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Title

The Logic of the Undecidable: An Interview with René Girard

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/7444f0z3>

Journal

Paroles gelées, 5(1)

ISSN

1094-7264

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Publication Date

1987

DOI

10.5070/PG751003211

Peer reviewed

The Logic of the Undecidable: An Interview with René Girard

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I

Elsewhere than in the work of René Girard we find in what might be called their privative manifestation the phenomena which constitute the focus of his research: violence and Western culture's obsession with it, mimesis and the problem of representation, and (not least) origin. Girard has treated these "themes" in a series of studies from the early *Deceit, Desire and the Novel*¹ (in French 1961, English translation 1965) to *The Scapegoat*² (1982/86), including what is perhaps his best known effort, *Violence and the Sacred*³ (1972/77). I write "privative" because, although Girard's work unfolds as it were in parallel with what has come to be known (however broadly and loosely applied the term may be) as Post-Structuralism, even adopting some of the methodological approaches accented by that movement (Girard's readings of other writers are often "deconstructive"), he does not share with his celebrated contemporaries that spirit of denial, stemming from Nietzsche, or indeed of *negation*, which seems at once to animate and etiolate so much of their production. In *Des choses cachées depuis la fondation du monde* (1978) Girard goes so far as to characterize this wide front of nihilism under the strong title of "a vast syndicalism of defeat."⁴ While in 1987 Girard's animosity to what he previously regarded as defeatism seems to have lessened, strong differences may still be drawn between the tenor of his own work and that of the spirit of the times. Whereas the Post-Structuralists and the self-styled Post-Modernists announce (as with Foucault) the imminent disappearance of man, Girard strives toward

man's recuperation; where Deconstruction despairs of meaning or simply eschews it, Girard, in the major thrust of his "fundamental anthropology," confronts the originary moment of culture in order to rescue meaning from mystification.

When Girard, therefore, in *Violence and the Sacred* or *The Scapegoat*, and Derrida in his essay entitled "Plato's Pharmacy" in *Dissemination*,⁵ both address the Athenian institution of the *pharmakos* or "scapegoat," it would seem a case of convergence. It is easy at first to trust this impression and yet the matter is not so simple. Affirming the impression, both, after all, speak of mechanisms of concealment at work deep within the currents of Western culture. Derrida notes, using one of his metaphors for culture, the *text*, that "a text is not a text unless it hides from the first comer, the first glance, the law of its composition and the rules of its game."⁶ Girard asserts in both *Violence* and *The Scapegoat* that in the generation of culture the device of that generation is (necessarily) hidden away—is one of those *choses cachées*: "human culture is predisposed to the concealment of its origins."⁷ The distinction, however, is that for Girard the *trace* of the double gesture of origination is neither absolutely elusive nor utterly opaque. The trace of origin is, rather, available and decipherable; it is, if not transparent, then translucent. To see as through a glass darkly is nevertheless to see, to understand, and to this extent we are licensed to find in Girard as much a hermeneutic as a deconstruction of the Western attitude toward violence. Instead of "trace" we should speak perhaps of *clue*. If that term suggests a Holmesian metaphor, all the better, for Girard's project is above all the detection of a grandly ramifying crime.

Girard's knowledge of that crime forces him to overturn modernity's many myths about its own instauration—Rousseau's, for example, and those of what Girard calls the Rousseauists. In *The Social Contract*, Rousseau sketches an idyll of origins seductive in its rationality. For Rousseau the social order begins in the spontaneous renunciation of violence by the human collective. Peace comes first and violence is the degeneration or corruption of that peace. Thus is born the "Noble Savage." Girard sees in Rousseau's philosophical primitive not only an illusion but a positive complicity or participation in that concealment of violence which is both culture's primordial concern and the most deeply seated check against an authentic pacificity. What Rousseau cannot grasp, what we his subscribers cannot grasp, is that violence inhabits and informs

the very inception of culture. Girard sees culture as coming-to-be in a paroxysm of "mimetic rivalry" and "reciprocal violence" leading to what he calls the "sacrificial crisis." He notes (in *Violence*) that "primitive societies do not have built into their structure an automatic brake against violence; but we do, in the form of powerful institutions whose grip grows progressively tighter as their role grows progressively less apparent."⁸ We discover the salient difference between primitive and modern societies in the lack in the former and the presence in the latter of a judiciary:

