a scandal to the ensconced institutional study of the human. Nevertheless, the scandal expressed by positive anthropology merely dodges the issue of the originary scene as a punctual inauguration of the human: "In reality, positivism only condemns certain uses of the scene as mythical in order better to be able to take refuge in others the scenic nature of which it refuses to acknowledge" (8). The stereotypical hominization scenario offered by positive anthropology consists of the faun-like proto-human suddenly standing upright to see farther across the savannah, or of the accidental discovery of fire, in the aftermath of a lightning storm, by the roving pack. Or else, *in re* language, animal signals mysteriously become human signs. Finally, positive anthropology boils down to a refusal to decide between the animal and the human, whereupon anthropologists begin to resemble the totemists whom they study, identifying so strongly with the animal-soul that they cannot unequivocally say what they are. Gans was probably not thinking of William Irwin Thompson when he wrote the following words, but he might have been: "The roots of contemporary anthropology do not lie in militant atheism [...] These roots are rather to be found in that 'religiosity' so characteristic of thinkers of the nineteenth century who hoped to find in primitive societies the lost fullness of their experience of the sacred" (11). Generative Anthropology does not, like positive anthropology, avoid knowledge. It does not participate in the relativism of contemporary anti-epistemology. It stipulates a human nature more *positively* because more *specifically* than the most ardent formulation of skeletal comparison or mitochondrial DNA analysis. Like Fundamental Anthropology, Generative Anthropology reveals that the most characteristic types of postmodern thinking are *magical thinking*.

15

Earlier I stated that both Girard and Gans concern themselves with the anthropological problem of justice. I would like to connect this with the political phenomenon identified by Milan Kundera under the name of the "tribunal." Kundera claims that the "tribunal" is the characteristic manifestation of totalitarian politics in the twentieth century. A tribunal, we recall, "does not signify the juridical institution for punishing people who have violated the laws," is not, that is, concerned with facts or with reality, no more so indeed than the witch-hunt with which it is homologically congruent. Wherever the tribunal appears, then, one must say that the genuinely scientific demand that claims be linked with

evidence has broken down. I would argue that the currently dominant epistemology, which I have already designated by the term constructivism, amounts to nothing less than the complete tribunalization of life. An empirical instance of what I mean can be found in multiculturalism, which has rapidly institutionalized itself on campus and in other areas of public life. Multiculturalism has a doctrine - the celebration of ethnicity - which is loosely but definitely bound up with constructivist epistemology. Multiculturalism announces itself in practice, however, as a witch-hunt in which facts, as educated people have previously defined this term, have absolutely no relevance. The entire range of politically incorrect offenses which multiculturalism holds ready to allege against its transgressors consists of petty and unintentional gestures attested by claim of the offended party many if not most of which are probably imaginary. The worst of these are well known, such as *not* looking at someone. But the poor people hauled before affirmative action courts are never accused of deeds which leave behind what is traditionally called evidence. The procedure therefore deprives the defendants of the opportunity of pointing to the absence of evidence in order to exonerate themselves. Rarely does the procedure grant anything like due process and never do plaintiffs need to produce positive corroboration of their claims. *Rien n'aura eu lieu que le lieu*. But that will be enough in the star chamber. The accusations that multiculturalism lodges against transgressors also occasion fits of mimeticism. On the campus of Central Michigan University, these occur three or four times a year, always with the same pattern: an offended party alleges an insult, a group of committed professors and activist students (who are always the same) spring into voluble action demanding punishment, letters of outrage fill the student newspaper, and the president of the university makes a speech and gives a monetary concession to this or that offended group. The accused is left to twist in the wind. It is a paroxysm and a catharsis. But it is not justice.

In *Originary Thinking* (1993), in a discussion of modernist aesthetics, Gans points out that "the obligation to enjoy an avant-garde artwork is not dissimilar to the obligation to maintain the proper 'consciousness' that the totalitarian regimes of the modern era were able to enforce, with surprising success, on their subjects" (194). When the approved "avant-garde" artwork is now the oral memoirs of Rigoberta Menchu, and when sneezing during a discussion of the aforesaid text can be construed as an act of malicious disrespect "to a whole people," then the relevance of Gans' remark to multiculturalism and its regime becomes clear. Insofar, then, as they are advocates of a reconstructive epistemology and apologists for justice as that is defined by the scientific traditions of Western jurisprudence, Girard and Gans once again find themselves occupying similar positions and once again at odds with the prevailing attitudes. Girard's discourse and Gans' too belong in the same category as Kundera's or Czeslaw Milosz's or Alexander Solzhenitsyn's. All of these writers may be said to be devoted to the principle of de-tribunalizing a totalized regime and in reinstating a type of justice based, not on denunciation, but on evidence.

16

I promised to state what is uniquely valuable in Generative Anthropology.

