



FOREWORD

René Girard died on November 4, 2015 at the age of 91. Contrary to what some of his detractors affirmed, he was far from being “the man of a single idea.” (“L’homme d’une seule idée”). It is actually difficult to summarize his work in a few paragraphs. However, one can try to present his intellectual career in a schematic way through several emblematic theses. The first distinctive idea in Girard’s writings is certainly the theory of mimetic desire. Starting from his first book, *Deceit, Desire and the Novel*, Girard disclaims the idea of an autonomous, authentic, spontaneous desire. It is our romantic illusions that make us believe that our desires belong to us, that they are the expression of our independence or our individuality. Beyond this veil of illusions, a blind force, which Girard will later call *mimesis*, is always at work: our desires are copies of the desires of others. Desire shall not be defined as a straight line connecting a subject to an object. Our attraction to objects, on the contrary, is mediated by the real or apparent desires of a model that we imitate. According to Girard, the specificity of great novelists (Cervantes, Stendhal, Dostoevsky, Proust etc.) is to help us understand the triangular dimension of human desires. This theory of desire will be developed by Girard throughout his work. This is undoubtedly the reason why he will inevitably encounter the issues of conflict and violence. Because, following the logic of mimetic desire, the proximity of the model and the object often turns out to be dangerous. In getting closer to the mediator, the disciple suggests to him the desirability of the object he possesses or that he (seems to) covet. They gradually become a model and an obstacle for each other. Their relationship then turns into a bad, potentially violent and lethal, reciprocity.

From the beginning of the 1960s, René Girard becomes increasingly interested in the anthropology of religion. During those years, he develops his theory of the surrogate victim which remains his most famous and controversial thesis. Girard believes that it is through the religious that one can aim to discover the origins of human culture, and that these origins are inevitably violent and sacrificial. As the cornerstone of human culture, the archaic sacred proceeds from the collective murder of an innocent victim ending an episode of extreme collective disorder (the “sacrificial crisis” plunging the crowd into a state of undifferentiation). Simultaneously perceived as responsible for the crisis and its resolution, the surrogate victim possesses the ambivalent characteristics which are those of the divinities. As Jean-Pierre Dupuy writes, “the supreme originality” of Girard’s theory is to argue that:

Nothing is more human ... than the propensity to make gods by making victims. When a delirious crowd discharges its unanimous hatred on a single

innocent person, it becomes a machine for creating the sacred, that is, for generating transcendence.¹

Myths are the original murder narrated from the point of view of the persecutors. The latter are unaware of the collective and mimetic mechanism that motivated them and the myths bear the mark of this misunderstanding. As for the rituals, they reproduce in their partial and incomplete way the original episode of the crisis and its resolution. Rites and prohibitions are progressively proven to be various means for regulating and containing human violence.

According to Girard, only one religion reveals what the persecutors ignored: Christianity. In the Passion of Jesus Christ, the victim's innocence is revealed and its sacredness no longer depends on the violence striking upon it (Jesus is not turned into a god by the crowd of persecutors, but is resurrected on the third day). Christianity is thus radically demystifying. In 1978, René Girard introduces in *Things Hidden Since the Foundation of the World* the Bible as an anthropological document of high importance. According to him, it is due to this religious text that we became able to propose an atheist and scientific reading of archaic myths and rituals. But Girard adds that the Christian message is difficult to hear and understand, since it deconstructs the sacrificial foundations of our culture and therefore tells us that men will be less and less able to contain their violence by violence. Progressively, the unanimity of the persecutors breaks down and loses its structuring role. Slowly and ineluctably, the "machine for creating the sacred" becomes blocked. Little by little, humanity enters the era of the desacralization of victims and executioners. The failure of the self-regulating mechanisms of violence reveals the true nature and identity of human beings, but also leads us to an age of peril. The meaning of history, as Girard will remind us in his last book (*Battling to the End*), is apocalyptic. As the progressive globalization of our armed conflicts illustrates, the destructive effects of violence increase tenfold. As contemporary genocides and terrorist attacks attest, sacrificial practices are marked by sterility. According to Girard, the Christian message is therefore a key to understanding our historical becoming and confronts us with "decisive choices:" "there will soon be no institutions, rituals or "differences" for regulating our behavior. We have to destroy one another or love one another, and humanity, we fear, will prefer to destroy itself."²

Of course, this rapid intellectual portrait of René Girard is not without simplifications. However, it can help us ask the question of the philosophical aspect of his work. As one can see, Girard was at once a brilliant literary critic, an audacious anthropologist and an atypical religious thinker. He was trained as a historian and refused to be considered a philosopher. Sometimes his judgments about philosophy are ironic or even severe. Nevertheless, Girard often wrote about the history of philosophy. His critical comments on Hegel, Nietzsche, Heidegger, or Derrida (to mention just a few) always leave room for intellectual homages. Moreover, he never denied the philosophical implications of his anthropology. It goes without saying that one of his favorite topics, namely *mimesis*, is also a fundamental concept of Western philosophy since Plato and Aristotle. However, if one wants to ask the question of the relevance and originality of Girard's conception of desire, a careful examination of the history of philosophy will often prove to be indispensable. For if certain philosophers like Adam Smith or Spinoza have been considered as precursors of the theory of mimetic desire, other currents of thought like Hegelianism introduce competing

¹ Jean-Pierre Dupuy, *The Mark of the Sacred* (Paolo Alto: Stanford University Press, 2013), 40.