As soon as the judicial system gains supremacy, its machinery disappears from sight. *Like sacrifice* [italics mine], it conceals—even as it also reveals—its resemblance to vengeance, differing only in that it is not self-perpetuating and its decisions discourage reprisals.⁹

The judiciary displaces the symmetrical immediacy so conducive to violence in the primitive community. The likeness of the judiciary to the primitive system is, therefore, apparent only; the difference is everything. For it is exactly the cycle of *self-perpetuating violence* which constitutes the sacrificial crisis and necessitates the institution of ritual murder. The sacrificial crisis occurs, in Girard's reconstruction (a reconstruction which in the interview which follows he refers to as "transcendental" or "eidetic") when the essential hierarchy of the primitive community is interrupted by *resemblance*. In Girard's view the communism or egalitarianism of the primitive community is one more delusive projection by modernity on its own misunderstood past. The cause of violence lies not in some alleged *difference* of inequality or economic maldistribution of goods but in the erasure of difference. Events such as the birth of twins or the arrival of some *extra* person from outside the community create a situation in which two or more parties desire the same thing. Twin brothers desire the same patrimony, for example, or the newcomer the rights and privileges of the well-ensconced. But even the maturation of an only son can instigate the crisis.

It is here that *mimesis* becomes an important, indeed the decisive, element in the Girardian analysis. In the case of the youth, who models himself after the father, the father's desires naturally become the youth's. But only one, either the father or the youth, can satisfy those desires. Conflict becomes inevitable. (It should be noted that for Girard desire is ontological; he therefore rejects Freud's exclusively sexual interpretation of the Oedipus myth.)

When two persons compete for the same niche or object only the elimination of one or the other by means of his (or her) death can restore the social equilibrium. But, since each contender has his (or her) partisans, his (or her) death will be avenged; and at that turn the vengeance itself must be avenged. "Big fleas have little fleas upon 'em to bite 'em, and so forth *ad infinitum*," as the old saying would have it. This is the principle of *reciprocal violence* which so divides the primitive community as to threaten its destruction. (Reciprocal violence appears to the community as something apart from all individuals, immense and unto itself, as we shall see.) Scapegoating, later institutionalized as sacrifice, displaces generalized violence into *generative violence*, centered now on a single victim, and having as its secret or "unconscious" aim the reduction of tensions through the production of unanimity. The victim is in reality "not guilty." His real status is therefore arbitrary; but this arbitrariness is repressed (either hidden or forgotten) and the factions agree that the victim is the cause of their affliction. His or her death will, therefore, appease the cycle of murder—conceived of as the wrath of an offended god. "The proper functioning of the sacrificial process [therefore] requires [. . .] the complete separation of the sacrificed victim from those beings for whom the victim is a substitute."¹⁰ Obviously, if the victim's arbitrary status were admitted, the efficacy of the substitutive maneuver would be undermined. In *The Scapegoat* Girard argues for the universality of this (eidetically reconstructed) originary scene and of the attempt to conceal it. He sees myth as a "game of transformations"¹¹ in which later peoples, revolted by the hints of murder abounding in the foundatory stories of their culture, begin to censor and alter those stories. Girard extends himself to suggest that ethnology and indeed the modern world view generally have implicated themselves in this progressive alteration. From this attitude stems Girard's suspicion of the "humanist" followers of Rousseau.

In his analyses of Sophocles' *Oedipus* and Euripides' *Bacchae* Girard discovers precisely those elements that the blindness of the Rousseauists prevents them from seeing: not the extraordinary stature or humanity of the protagonist but the oppositional symmetry of the so-called tragic hero(ine) and his (or her) antagonist(s). Thus Oedipus on the one hand and Creon and Tiresias on the other *resemble one another*. So do Dionysus and Pentheus. In each case the

opposed parties desire the same thing, and in each case that convergent desire erupts into reciprocal violence. "The *mimetic* attributes of violence are extraordinary—sometimes direct and positive and sometimes indirect and negative."¹² Every thrust engenders its counterthrust and the *agon* radiates from the central figures to infect, rapidly, their partisans. Violence appears to the primitive community as something superhuman which has invaded the social order from without. The connection, of such crucial importance for Girard, between violence and the sacred can be found, then, in the fact that "the sacred consists of all those forces whose dominance over man increases or seems to increase in proportion to man's effort to master them."¹³