This consists, of course, of the intuition of the originary scene as the genetic locus of representation in general, from which, as Gans persuasively shows in *The End of Culture* (1985), Girard's sacrificial crisis at length derives. The argument is very simple. Designating a victim presupposes and therefore requires designation: humanity must have learned how to designate things generally before it could designate a victim specifically. By shifting his focus from the sacrificial crisis to the originary scene, Gans could begin to think in fine detail about the basic structure of language; he could, in other words, begin to discern what might be called the MS.DOS of culture, whereas Girard had concentrated on a specific

program underneath which MS.DOS functioned unsuspected. In his account of Peter's treason in *The Scapegoat*, Girard emphasizes that, in the courtyard with the agents of the high priest, Peter joins a circle in which the hands of all, in the cold of the evening, reach out toward the fire. Here is a precise moment in Girard's text where Gans' notion of the originary scene can be grafted onto the Girardian insight. Some of those hands, sharing but not appropriating the warmth of the communal fire, quickly become pointing fingers of accusation. The Biblical text shows us, in that very transition, how the abortive gesture of appropriation becomes the designation of a victim. I might add that the abortive gesture of appropriation on Gans' originary scene contains an accusation, implicitly, just as it contains so much else (everything else, linguistically speaking): the abortive gesture is an accusation against the others for wanting to do what the gesticulator also wants to do, and the other equivalent gestures are accusations against him. As the specificity of Generative Anthropology is well known to readers of *Anthropoetics*, I do not need to go into further details here. Suffice it to say that the field of investigation opened up by the hypothesis of the originary scene is as important as that opened up by Girard's hypothesis of the sacrificial crisis.

Together, Fundamental Anthropology and Generative Anthropology comprise a history of consciousness. Neither discourse contradicts the other, as far as I can see, at any point. I therefore take them together. It seems to me that modern consciousness consists of the Gansian originary consciousness passed through the experience of the Girardian sacrificial crisis. This makes the explanation of modern consciousness more complicated than it is with Generative Anthropology alone, a fact which might be aesthetically disappointing to strong partisans of a purely Gansian position. I would remind my friends that, from the Generative Anthropological viewpoint, ethics is ultimately more important for assessing the justice of ideas than aesthetics. Perhaps the definition of justice at the end of the twentieth century is that it consists of a return *at a higher level* to the intuition of rightness that accompanies the abortive gesture of appropriation on the originary scene; but this return occurs after the deformation of originary consciousness during the sacrificial crisis and must deal with that deformation. Once again, it appears that, in order to understand ourselves fully, we need both Girard and Gans. The two should not be put apart.

17

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Mimetic Polemicism: René Girard and Harold Bloom contra the "School of Resentment"

A Review Essay

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Harold Bloom. *The Western Canon: The Books and School of the Ages*. New York: Harcourt Brace, 1994.

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Near the end of a 1978 interview that appeared in *Diacritics*, René Girard was asked to comment on several schools of "modern literary criticism," a subject toward which in general, the interviewer acknowledged, Girard had in the past displayed "a relatively antagonistic attitude." Though he could scarcely deny the accuracy of such an assessment, Girard began his comments by admitting that he found parts of Northrop Frye's *Anatomy of Criticism* "admirable" and praising Kenneth Burke's acknowledgment that a "'principle of victimage'. . . is at work in human culture" as "an extraordinary achievement." One other critic, though Girard neglected to mention him by name, was also extended a qualified approval:

I regard the current "intertextual" school as a generally positive phenomenon. It has liberated American criticism from the fetish of the single work; it has made the antiphilosophical stance fashionable. It has popularized a somewhat romantic but interesting notion of the (mimetic) "anxiety of influence," etc. In many instances, however, under a liberal sprinkling of "deconstructive" terminology, the old neo-critical or thematic cake is still there and the taste is not as uncanny as one might wish (*To Double Business Bound* 221).

The unnamed founder of this "intertextual school" is, of course, Harold Bloom. Girard's demurrers--that Bloom's work, though fundamentally mimetic, is romantic and therefore lends itself to formalist thematizing--seem the obvious responses of any neomimetic thinker who encounters intertextualism as it was first laid out in *The Anxiety of Influence* (1973) and *A Map of Misreading* (1975). Such objections are harder to maintain, however, with the publication of Bloom's latest book, *The Western Canon*. Though Bloom himself admits to being "an aged institutional Romantic," it is now clearer than ever that his special notion of "influence"--which, as he approvingly quotes Peter de Bolla, "is both a tropological

category, a figure which determines the poetic tradition, and a complex of psychic, historical, and imagistic relations" (*Western Canon* 8), shares important similarities with what Girard calls in the Diacritics interview the literary text's ability to "become aware of the mimetic effects upon which it is founded and reveal these effects" ("*To Double Business Bound*" 221). In short, the gap between the anxiety of influence and mimetic desire has shrunk: having evolved over the past twenty years or so, Bloom's theory may now be differentiated from Girard's primarily by the latter's relatively greater willingness to search out and theorize the anthropological bases and implications of conflictive mimesis. Both are, however, guided by an intuition, derived primarily from their readings of literary texts, that (in Bloom's words) "the aesthetic and the agonistic are one" (*Western Canon* 6). The anxiety of influence is the form of mimetic desire to which writers are particularly prone, since they are necessarily led by their craft to the existential bases of their compulsion to create.