² René Girard, *Battling to the end* (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2010), 48-49.

views³ (the "desire for recognition" has sometimes been presented as a thesis which would be more innovative and would already encompass most of Girard's intuitions).

However, another problem has also emerged, namely that of the relevance of a dialogue between mimetic theory and philosophy. Some scholars, like William Mishler, observed that Girard's work and philosophy are separated by an "incommensurable gulf:"⁴ their respective conceptions of truth. Whereas, in general, philosophy opposes truth to falsehood, Girard, closer here to theologians, would oppose the truth (novelistic but also religious) to (romantic) lies. Without denying the religious dimension of Girard's thought, this "gulf" which separates these two conceptions of truth is perhaps not as "incommensurable" as it might first seem. First of all, Girard admits throughout his work that a number of philosophers influenced him (including Heidegger, Kojève, Sartre and Derrida). Moreover, it would be exaggerated to affirm that Girard limited himself to oppose against philosophers the truth of Christian revelation. Girard was a particularly curious and meticulous reader. Far from descending into pure dogmatism, his critique of philosophers is sustained by an obvious concern for logic and empiricism. Last but not least, it would be inaccurate to say that, according to Girard, truth is solely a religious matter. For, as an anthropologist, he constantly vindicated the scientific character of his intellectual enterprise. This aspect is fundamental since it puts Girard's work in a direct dialogue with philosophy. A confrontation between mimetic theory and contemporary epistemology is not only possible but also needed. Besides, the naturalization of the mimetic theory and its rapprochement with neurosciences (triggered by the recent discovery of mirror neurons) raise issues and debates which belong to the philosophy of the mind. Jean-Pierre Dupuy and Paul Dumouchel, two of the most brilliant commentators, continuators, and sometimes critics of Girard's work, have shown to what extent philosophical discussions on the mimetic theory made it possible to deepen its explanatory power and coherence in fields as varied as economics, sociology, political sciences or ethics.

Eventually, it seems possible to state that Girard's work expresses, through his criticism of philosophers, an attitude that can be described as philosophical. While he recognizes the fundamental character of the concept of *catharsis* in Aristotle and agrees with him on the importance of imitation in the human being, he nonetheless criticized him for having neglected the most destructive aspects of mimicry. If he sees in Hegel a great philosopher of desire and war, he nonetheless criticized his dialectic for watering down the conflictual nature of men. While he considers Nietzsche the great thinker of resentment and praises some of his intuitions on the religious, he nonetheless perceives his rehabilitation of the sacrificial and the Dionysian with a critical eye. While he sometimes considers Derrida's analyzes worthwhile, he also criticizes contemporary deconstructionism for its contempt with respect to the question of extratextual reference - a contempt which would prevent us from conceiving real phenomena of violence behind myths and texts of persecution. This non-comprehensive list of examples shows that, according to Girard, philosophy is constantly confronted with the risk of underestimating human violence or transforming it into a kind of absolute. This criticism is original insofar as it questions the unconscious or unrecognized tendency of philosophy to step back into the structures of the archaic sacred. This criticism, moreover, does not amount to patronizing philosophy. In *Battling to the end*, Girard clearly states that no intellectual enterprise can pretend to occupy a non-sacrificial

³ For an introduction to these debates see Christian Lazzeri, "Désir Mimétique et Reconnaissance", in *René Girard. La théorie mimétique : de l'apprentissage à l'apocalypse*, ed. Charles Ramond (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2010), 15-58.

⁴ William Mishler, *COV&R, The Bulletin of the Colloquium on Violence and Religion* 20 (2002): 5.

space.⁵ While he reaffirms that not even the uniqueness of the Christian religion can guard us against the possibility of violence and sacrifice, one can also perceive his standpoint as an opportunity for Western philosophy to question itself and its own history. Whether one agrees or not with Girard in defining "philosophy" as "a direct extension of the structures of the sacred,"⁶ one must admit that his work carries exciting philosophical issues and debates, a large part of which undoubtedly remains to be explored. It must also be noted that Girard's work has placed the issues of conflict and violence at the very heart of the history of philosophy. These are precisely the reasons why the *Philosophical Journal of Conflict and Violence* has dedicated to him its first issue.

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⁵ René Girard, *Battling to the end*, 44.

⁶ René Girard & Raymund Schwager, *Correspondence 1974-1991* (London: Bloomsbury, 2016), 158.