Tempests, forest fires, plagues, among other phenomena, may be classified as sacred. Far outranking these, however, though in far less obvious a manner, stands human violence—violence seen as something exterior to man and henceforth as part of all the other forces that threaten mankind. Violence is the secret heart and soul of the sacred.¹⁴

Girard's "sacred" partakes, as he explains, of its Latin root: *sacer*. The Latinism embraces both positive and negative, "good" and "bad," attributes; it consists precisely of those powers physically greater than man and is related perhaps more to the sublime than to the holy. In Girard's analysis modern commentators have fallen into a kind of Manichaeian Fallacy, supposing that the sacred can only be positive. Indeed, "moral dualism appears as *collective* violence is eliminated."¹⁵ But because all symptoms of collective violence still can and do afflict our culture (we are speaking of the breakdown of social conventions, the persecution of minorities, and finally of the lynch mob) such a dualism has the dangerous supplemental effect of maintaining the obfuscation of the very phenomenon toward which it turns.

It is not that Girard *assents* to the violence inherent in the inception of culture. Most assuredly he does not. But it would be folly to deny what must be, which is precisely what—according to him—the rationalizing, nostalgic, or "humanist" theories do. The inaugural brutality of culture must be uncovered and recognized precisely in order to overcome the cyclicism which it sets into motion. (Thus, if ritual sacrifice reproduces the scene in which unanimity returned to a riven community, it also distances itself from that scene; it "runs

flat" after a time, like a battery, and must be "recharged" by an infusion of new violence.) Because violence and mimesis are so closely connected, the denial of violence has included a denial of the full power of mimesis. But

Mimeticism is the source of all man's troubles, desires, and rivalries, his tragic and grotesque misunderstandings, the source of all disorder and therefore equally of order through the mediation of scapegoats.¹⁶

"Humanism" *collaborates* with the classical denial of violence by reading the myths and tragedies from the classical standpoint: "What no one ever realizes is that Oedipus could not be both the incestuous son and parricide and at the same time the *pharmakos*."¹⁷ Thus Girard's task is to "deconstruct" the accessory readings of the "humanists." But—and this is the most unorthodox aspect of Girard's project—he insists that this "deconstruction" began already in the transition from paganism to Christianity with the Passion of Christ.

What is astonishing about the Gospels is that the unanimity [of Christ's accusers] is not emphasized in order to bow before, or submit to, its verdict as in all the mythological, political and even philosophical texts, but to denounce its total mistake, its perfect example of non-truth.¹⁸

We might refer to Girard, then, as a *kind* of "anti-Logocentrist" insofar as the *Logos* of our epoch is still duplicitous, still engaged in that *unconscious* concealment-of-origins which the Christian *anti-myth* opposes and begins to undo. It would be a mistake, however, to view Girard as some sort of naive apologist for Christendom because, indeed, he distinguishes between Christendom, which is the political appropriation of the Gospel message, and Christianity, the message of Christ as attested by the Gospels. Nevertheless his position will make many humanist academics uncomfortable.

Whether ultimately one agrees with Girard's Christocentric viewpoint or not, one cannot deny the breadth of his knowledge or the audacity of his investigations. He is as antithetical as Derrida, though of course in an entirely different way, constructive rather than deconstructive in his dismantling of conventional wisdom. Posterity may have to distinguish *two* lines of "deconstruction" beginning in the mid-1960's: that, namely, of Derrida, and that of Girard. What, though, can be founded in the abyss of *différance* or in the "unreadability" of texts? This is not to say that Girard has made deconstruction obsolete; rather, he has shown it in a different light. He has

shown, perhaps, that the Derridean project, for example, is far more positive and *constructive* than Derrida himself may know.

In Girard's ongoing exploration of origins, human consciousness attains its ground in *terra firma* by turning a penetrating eye on all received opinion. The reader must sometimes feel a Euthyphro to Girard's Socratic voice. It was Socrates, not Euthyphro, who understood the meaning of piety. Such is the nature of the true *skandalon*, or offense. If modernity is offended, then why not for the better?