2

That Bloom and Girard start from common ground is made clear by *The Western Canon* in two ways. First, like Girard's *A Theater of Envy*, *The Western Canon* is really a book about William Shakespeare, whom Bloom identifies as the discoverer and chronicler of the varieties and mysteries of human nature. Second, and most revealing for our purposes, both recognize that Shakespeare's astonishing cognitive and aesthetic power is, as Girard might say, a representational scandal that has, in turn, stirred a mimetic crisis in the literary academy. This crisis threatens not merely to "dethrone" Shakespeare as the West's (if not the world's) consummate literary genius, but for Bloom presages the death of the aesthetic sensibility, and for Girard, shows just how stubborn is the literary critical world's refusal to acknowledge the relations between imitation, violence, and scapegoating. For both, the measure of academia is taken by its refusal to see how Shakespeare serves as modernity's locus for the necessary anguish that surrounds all types of mimesis--whether imitation is, in Girard's view, the obsessively returned-to content of the plays themselves, or, as Bloom would have it, an existential and aesthetic issue with which all writers (especially today's critics) must, but frequently choose not to, contend.

The mimetic assumptions underlying both Girard's and Bloom's work grant their readings of literary texts a necessary polemical cast--perhaps unfortunately so, since polemicism can be dismissed all too easily as defensiveness or crankiness, especially in critics who been around as long as these two have. Their polemicism is, however, an important, even essential aspect of their work, if only for reminding us that a neomimetic approach will not--indeed cannot--succumb to the fashionable skepticisms of our times. As true believers in the cognitive power of the literary text, Bloom and Girard present an attractive alternative to the cynicism and defeatism of certain contemporary intellectual trends. The difference between them--and it is an important one--lies in the extent to which each is willing to make an awareness of mimesis's conflictive configurations the starting point for an escape from the dead-end of mimetic circularity. Girard's more systematic theorizing of imitation frees him from an ultimately debilitating fatalism that colors many of Bloom's conclusions about the applicability of literature's cognitive insights to life.

Ironically, in both books the attractiveness and vitality of the literary-critical alternative Bloom and Girard offer is principally manifested by the vigor with which both deplore how literature is treated by today's academy. Both are understandably disheartened by the direction in which literary studies are headed. Bloom begins *The Western Canon* with "an elegy for the canon," a sometimes barely civil survey of current trends in humanities teaching and scholarship. What's wrong with the humanities today? "Our educational institutions are thronged these days by idealistic resisters who denounce competition in

literature as in life," writes Bloom. The anxiety of influence, in other words, has spread from the writers creating the canon to the critics and teachers charged with the task of transmitting the pleasures of reading deeply to the coming generations. The old pedagogical goal of appreciating the aesthetic has given way to expressions of resentment, which are all the more contemptible for hiding behind masks of "adventure and new interpretations" (*Western Canon* 18). All this leads to a discouraging misapprehension of canonical texts: now "best explained as a mystification promoted by bourgeois institutions," literature has been reduced "to ideology, or at best to metaphysics." As a result, a "poem cannot be read *as a poem*, because it is primarily a social document or, rarely yet possibly, an attempt to overcome philosophy" (*Western Canon* 18). This kind of an "attack" on literature is, Bloom acknowledges, hardly new: as it was under the "ancient polemic" of "Platonic moralism and Aristotelian social science," poetry today is either exiled "for being destructive of social well-being" or allowed "sufferance if it will assume the work of social catharsis under the banners of the new multiculturalism" (*Western Canon* 18). In deserting or exiling the aesthetic, however, Bloom argues that today's critics only reveal their own fear of mimesis. In *The Anxiety of Influence*, Bloom coined the term *daemonization* to describe one of the means by which a poet evades a potentially paralyzing sense of cognitive and aesthetic indebtedness to strong precursors. The past is simply negated; thus "daemonization or the Counter-Sublime," writes Bloom, "is a war between Pride and Pride, and momentarily the power of newness wins" (*Anxiety of Influence* 101).

3

Enthralled by the siren song of newness, today's "lemminglike" (*Western Canon* 18) academicians hurl themselves from the cliffs in a desperate attempt to evade the guilt that inheres in what Bloom sees as the underlying purpose of Western literature: the expression of an "achieved individuality" (*Western Canon* 24). The most egregious example of this resentful embrace of the new may be found in Foucault-inspired New Historicist criticism of the works of Shakespeare, whom Bloom identifies as the center of the Western canon for having effectively created modern self-understanding: with "no true precursor in the creation of character," Shakespeare "has left no one after him untouched by his ways of representing human nature" (*Western Canon* 524). For "strong writers," Shakespeare's prodigious achievement offers an inspiration to strive for greatness; for those whose self-confidence is threatened by the spectacle of aesthetic prominence, Shakespeare is the ultimate *skandalon*. In the former category Bloom includes practically every canonical writer who has come since Shakespeare, all of whom have had to contend with the astonishing vitality of his characters and the comprehensiveness of his cognitive vision. The latter category includes today's New Historicist critics, who express their resentment of Shakespeare's eminence and aesthetic legacy by proposing that his "greatness" is merely putative and explaining his achievement as a byproduct of the "social energies of the English Renaissance" (*Western Canon* 38). Logically, Bloom points out, this makes no sense:

