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BOOK REVIEW

Reineke, Martha. *Intimate Domain: Desire, Trauma, and Mimetic Theory*. East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2014. xviii + 368 pp.

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In an effort to ground Rene Girard's mimetic theory and further its insights in the psychoanalytic tradition, Martha Reineke opens up a candid and inquisitive dialogue about mimetic rivalry, trauma and healing in her latest book, *Intimate Domain*. Brimming with insights from feminist scholars, most notably Julia Kristeva's literary and psychoanalytic work, the text brings familial relationships in the spotlight to search for an articulated resolution to "metaphysical desire", thus rehabilitating the role of psychoanalysis and familial dynamics for Girard's thought. The path Reineke takes is a meticulous consolidation of mimetic theory to carefully match Kristeva's narrative as imagined response to Girard's problematic and pessimistic early account of "ontological illness"¹. The discussion unravels with effortless literary elegance, and in a remarkable psychoanalytic account that sheds light on what could have been an exceptional collaboration between Girard and Kristeva, we can only lament on the missed opportunity. Although Kristeva declined Girard's invitation to teach at John Hopkins and stayed in France for many moons, her intellectual work continued to be influenced by Girardian ideas. With *Intimate Domain*, the main point Reineke seeks to make is that the healing of ontological illness as manifested through trauma is possible through positive mimesis in the loving and intimate domain of family and through affective memory and sensory experience—an account of corporeal hermeneutics left unexplored by Girard.

In *Deceit, Desire and the Novel*, Girard briefly touched on the subject of sensory experience and its transformative effect in healing and circumventing violence (e.g. in his work on Proust, he talks about the narrator's "spiritual conversion" and "blossoming of affective memory") (7) but moves away from a phenomenological dialectic in his work. His break with psychoanalysis and critique of Freud might have been however premature, Reineke notes, since it left Girard's door closed to subsequent psychoanalytic contributions and led up to a defeatist resolve to the problem posed by metaphysical desire and a lacunar prescription of a cure from the inevitability of modern, post-Christian ontological illness (xv). What if, Reineke asks, the subject is not carried away by trauma, the mechanisms of mimetic desire and the complications of contagious violence in scapegoating, but is able to heal through love and intimacy in a journey of affective memory and decoded narratives. Moreover, she emphasizes the unexplored domain of transformative alternatives to an economy of sacrifice and identifies this discussion as a much-needed anchor of mimetic theory in the psychoanalytic tradition.

The key to finding a cure to ontological illness requires one to turn to literature where the bankruptcy of mimetic desire unravels—a domain where reflection thrives and human experience becomes transparent, and thus revealing of new possibilities and transformations (xxviii). Reineke is drawing on Girard's early insights from *Deceit, Desire and the Novel* improved by those of Julia Kristeva to validate the importance of sensory experience by his thought. Proust's *In Search of Lost Time*, Sophocles's *Antigone* and Kristeva's novel *The Old Man and the Wolves* hold valuable clues of attaining positive mimesis that can be found at a

¹ It is important to note Reineke's inclination for Girard's early writings and corresponding terminology. "Ontological sickness" and "metaphysical desire" were concepts mostly developed in René Girard *Deceit, Desire and the Novel* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1965).

closer inspection of familial relationships and their unraveling. Redefined family romance is created through the unfolding of mimetic rivalry and is laid open for analysis of trauma, the catalyst of the illness that marks our lack of being. The family, Reineke holds, is on the one side the origin of trauma and ontological illness, and on the other side a safe intimate domain, where healing is possible via positive mimesis (xxvi). These texts, read within a corporeal hermeneutical framework, speak of maternal promises that redirect mimetic desire (*In search of Lost Time*), of an intimacy among siblings in which ethical praxis paves the way out of mimetic rivalry (*Antigone*), and of a loving paternal figure that revitalizes hope in a posttraumatic future (*The Old Man and the Wolves*).