II

This interview with René Girard took place on March 7, 1987 in conjunction with his lecture on "Sacrifice and Deconstruction," given under the sponsorship of the graduate students of the UCLA French Department and *Paroles Gelées*. I began the interview by invoking what Paul de Man refers to as "the Resistance to Theory" in an essay of that name.¹⁹ Just such a resistance had haunted my reading of Prof. Girard's work; and it had been evident in a number of questions put to him by his audience.

Bertonneau: Your lecture today had the same effect on me as your books, which I confess is ambiguous. On the one hand, your arguments persuade me; on the other hand, I'm so persuaded as to feel somewhat suspicious. A certain innate skepticism asserts itself which leaves me feeling uncomfortable. I might add that a poll of local readers reveals a similar response. Are you aware of the "resistance to Girard's theory," and if so, to what do you attribute it?

Girard: Resistance to theory is really quite an interesting idea. But do you mean a resistance to theory among the theoreticians? [The interviewer assents] One could, in fact, view contemporary theory itself as a resistance to theory . . . But if your ambiguous reaction to my books is a fear of what you might perceive as a totalizing principle, then I would assure you that there is no such project in me—no impulse whatever to systematize. While I have undoubtedly developed a *kind* of system, and while there is no *refusal of theory* in me, the result was not intentional. To put it bluntly, my theory took me by surprise.

Bertonneau: Your remark takes *me* a bit by surprise. What exactly do you mean?

Girard: Mind you, I will need to be subjective in order to explain myself; so, of course, what I report may be a purely subjective illusion—I don't know . . . But when I first started working with mimetic theory [in the early nineteen sixties] I noticed some pretty amazing effects. Quite suddenly, all these novels by Dostoyevsky, Zola, and Flaubert made sense. And yet it was still, somehow, diffuse. At that point the victimage theory presented itself to me. On the one hand I was flabbergasted, but on the other hand I was not surprised at all. Do you know why?

Bertonneau: It sounds as if something like Jung's Collective Unconscious was hard at work.

Girard: You are being ironic, of course. But whatever explanation you prefer to invoke, I felt that it was none of my doing. Eugenio Donato, who later became a deconstructionist, advised me to look into anthropology; he thought that I'd find a lot of material on mimeticism and victimage in anthropological texts. And, up until then, I had, in effect, rejected anthropology. Donato said to me, "Read it, you really ought to read it." So I read it, under his influence, I guess you'd say. That's when things started to fall into place. One, two, three! Just like that. It came together so naturally that I simply couldn't be surprised. But, since Donato didn't understand victimage in the way in which I was beginning to understand it, the process wasn't exactly causal. I had no formal intention of providing a universal explanation of cultural development, and, if that's what it proved to be, then I only recognized it after the fact. I'm really just as startled by it as anyone else.

But the fact that [the victimage theory] provides a useful explanation for so many things should not prejudice us against it. What if it is the product of my systematizing mind? Should we make that an *a priori* objection to my theory? If we make it an *a priori* that, should a theory move toward systematization, we won't accept it, then I suppose that we will have just that resistance to theory that de Man talks about.

In fact, I myself felt that resistance for a while. That's the reason it took me eleven years to write *Violence and the Sacred*: I felt certain that there were errors in my theory, and I was always reading more in order to see whether I would have to make any adjustments. But research just kept confirming the original insight. After a while, I just had to say to myself: "Well, that's the way it is." Maybe there is a tendency toward system in me. I can't say, because, of course,

I can't get outside of myself. It's as I said in my lecture: nobody is ever aware of himself as scapegoating another. It's always someone else who is guilty of scapegoating.

Bertonneau: How far is your interest in religion, or indeed the religious element, responsible for the defensive attitude many people seem to take toward your theory?

Girard: I would say ninety-eight-and-a-half per cent; maybe ninety-nine-and-a-half. The religious aspect wasn't there at the beginning, and maybe that's why some scholars can accept *Deceit, Desire and the Novel* but not *Violence and the Sacred*, let alone *The Scapegoat*. Eric Gans said something about me in his introduction to my lecture today that I would like to amend or correct. He suggested that there was a strategic aspect in the order of my work, that religion and, in particular, Christianity, was deliberately omitted from *Violence and the Sacred*. The truth is that when I wrote *Violence and the Sacred* I indeed wanted to include the religious element, to write a "two-sided" book. As I wasn't able to do that, I cut it out entirely. Time was passing and I wanted to publish the book.