How can they have it both ways? If it is arbitrary that Shakespeare centers the Canon, then they need to show why the dominant social class selected him rather than, say, Ben Jonson, for that arbitrary role. Or if history and not the ruling circles exalted Shakespeare, what was it in Shakespeare that so captivated the mighty Demiurge, economic and social history? Clearly this line of inquiry begins to border on the fantastic; how much simpler to admit that there is a *qualitative* difference, a difference in kind, between Shakespeare and every other writer, even Chaucer, even Tolstoy, or whoever. Originality is the great scandal that resentment cannot accommodate, and Shakespeare remains the most original writer we will ever know (*Western Canon* 25).

That Shakespeare's originality differentiates him in kind from all other writers--an opinion which, we will see, Girard, in his own way, shares with Bloom--was apparently evident at the playwright's first appearance on the London theater scene in the early 1590s. If the Shakespearean School of Resentment had a founder, it was Robert Greene, whose *Groats-worth of witte, bought with a million of Repentance* (1592) branded the young playwright an "upstart Crow," and warned all who cared to listen that Shakespeare "supposes he is able to bombast out a blanke verse as the best of you: and beeing an absolute *Johannes fac totum*, is in his own conceit the onely Shake-scene in a countrey" (Shakespeare 1835). Today's resenters share Greene's outrage at the impertinence of Shakespeare's sense of his own aesthetic singularity. Instead, however, of wearing that resentment on their sleeves for daws to peck at as Greene did, according to Bloom, New Historicists and other Shakespeare doubters disguise their defensive scorn under the insistence that the "death of the author" calls into question the received image of the writer striving alone for immortality. If there are no authors, then the Shakespeare lauded by Ben Jonson as "not of an age but for all time" ceases to exist.

If the real motivation behind today's critics is the avoidance of guilt, the pangs of which they attempt to keep at bay by exerting theoretical mastery over Shakespeare, then they exhibit a revealing resemblance to Girard's "mythicizers" of an episode of scapegoating: theory becomes the means by which those who perpetrate Shakespeare's expulsion from the canon justify themselves and, more important, avoid acknowledging their debt to Shakespeare for the very cognitive tools they use to diminish his achievement. But here, writes Bloom,

they confront insurmountable difficulty in Shakespeare's most idiosyncratic strength: he is always ahead of you, conceptually and imagistically, whoever and whenever you are. He renders you anachronistic because he *contains* you; you cannot subsume him. You cannot illuminate him with a new doctrine, be it Marxism or Freudianism or Demanian linguistic skepticism. Instead, he will illuminate the doctrine, not be prefiguration but by postfiguration as it were: all of Freud that matters most is there in Shakespeare already, with a persuasive critique of Freud besides. . . . *Coriolanus* is a far more powerful reading of Marx's *Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Napoleon* than any Marxist reading of *Coriolanus* could hope to be (*Western Canon* 25).

4

Bloom devotes an entire chapter--and several digressions in discussions of other writers--to proving his contention that Freud's work is "essentially prosified Shakespeare" (*Western Canon* 371). It seems that this task is partly undertaken in self-defense: Bloom has been accused of producing the "anxiety of influence" by grafting Freud's concept of the family romance onto T.S. Eliot's conception of literary influence as benign transmission within the self-evident parameters of a stable tradition. The discussion's deeper purpose, though, is to provide a monumental paradigm of what Shakespeare-resentment looks like when elevated to the status of a comprehensive theory of human nature. Freud was, in Bloom's view, Shakespeare's most vital misreader; though our contemporary New Historicists share Freud's resentment, they cannot come close to matching his creativity. The chapter entitled "Freud: A Shakespearean Reading" begins by reminding us of two strange but ultimately revealing facts: first, Shakespeare quotations appear throughout Freud's work with an astonishing, one might even say obsessive frequency; and second, late in his life Freud came to believe J. Edward Looney's hypothesis that the plays and poems were written by Edward de Vere, the seventeenth Earl of Oxford. The concurrence of these symptoms, argues Bloom, constitutes a textbook case of what psychoanalysis terms neurotic repression,

and it doesn't take years of training at the Psychoanalytic Institute to identify what Freud was attempting to repress. The delusion that the "man from Stratford" did not author the plays was motivated not by snobbery, but by a desire for vengeance:

It was somehow a great comfort to Freud to believe that his precursor Shakespeare was not a rather ordinary personality from Stratford, but an enigmatic and mighty nobleman. . . . On some level, Freud understood that Shakespeare had invented psychoanalysis by inventing the psyche, insofar as Freud could recognize and describe it. This could not have been a pleasant understanding, since it subverted Freud's declaration that "I invented psychoanalysis because it had no literature." Revenge came with the supposed demonstration that Shakespeare was an impostor, which satisfied Freudian resentment though rationally it did not make the plays any less of a precursor. Shakespeare had played great havoc with Freud's originalities; now Shakespeare was unmasked and disgraced (*Western Canon* 60-1).