The first part of the book combines the readings of Proust by Girard and Kristeva, whereby Reineke traces their common ground from the exceptional character of the madeleine accident as a disparate instance outside of the mechanisms of metaphysical desire, to the restorative focus of the final volume to his masterpiece. The narrator distances himself through artistic effort and affective memory from his former self and is reborn as the author in a graceful world of beginnings and resolve from the past—in reading *In search of Lost Time*, the narrator exposes ontological illness in himself, an analysis that needs yet another look if Reineke wants to strengthen Girard’s mimetic theory with a practical resolution. She finds support in Kristeva’s insightful commentary on the narrator’s mother and the role the maternal body plays in healing from trauma for Proust (11, 34). This, the Girardian account misses, by turning away from a phenomenological tradition and missing the importance of sensory experience as pivotal in mitigating mimetic illness. According to Girard, Proust’s novel unveils the sacral bond that draws the subject to desire the mediator as a model-turned obstacle and subsequent ontological illness. Still, Girard fails to recognize the narrator’s mother as locus of primal desire, first mediator, and the key of healing in redefining the subject’s relationship with Being (intimacy) (72). He overlooks the centrality of matricidal aggression in creating trauma inscribed in the maternal body, and the necessity for the Proustian narrator to revisit the past, to assuage the guilt he felt over his mother and grandmother, and expose the bankruptcy of this metaphysical desire. This is the course Girard could have taken when reading Proust’s early premonitory essay, “Filial Sentiments of a Parricide”, a work written in the throes of grief over his mother, where he takes the first steps of transformative healing by way of aesthetic promise of time regained (24). Through an affective memory centered around metaphorical recreation, the Proustian narrator experiences maternal trauma in time, exposing the metaphysical illness and allowing his Being to transcend mimetic desire and incorporate the past, the otherness, into Being itself—a healing mediated by intimacy and *kinesis* (78).

In the second part of her book, Reineke explores Sophocles’ *Antigone*, as a story of trauma and healing in the intimate domain of sibling relationships. Girard himself placed *Antigone* outside of the sacrificial orbit in light of her gesture of love and denial of victimization, when briefly touching on the subject in *Things Hidden Since the Foundation of the World* (88). Corporeal narratology grounds positive mimesis and offers an alternative to sacrifice in the shape of a ritual and ethical praxis of love and intimacy between sister and brother. As we recall, *Antigone* defies all expectations and norms by choosing to bury the body of her brother and thus losing her own life as a consequence of this loving act. Reineke emphasizes the importance of lateral relationships in healing from trauma and furthers Girard’s analysis to include the importance siblings play in creating and escaping mimetic rivalry alike. Mimetic rivalries, she says, are tightly linked to sibling relationships and they anticipate further connections in life, so one can either decompensate in repetitive rivalry and ontological illness, or pursue an ethical intimacy that creates a structural potential for healing (81). Instead of acting as scapegoater, *Antigone* lets herself be carried by the impetus of love in performing the burial ritual for her brother, a gesture of pure non-

sacrificial ethic. Still, here as well Girard seems to have had room for further argument, as he fails to acknowledge the importance of Antigone's healing choice of actions in a world of contagious violence prevalent on the bodies of the characters of Theban plays. Antigone refuses to be carried away in repetitive conflict symptomatic of the sacrificial economy that preceded her in the family romance, a radical move that Reineke centers around in her argument. Reineke makes use of Cathy Caruth's impressions (123) to identify that what Antigone is doing in fact, is speaking from a wound that relieves her suffering and breaks the traumatic cycle of violence her family was caught in. In performing the ritual grief, Antigone was susceptible to rework the meaning of loss in the sacrificial economy, and enter an intimate domain whence healing transcends through loving ethics into positive mimesis. Another problem Reineke has with Girard's approach to positive mimesis — "non-rivalrous imitation"—is the little attention offered to the act of ritual in attaining the Christlike model of non-rivalrous desire Girard mentions (143). The scapegoating mechanism and ontological illness of modernity that Girard observed, can be helped by ritual as a transformative catalyst of violence that invites to an ethical praxis of healing. For Antigone, she enters an intimate space and accepts the singularity of her brother's being, overcoming mimetic rivalry and breaking open the mimetic violent cycle through love and corporeal ethics, not sacrifice and hatred (163). We have already by now an articulation of mimetic desire sensitive to psychoanalytic tradition in the supervision of Kristeva's work that identifies the origin of desire as inscribed in the maternal body and shaped ethically in lateral relationships of the family—an account of healing from familial trauma by way of the redefined relationship with the self within the family.