Bertonneau: I had wondered about what I had perceived as the conspicuous absence of Christianity from *Violence and the Sacred*.

Girard: Yes . . . Much of what later became *Des choses cachées* goes back to '67 or '68, or around that time . . . *Des choses cachées* is really *Violence and the Sacred* plus the Christian element. In some ways I like *Des choses cachées* better than the earlier book. It's more logical, a bit more sound.

Bertonneau: Is it, in your opinion, a serious cultural problem that scholarship in general should reject a comprehensive interpretation of human institutions, such as yours, more or less because it contains a religious element?

Girard: Yes, I think it's a very serious problem. On the other hand, it may well be an inevitable problem. We should perhaps ask ourselves if, after all, the modern university, going back, I mean, to the French and British universities of the late Middle Ages, was founded on a religious principle. The easy answer would be yes. But sometimes I think not. It appears to me that the modern university expels the religious element more or less from the beginning—and perhaps for good reason. Religion is going to be divisive. There's no getting around that. We might well ask whether modern democracy is founded on a religious principle. Again the answer is no: modern democracy also expels the religious—not, perhaps, very graciously,

and certainly not to the satisfaction of some parties, but certainly for good reason. And because of this I hesitate to criticize the universalists for their suspicion of the religious, or even for their non- or anti-religiosity. The expulsion of religion may paradoxically be the unitive element of our world—yet one more embodiment of the victimage principle.

Bertonneau: To Americans at any rate, that expulsion and its positive results seem more or less invisible. There's this clamor on the political right to put religion back into public life, whatever that might entail, and so on.

Girard: We need more time. Do you see what I mean? We need the passage of more history before the necessity of this expulsion will be fully revealed. But it's becoming more visible all the time. And, to come back to what I said a moment ago about the problematics of non-religiosity: I think it's going to make things more difficult, rather than easier, at least in the short term. I think, really, that just this is what deconstruction is all about, and why it's not terroristic, as some of its opponents claim it to be. Deconstruction teaches us, far better than Heidegger, how to live in a "groundless" world, how to avoid the violence inherent in any kind of a foundationalist doctrine.

Bertonneau: I've been curious about your reading of Heidegger [in *Des choses cachées*], and this may be a good point to ask you about it. You react to him as I reported myself to have reacted to you, namely with both admiration and suspicion.

Girard: Yes, yes. And this is because there are so many repressive elements in Heidegger: what I would almost call a worship of the old sacred. That strikes me as pretty scary. I mean, look at his "Speech to the Rectorate" (1934),²⁰ and some of his other writings from the early or mid-thirties. I really think that they represent a kind of dark worship of this force that Heidegger calls Being—which really isn't a being. It's sinister. And yet there can be no doubt that Heidegger is a genius. Deconstruction owes a great deal to Heidegger. But when you turn to deconstruction, none of those dark elements that haunt Heidegger are present. Deconstruction is—certainly—nihilistic in its post-modern and post-humanist way; but, as such, it belongs to the modern democratic world. There are no Nazi or fascist temptations, and probably no communistic ones either, in deconstruction. There's no center, so there's no temptation to centralize. It's the death of humanism. Heidegger, the French critics—Derrida, Foucault, Lacan—these all contribute to it.

Bertonneau: Your attitude toward the deconstructionists, like your attitude toward Heidegger, is ambiguous. In *Des chose cachées*, for example, you refer to post-structuralism as a “*vaste syndicalisme de l’échec*.” That’s a strong phrase. But, I take it, your position is not now so polemical.

Girard: The characterization was strong, yes, and my position has changed. I have become less polemical vis-à-vis my fellow French critics. This is to some extent because I’ve been so disappointed by the social sciences. I’ve come to feel that my natural audience is philosophers. Then again it may be that because of age I’ve become less polemical. It was a combination of these things, I suppose, that sent me back to Derrida to begin to read him again in earnest. I now feel that he must be credited with very powerful readings, and that this is a great thing. There aren’t many readings carried out at [Derrida’s] level. What he says should and needs to be said. Recently, you know, some books have been published which suggest that Derrida is nothing but Heidegger *rebouilli*, “warmed over,” as you might say in English. Likewise with Foucault. It’s just not true to say that Derrida brings nothing new or original to the space opened up by Heidegger. He does. And what he brings is creatively and powerfully original.