Freud's need to repress his debt to Shakespeare not only accounts for the alacrity with which the "best mind of our century" (*Western Canon* 373) accepted the appropriately named Looney hypothesis. This grand evasion is also behind the misnaming of the centerpiece of Freud's theory, the Oedipus complex. According to Bloom, the Oedipus complex really should be called the Hamlet complex, since Freud found his paradigm of the "civil war within the psyche" (*Western Canon* 377) where European romanticism had found it, in Shakespeare's most compelling play. Oedipus, writes Bloom, was "hauled in by Freud and grafted onto Hamlet largely to cover up an obligation to Shakespeare" (377). In fact, while the "Oedipus of Sophocles may have a Hamlet complex (which I define as thinking not too much but much too well)," the "Hamlet of the man from Stratford most definitely does not have an Oedipus complex" (*Western Canon* 377).

It is with this assertion that Bloom's thinking comes closest to Girard's. In Bloom's view, Freud overvalued the Oedipus complex, and thus was willing go to any length to protect the claim to "scientific" originality he felt this concept granted him. In *Violence and the Sacred*, Girard argues that Freud came close to a "mimetic intuition" in *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego*, but in subsequent works "saw the path of mimetic desire stretching out before him and deliberately turned aside" (171). "Why did Freud banish mimesis from his later thought?" asks Girard. The reason "is not difficult to identify": to embrace the relatively simple mechanism of mimetic desire as an interindividual force is to render the unconscious superfluous, and Freud could not bring himself to give up the mysterious and powerful agency of that region of the mind. In his own way, Bloom asks a similar question: why wouldn't (or couldn't) Freud acknowledge Shakespeare as his cognitive precursor? Bloom's answer is that doing so would have required Freud to relinquish his surest claim to an "achieved individuality": the pride he took in portraying himself as the man who "discovered" the unconscious and its structuring sex and death drives, which are so conveniently portrayed by the Oedipus myth. "Freud was anxious about Shakespeare," writes Bloom, because he learned anxiety from him, as he had learned ambivalence and narcissism and schism in the self" (*Western Canon* 394). Writes Girard, "Freud was dazzled by what he took to be his crucial discovery. Loyalty to this discovery kept him from forging ahead on the path of mimesis" (*Violence and the Sacred* 183). Though Bloom goes farther than Girard in asking how much bad faith there was in Freud's decision, for both the awareness that Freud sought to evade was the same. To attain the greatest degree of the scientific economy and precision Freud ostensibly sought in his work would have required a sacrifice he was, in the end, unable or unwilling to make: the self-satisfaction he derived from having pioneered a "new" understanding of the human.

Today's critics, writes Bloom, have a "curious affinity with the exasperations that keep creating partisans for the idea of Sir Francis Bacon or the earl of Oxford as the true author of *Lear*" (*Western Canon* 60). The mimetic focus of both Bloom's and Girard's theories lead them to distrust profoundly the motives and conclusions of Shakespeare's previous and current critics, though the latter manages to sound considerably less exasperated by these interpretations than the former. The thrust of the polemic in Girard's *A Theater of Envy*, though, is the same as in *The Western Canon*: critics and academics have consistently failed to recognize that the plays and poems will always read us better than any scheme we can devise to read them. Girard's explanation of this state of affairs starts where Bloom's does, with an impression of Shakespeare as qualitatively different from all other writers. But Girard goes farther than Bloom in identifying the real source of Shakespeare's astonishing originality. For Girard, as one might expect, Shakespeare's achievement is the result of his unprecedented cognitive grasp of the mechanisms and ramifications of mimetic desire, which in the plays and poems is usually, though not exclusively, called "envy." In none of his other treatments of literary texts does Girard go so far in granting a writer conscious awareness of this essential principle of fundamental anthropology. Shakespeare, writes Girard, "discovered" the "fundamental source of human conflict" so early "that his approach to it seems juvenile, even caricatural, at first" (*Theater of Envy* 3-4). As Shakespeare's dramatic expertise grows, however, his understanding of the modalities of mimetic desire and its necessary concomitant, scapegoating, deepens, culminating in the work that has (justly, in Girard's view), captivated the world: *Hamlet*.