The final part of the book brings Kristeva's novel, *The Old Man and the Wolves*, to the fore of investigation for ways of exposing and healing metaphysical desire. The author unveils a break within the paternal function lost on one side in the symbolic and sacrificial economy characteristic of the first part of the novel, and regained on the other side as a loving father that offers hope in a transformative future outside of traumatic violence (187). The father thus recast as absent rather than altogether lost in failure, is just the path to salvation and positive mimesis Reineke is looking for, simply put: to find a remedy for ontological illness through conversion. In this vein, Kristeva's novel finds God again in the face of the escalating contagion violence in Santa Varvara and posits Him as accessible through hope and intimacy in the family domain. Affective memory and sensory experience become central to the work of healing intimacy for the psychoanalyst as she shows how Girard could have imagined an alternative to violence climaxing in sacrificial mechanisms, by enhancing intimacy in the familial domain and using this loving space to forgive and heal rather than recreate mimetic rivalry and perpetuate trauma. To be noted, Girard was not a stranger to the concept of intimacy as "intimate mediation"², but Reineke finds that Kristeva's account of a loving father that transforms mimetic desire and opens an alternative to violence, to further develop his theory (193). She addresses unsolved questions on how to use this force against violent mimesis, and how to access it through affect as sensation, mood and feeling that redress feelings from mimesis-induced trauma and reveal the possibility for positive mimesis. The path to intimacy is established in early childhood through mimesis inscribed on the maternal body and tutored in sibling relationships, one that we return to for healing that is ultimately mediated by the paternal function that opens the door to an intimate domain and life-giving forgiveness. In *The Old Men and the Wolves*, the old men from Santa Varvara testify to a healing mechanism evocative to the paternal figure itself (247). Violence spreads as the paternal function divides and sacrifice gains narrative ground and the victims of the wolves' violence become apparent

² René Girard, *Battling to the End* (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press), 205.

scapegoats. Nevertheless, on the affective surface of Stephanie's diary introspection gives way to forgiveness, a necessary step towards healing from traumatic violence. Intimacy then becomes an available alternative to mimetic rivalry by choosing the life-giving father in compassion over the sacrificial economy in place and scapegoating resolve (224).

In Kristeva's novel, the loving alternative of an absent enduring father is rooted in the capacity for empathy. Unsatisfied with Girard's answer on the capacity for empathy (a capacity developed prior to even our acquisition of language, Reineke argues), *Intimate Domain* is using Kristeva to remedy the gaps in Girard's apocalyptic account that follows in the wake of the dead father, that is, the Christ-like action to open out on forgiveness. Kristeva allows for God's absence in a Christian Orthodox account without assuming implicit loss of the Father-God—an absolute whose withdrawal cannot circumscribe to loss (256). In *The Old Men and the Wolves*, Kristeva finds an antidote from ontological illness in imagination that follows the death of the father with hope, the capacity to transform and transcend trauma, and renewal through iconic memories of fathers (253; 258). *Intimate Domain* has all the helpful analysis for scholars who would have preferred to see Girard develop his work in friendlier relations with psychoanalytic insights and in vein with his early phenomenological interests, and it reopens important discussions of alternatives to ontological illness, from which Girard strayed maybe too soon.

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