Bertonneau: People note that Heidegger, at least the early Heidegger, is not as much a textual exegete as is Derrida, and that, because Derrida is, apparently, purely exegetical, it follows that he can’t be as original as Heidegger.

Girard: Or, in the same vein, they argue that Derrida doesn’t limit himself to philosophical texts, and that he is, therefore, a *literary* exegete. In the case of “Plato’s Pharmacy,” for example, Derrida leans toward mythology. But in my opinion this is a great thing.

Bertonneau: The mention of “Plato’s Pharmacy” suggests some questions about your theory. The accessory relation of criticism and philosophy to the concealment of the origins of culture in a scene of victimage, one of the strong features of your scheme, intrigues me. I can see how Nietzsche, for example, fits the pattern: where Christianity expels the old sacred, Nietzsche expels Christianity. But it’s less easy to see where the post-Nietzscheans find their place. Where, for example, do we locate the concealment of origin in Heidegger?

Girard: I imagine that we would go to what Heidegger, in his text, calls the withdrawal of Being, his history of metaphysics. As I read that history, it moves in parallel with, or is even an allegory of, the movement away from the old sacred and its sacrificial gods. That

movement is quite slow, of course, since the influence of the Bible on late antiquity is gradual; and it cannot be considered as a mere duplication of what people call religious faith.

When Heidegger claims, then, that there is, for example, no such thing as a Christian philosophy; that, when the Christians start thinking, they simply appropriate Aristotle; and that, therefore, they can't be taken seriously as philosophers—he has duplicated the original expulsion. I sense in Heidegger's total expulsion of Christian thinking something both positive and negative. It reflects the exclusion of Christianity from philosophy, but that's exactly why Christian thinking could come into its own. That's why the Christian *Logos* was able to come into its own.

By the way, I need to correct you on one point. Christianity doesn't duplicate the pre-Christian, the sacred, act of expulsion: it *reveals* expulsion and clears the ground for something new.

Bertonneau: In *Des choses cachées*, in the chapter on "The *Logos* of John," you discuss the distinction between the Greek or Heraclitean *Logos* and the Christian *Logos*, in the context, in fact, of Heidegger's derogation of the latter. Given that, for you, the history of the West since the time of Christ is articulated on just that distinction, I wonder if you wouldn't explain for me exactly how you measure it.

Girard: The text of Heidegger that I have in mind in that chapter is his *Introduction to Metaphysics* (1935).²¹ Heidegger remarks that the word *Logos* appears prominently in the Gospel of John. That's why the Gospel of John has always been considered the most "Greek" of the Gospels. Now the Christians, Heidegger says, always claimed that the Greek *Logos* was the "little brother" of the Christian *Logos*. Then the philosophers made the counterclaim that the Christian *Logos* was the "little brother" of the Greek *Logos*. But nobody ever said that they were completely different. Heidegger was the first ever to say so. Heidegger claims that the Christian *Logos* doesn't mean "order" so much as it means "obedience." He also notes that the Christian *Logos* sometimes bears the name of *Kyrix*, which means "herald." In Heidegger's reading, the Son of Man came to earth to call people to obey the Father, casting the Father in the role of a kind of "chief of police." I can't agree with that. But Heidegger's separation of the two *Logoi* is nevertheless significant.

As to how we are to understand the Christian *Logos* as different from the Greek: the Christians said of Christ that "he came into his

own and no one recognized him," and, of course, no one would dream of a Greek *Logos* which wasn't visibly present or recognizable. Note that the metaphysics of presence is right there, in the Greek *Logos*. The Christian *Logos*, on the other hand, is *not there*. It isn't part of this world, or of the City of Man. That's what the text says. So Heidegger is righter than he knows; he just didn't carry his reading far enough. The *Logos* of John is the excluded *Logos*, or it's the *Logos* of exclusion which speaks about exclusion. Heidegger's definition of the *Logos* is that it keeps opposites together with violence. That's pretty interesting. It's the *Logos* of dialectics, of philosophy.

Bertonneau: It strikes me that there may indeed be some common ground between Heidegger's thinking and your own. This would be in what he calls *Unverborgenheit*, "unconcealment," modeled on the Greek *Aletheia*. In *Des choses cachées*, you invoke a related concept, that of Apocalypse, which is almost a synonym of *Aletheia*. You describe modernity as apocalyptic. I suppose that just such texts as Heidegger's, or Derrida's, which seem to presage some great transformation in human thought, prompt your characterization.