Girard's chapter on history's most frequently performed and thoroughly studied tragedy--entitled "Hamlet's Dull Revenge" and originally published in another version in *Stanford French Review*--begins by posing the traditional interpretive question about the play: why the long and painful delay in executing the ghost's charge of revenge against Claudius? Girard "solves" the problem of *Hamlet* in a couple of ways: first by reminding his readers that delaying the culminating act was a generic requirement of the revenge tragedy--indeed, many of Shakespeare's contemporaries found themselves hard-pressed "to postpone for the whole duration of a lengthy Elizabethan play an action that had never been in doubt in the first place and that is always the same anyway" (*Theater of Envy* 273). From our viewpoint, however, Girard's more interesting solution of the Hamlet problem harkens back to drama's putative origin in sacrificial ritual, an origin intuited by Shakespeare and used as the jumping-off point for a consideration of the ethics of revenge in a non-theatrical context. The very existence of the revenge play as a subgenre of tragedy, argues Girard, prompts someone with as sharp and self-critical a mind as Shakespeare to ponder the wide acceptance of revenge as a "sacred duty." What strikes Girard, and what has struck critics presumably since the play was first performed, is the extraordinary degree of reluctance with which Hamlet approaches the task to which, he says, he is prompted by "heaven and hell." For Girard, the play's length and tedium arise not from Hamlet's being "sicklied o'er with the pale cast of thought," but from Shakespeare's own weariness with the cyclical violence of revenge. As usual with Girard's work, this chapter stands as a kind of conclusion to a carefully wrought narrative exposition of how mimetic desire leads to violence and scapegoating, a story told in this instance through readings of the plays in (roughly) their order of composition. Girard sees Shakespeare discovering and fleshing out his understanding of mimetic desire as the structure of interindividual relations in the comedies; the histories (particularly those set in Roman and Greek antiquity) and tragedies show how mimetic crisis leads to scapegoating and sacrifice; and the romances present forgiveness as the alternative to mimetic circularity. *Hamlet*, written at about the middle of Shakespeare's career (1600) but obviously the play to which he devoted most of his artistic resources, reveals the playwright's own "ambiguous relationship to the

theatre," which, writes Girard, is "not unlike Hamlet's relationship to his revenge" (*Theater of Envy* 280).

6

Though this may help to account for the play's intrinsic linguistic and psychological complexity, it does not explain Hamlet's unmatched power of speaking to generation after generation of readers and audiences. Freud explained this aspect of Hamlet by inventing the Oedipus complex; for Girard the play's extraordinary and lasting appeal is not quite so individual a matter. "There must be," writes Girard, "something in the Hamletian transposition of the author's lassitude with revenge and its tragedies that transcends the centuries and still corresponds to the predicament of our own culture" (280). That something is, of course, Shakespeare's insight into the true source of tragic paradox, the double bind of mimetic desire, a process which Hamlet understands not too much but much too well. Girard's explanation of exactly why Hamlet delays killing his uncle is virtually identical to Bloom's: Hamlet is justifiably reluctant about repeating the violent and vengeful deeds of both his father and uncle, and hence ambivalent about fulfilling the ghost's request. "Claudius and Old Hamlet," writes Girard, "are not blood brothers first and enemies second; they are brothers in revenge" (*Theater of Envy* 274). Compare Bloom: "Shakespeare was careful to show that Prince Hamlet was a rather neglected child, at least by his father. Nowhere in the play does anyone, including Hamlet and the Ghost, tell us that the uxorious father loved the son. A basher in battle, like Fortinbras, the fractious king seems to have had no time for the child between the demands of state, war, and husbandly lust" (*Western Canon* 377-8). For both, Hamlet's delays reflect the desire *not* to imitate the actions of his father and uncle, rather than (as Freud would have it) manifesting a suppressed wish to repeat their sexual and violent exploits.

The most remarkable aspect of this elegant and seemingly self-evident interpretation, however, is not its refutation of Freud's influential reading of Hamlet. Rather, both Girard and Bloom see the willingness of critics stubbornly to divert their gaze from the obvious in favor of what Girard calls a "supreme stage of self-deception where the theoreticians join in and the whole enterprise is justified as a superior form of aesthetic responsibility" (*Theater of Envy* 285) as Hamlet's most important lesson for our time. According to Bloom, academicians who worship Freud (either in his own name or in his Jungian or Lacanian incarnations) pursue such a deception in order to discredit Shakespeare and thereby to stave off the discomfiting realization that he "largely invented us" (*Western Canon* 40). Girard's analysis of the critical blindness toward Hamlet--lengthier and more systematically developed than Bloom's--redounds to an even more damning indictment of today's academicians by demonstrating how their pursuit colludes with the forces of resentment to forestall a potentially freeing exposure of the ethical dead-end of vengeance. In this respect, conventional and currently fashionable interpretations of Hamlet resemble "the traditional reading of many Gospel themes" in suffering from "sacrificial distortions" (*Theater of Envy* 282):

In Hamlet, the very absence of a case against revenge becomes a powerful intimation of what the modern world is really about. Even at those later stages in our culture when physical revenge and blood feuds completely disappeared or were limited to such marginal milieu as the underworld, it would seem that no revenge play, not even a play of reluctant revenge, could strike a really deep chord in the modern psyche. In reality the question is never entirely settled, and the strange void at the center of Hamlet becomes a powerful symbolic expression of the Western and modern malaise, no less powerful than the most brilliant attempts to define the problem, such as Dostoyevski's underground revenge. Our "symptoms" always resemble that unnamable paralysis of the will, that ineffable corruption

of the spirit, that affect not only Hamlet but the other characters as well. The devious ways of these characters, the bizarre plots they hatch, their passion for watching without being watched, their propensity to voyeurism and spying, and the general disease of human relations make a good deal of sense as a description of an undifferentiated no-man's-land between revenge and no revenge in which we ourselves are still living (*Theater of Envy* 284).