Girard: Yes, but let me make it clear that by Apocalypse I don't mean the end of the world, which is the vulgar interpretation of the term. When I say that modernity is apocalyptic, I mean that it is revelatory. Certain of the *choses cachées* are being revealed. And I would say that I belong to the same epoch as these thinkers. The difference between their Apocalypse and mine is that mine finds its roots and, naturally, its nourishment, in the Bible and in Christianity. It goes back to the disavowal of the sacred at the beginning of our culture, Judeo-Christian culture. The argument *against* the sacred cannot, if it is to differentiate itself *from* the sacred, use the methods *of* the sacred. Our epoch is characterized by the on-going revelation of the *human* origin of violence. I think there's a kind of systematic logic to it. A world without sacrificial protection will create all sorts of tools, more and more dangerous, which will threaten those who build them. Technology when applied to destruction functions this way: it reveals or disconceals the human origin of violence. Insofar as the Christian text anticipates this revelation, it is, precisely, apocalyptic. It declares that no violence comes from God, but that violence comes entirely from the human agency. It's one nation against the other; brother against brother. It's force; it's excess.

For just these reasons, not only is ours an apocalyptic age; it's an age for which the apocalyptic text of John, and of the New Testament in general, is the most appropriate text. How can we deny John today? And yet there is the mystery that our culture does not speak much of it. All those cartoons which one used to see in *The New Yorker*, with a sort of beatnik character walking along with a sign that reads "Doomsday"—you don't see that much any more.

Bertonneau: It was Stine, I think, who was famous for those cartoons in the early and mid-fifties. You'd have to dig into the archives to find them.

Girard: Yes, and it's actually rather interesting that they existed then, so close to the beginning of the atomic age. That shows that the situation was already what it is today. Some details may have changed. I'm never sure of the exact distinction between the atomic and the hydrogen bomb. But the *Angst* was already there.

Indeed, I would say that people like Heidegger are forerunners of the modern temperament, discerners of a situation that has become more pronounced and more widespread. But my sense of it is, frankly, more optimistic than theirs. Sure, the year 2000 is close at hand, but that doesn't mean that the end of the world is imminent. It means that any radical religious experience in this world must be apocalyptic, must be conditioned by the possibility of total destruction. The ethical imperative today is dominated by that. Any thinking that fails to take into account the fact of the H-bomb will be partial thinking. Now, if it's only a reaction to the possibility of total destruction, it may well run to the superficial. But that too is part of our experience today, which is fundamentally historical. Whatever leaves out contemporary historical conditions must necessarily be banal or superficial. That's why I think a book like *Being and Time* is, to use the language of technology, obsolete. Today our existential experience includes the potential for complete annihilation. Everybody knows that that wasn't there in the nineteen-twenties or thirties. In nineteen eighty-six, one cannot read a newspaper without being made aware of man's self-destructive capacity.

Bertonneau: The notion of an ethical imperative is a Kantian notion. In your talk today you used another Kantian term, "the Transcendental." In *Des choses cachées*, you call your anthropology a "Fundamental Anthropology." Today, however, you called it a "Transcendental Anthropology." What, exactly, did you mean?

Girard: I meant "transcendental" in the Husserlian sense, because I said at the same time there was an empirical referent. I meant "transcendental" in the sense that there is a relation [between any particular aspect of culture and some original] ritual, however distant. But, since the origin of the ritual has not been witnessed by the people who repeat it, or who manifest its meaning, what I'm talking about is on another level, a reconstructed level. "Transcendental" refers to that level. I mean "transcendental" in the philosophical and not in the religious sense.

Bertonneau: If I follow you, you're saying that your reconstruction of the originary sense is an eidetic reconstruction.

Girard: That's right—eidetic. I wish I had said eidetic instead of transcendental. Transcendental is subject to misreading, whereas eidetic is not.

Bertonneau: Since we're on the subject of terminology, let me ask about the distinction between two terms employed fairly consistently in *Violence and the Sacred* and in *The Scapegoat*, but particularly in the latter. I mean the terms "sacred" and "supernatural." These seem strongly distinguished from each other. In *The Scapegoat* you write that there is a pervasive and undeniable "supernatural" element in the Gospels which you would not wish to denigrate. How far is your reading of the Gospels articulated on these two terms?