The endless search for increasingly complex and clever explanations of Hamlet's "unconscionable" delay in executing Claudius demonstrates neither the inexhaustibility of the text nor the limitless ingenuity of its interpreters, but the lamentable extent to which our critics continue to be held spellbound by "an ethics of revenge" (288):

7

Should our enormous critical literature on *Hamlet* fall into the hands of people otherwise ignorant of our mores, they could not fail to conclude that our academic tribe must have been a savage breed, indeed. After four centuries of controversies, Hamlet's temporary reluctance to commit murder still looks so outlandish to us that more and more books are being written in an unsuccessful effort to solve that mystery. The only way to account for this curious body of literature is to suppose that back in the twentieth century no more was needed than the request of some ghost, and the average professor of literature would massacre his entire household without batting an eyelash. . . . The psychiatrist sees the very thought of. . . [the] abandonment [of revenge] as an illness he must cure, and the traditional critic sees revenge as a literary rule he must respect. Others still try to read *Hamlet* through one of the popular ideologies of our time, like political rebellion, the absurd, the individual's right to an aggressive personality, and so on. It is no accident if the sanctity of revenge provides a perfect vehicle for all the masks of modern *ressentiment*. . . . It is not *Hamlet* that is irrelevant, but the wall of conventions and ritualism with which we surround the play, in the name now of innovation rather than tradition. As more events, objects, and attitudes around us proclaim the same message ever more loudly, in order not to hear that message, we must condemn more of our experience to insignificance and absurdity. With our most fashionable critics today we have reached the point when history makes no sense, art makes no sense, language and sense itself make no sense (*Theater of Envy* 287-8).

For Girard, this is not a new message; as far back as the 1978 *Diacritics* interview he felt it necessary to castigate "fashionable critics" for refusing to acknowledge the mimeticism that really drives the cycles of theoretic change in the current literary academy. Asked if his work required "an imperative for a theoretical *reprise* comparable to the one that informs Foucault's *Archeology of Knowledge*," Girard replied that though at first he felt the need to protect his "hypothesis from being intimidated out of existence by the great theoretical steamrollers of our time," the danger of competing theories had lessened with the increasing clarity with which one can see that "the day is approaching, I am afraid, when the real but limited achievements of these great machines will have to be maintained in the face of a new unthinking rejection by the same forces of mimetic snobbery that espouse them so unthinkingly at the present time" ("*To Double Business Bound*" 216). According to Bloom, that day still has not come; indeed, as Foucault's "shadows lengthen in our evening land" (*Western Canon* 16), the critical and academic recognition that mimesis can, and frequently does, manifest itself in conflictive or anxious forms may be farther off than ever.

The principal difference between Bloom and Girard with respect to this grave situation is that the former proclaims he "does not deplore these matters; the aesthetic is, in my view an individual rather than a societal concern. . . . Art is perfectly useless, according to the sublime Oscar Wilde, who was right about everything" (*Western Canon* 16). About the best one can hope for in reading well and deeply, Bloom concludes, is "to enlarge a solitary existence" (*Western Canon* 518). There can be little doubt that Bloom means what he says here; earlier, as we have noted, he confesses to being a romantic, and these sentiments are certainly consistent with such an identity. But if the goal of reading is identical with that of writing--for how much difference can there be between "an achieved individuality" and an enlarged solitude--then what, exactly, is the point of theorizing the anxiety of influence? Bloom's failure to extricate himself from the mimetic processes he intuitively and movingly describes results in a sustained note of pessimism running through *The Western Canon*, producing dire predictions like "our current English and other literature departments" are destined soon to "shrink to the dimensions of our current Classics departments" (*Western Canon* 17), replaced by "departments of 'Cultural Studies' where *Batman* comics, Mormon theme parks, television, movies, and rock will replace Chaucer, Shakespeare, Milton, Wordsworth, and Wallace Stevens" (*Western Canon* 519). Bloom is led to such dismal forecasts, however, not merely by his adoption of what he calls the "true" Marxist criticism, "following Groucho rather than Karl," and taking as his motto "Groucho's grand admonition: 'Whatever it is, I'm against it!' (*Western Canon* 520). The real source of his pessimism is the fatalism, always latent but now emerging full-blown, that inheres in the anxiety of influence, a mimetic process Bloom views as not only inescapable, but desirable for its power to goad literary ephebes to great artistic achievement. By expelling competition from canon-formation, argues Bloom, the School of Resentment makes genuine literary accomplishment impossible. In short, great art requires a sacrificial competition; in this respect Bloom comes dangerously close to espousing what many of Girard's critics have mistakenly accused him of: endorsing the cultural efficacy, and therefore the necessity, of sacrifice.

8

Great writers like Shakespeare, argues Girard, go beyond merely intuiting the haunting resemblances between the modes of artistic mimesis they employ in their works and the existential forces that called them to become writers in the first place. What separates the writers that survive from those who do not, in Girard's view, is that the former know that "mimetic circularity is not a question of 'feeling,' of ideology, of religious belief; it is the intractable structure of human conflict" (*Theater of Envy* 339). When he discovered the anxiety of influence some twenty years ago, Bloom's faith in the literary text's power to serve as a means of understanding and negotiating the existential conundrums raised by this mimetic circularity seemed rather closer to Girard's than it appears today. Just a few years before Girard's hopeful (but premature) prediction that the "great theoretical steamrollers of our time" would soon run out of fuel, Bloom presented, in *A Map of Misreading*, a stirring exposition of the relevance of his recently formulated idea to his own profession: I remember, as a young man setting out to be a university teacher, how afflicted

I was by my sense of uselessness, my not exactly vitalizing fear that my chosen profession reduced to an incoherent blend of antiquarianism and culture-mongering. I recall also that I would solace myself by thinking that while a scholar-teacher of literature could do no good, at least he could do no harm, or anyway not to others, whatever he did to himself. But that was at the very start of the decade of the fifties, and after more than twenty years I have come to understand that I under-rated my profession, as much in its capacity for doing harm

as in its potential for good works. Even our treasons, our betrayals of our implicit trusts, are treasons of something more than of the intellectuals, and most directly damage our immediate students, our Oedipal sons and daughters. Our profession is not genuinely akin any longer to that of the historians or the philosophers. Without willing the change, our theoretical critics have become negative theologians, our practical critics are close to being Agaddic commentators, and all of our teachers, of whatever generation, teach how to live, what to do, in order to avoid the damnation of death in life. . . . Emerson abandoned his church to become a secular orator, rightly trusting that the lecture, rather than the sermon, was the proper and luminous melody for Americans. We have institutionalized Emerson's procedures, while abandoning (understandably) his aims, for the burden of the prophecy is already carried by our auditors (*Anxiety of Influence* 15-16).

Bloom no doubt meant the phrase "the damnation of death in life" in a classically romantic, Wordsworthian-solipsistic sense. His most recent book's obsessive returns to the question of why today's educational institutions have obsessively devoted themselves to debunking "the mystery of Shakespeare's genius" (*Western Canon* 60), however, demonstrate that one current manifestation of "the damnation of death in life" might be seen in the School of Resentment's blindness to the double bind of its unacknowledged mimetic snobbery. In light of the similarities between Bloom's critique and Girard's, it is, therefore, disappointing that the former ultimately refuses to take up the gauntlet of mimetic polemicism to assert that great writers and their interpreters have, as he apparently once believed, the ability to tell us "what to do." Bloom has been in higher education long enough to know that modes of thinking which achieve currency at the Yales and Stanfords of our land do not stop at the walls of those august institutions. Resentment, like water, finds its lowest point, and so trickles down through state and community colleges, into high school, and, presumably, even down to elementary school, where, stripped along the way of its theoretical subtleties, it manifests itself in peremptory dismissals of the canonical works to which both Bloom and Girard are cognitively, and whether Bloom likes it or not, ethically indebted. Girard's interpretation of Shakespeare shows what is missing from Bloom's castigation of the School of Resentment's flight from the canonical: the loss of the living presence of texts that have the power still to tell us "how to live."

9

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Anthropoetics II, 1 Benchmarks

All the material in *Anthropoetics II, 1* was written especially for this issue. We are particularly fortunate to be able to include an original interview with **René Girard** and an article by **James Williams**, executive secretary of the *COV&R*, along with the works of faithful contributors **Tom Bertonneau** and **Matt Schneider**.

About our Contributors

René Girard, to whom this issue is dedicated, recently retired as the Hammond Professor of Romance Languages at Stanford University. His major works may be found in the [GA bibliography](#).

James G. Williams received his Ph.D. from Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion in 1966. He first encountered Girard's work in 1985. He is the executive secretary of the **Colloquium on Violence and Religion**. His most recent book is *The Bible, Violence, and the Sacred*, published in paperback by Trinity Press in 1995. He is also the editor of the forthcoming set of selections from Girard's writings, *The Girard Reader* (Crossroad), and the translator of Girard's monograph on Dostoevsky, which Crossroad will publish as *Resurrection from the Underground: Feodor Dostoevsky*.

Tom Bertonneau, a veteran of the **GA** seminar, received his PhD from UCLA in Comparative Literature in 1990. His dissertation applied **GA** to the study of the modern epic, William Carlos Williams' *Paterson* and Stéphane Mallarmé's *Un coup de dés...* Since then he has published and presented papers on Williams, Wallace Stevens, Charles Olson, and other American authors, as well as on theoretical topics (and science fiction). He currently teaches English at Central Michigan University.

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