Girard: It's not that I tried to use them systematically; but I wanted to show that there cannot be a humanistic reading of the Gospels. In other words, the Father cannot be reduced to some kind of psychological device. You can do this to some extent with Satan. You can call him a figure of mimetic desire, and there might not be much left. Not so with the Father.

Bertonneau: I'm not sure that I follow you.

Girard: One has to assume that everything Jesus says touches on a reality outside of this universe, something out of human reach, which nevertheless acts upon this world. Christ refers to "the One who sent Me." That's not the same as the sacred at all. That's the main thing.

Bertonneau: The supernatural can't be bracketed.

Girard: Not at all. It's part of the very substance of the Gospels.

Bertonneau: It may be that the question of the Gospels is once again the question of the resistance to your theory.

Girard: Yes, of course.

Bertonneau: It may be unfair of me to ask, but does one need faith, ultimately, to accept your theory?

Girard: As I see it, my argument is quite logical. If you understand the old sacred as a closed system, and if you understand the Gospels as a revelation of how that system works, then the Gospel cannot come from within the closure of violence. It can't come from humanity, and therefore it must come from without. If you think that God is violence, then, in effect, you have no god; you've only got your own mediated desires. Now, because violence reigns within its own closure, if God comes into the world of violence, he cannot remain there. The proof that he's God is that he's killed. But having behaved like the anti-sacred God, by submitting himself to death rather than imitating the pattern of violence, he has triumphed over violence. The whole scheme of redemption enters with the temporary presence of God. It's part of the logical sequence of what I would call the anthropology of the Gospels. You cannot contradict it at all. One doesn't need sacrifice, one needn't go back to the old sacred, in order to find transcendence, using that term now in the religious sense. The Gospels constantly recognize this by talking about the intermediate powers, what Paul calls the celestial powers. There are, maybe, these petty gods, but they are not at all identical with the true God.

Bertonneau: The Mosaic injunction against the worship of false gods makes sense in this context.

Girard: And the great continuative between the Old Testament and the New is the refusal of idolatry.

Bertonneau: In this negative proof of the transcendence of God, or of the supernatural, there is something that resembles Derrida's notion of metaphysical closure: we can posit the "other" of a system only as the notion of something outside that system.

Girard: I can agree to some extent. Mind you, Derrida says nothing about the Torah. But there is, in his assertion of multiple centers, none hierarchically valorized over any other, a certain non-violent skepticism. Yes, it's anti-idolatrous, like the work of all great negative thinkers—Nietzsche, for example.

Bertonneau: I suppose that to some extent we must read people like Nietzsche and even Heidegger as religious thinkers, while admitting that such a characterization is almost bound to be misunderstood.

Girard: I would exempt Heidegger on the grounds of what strikes me as his idolatry of Being, or perhaps on account of his cult of the

ancient Greeks. Things like that worry me. Not to mention the cult which has formed around Heidegger himself. And maybe certain aspects of his readings of poetry could be considered cultic. I don't really know, however, what Heidegger's religious stance was.

Nietzsche is a different case. His anti-Biblical stance is explicit throughout his writings, but it doesn't irritate me, even in spite of my own Biblical orientation. Heidegger, on the other hand, irritates me. This is purely personal. I mean, there are attacks against Heidegger which say, don't read him because he associated with the Nazis, he's tainted, and so on; but I can't buy that kind of simple-minded prohibition. Nevertheless, there is something in Heidegger profoundly sympathetic to some of the worst things to have shown themselves in our century. But he's like Wagner, uncanny because he's so frightening.

Bertonneau: I'd like to direct a question to what you call mimetic appropriation, which one member of the audience today tried to map onto a Marxian model of economic scarcity. The assumption was, apparently, that desire is always provoked by material conditions. As I read you, however, mimesis does not have to be articulated on anything material. Is that correct?

Girard: Yes. Let me explain. First of all, my mimetic theory is not by any stretch of the imagination a scarcity theory, and the Marxian commentators are fully aware of that. The *economic* commentators, on the other hand, are also aware of it, and a number of them are interested in its implications for their field of study. There's a book called *La violence de la monnaie*,²² due, I think, to be translated into English. It's a theory of inflation, and in my opinion, it's quite good. The authors' thesis has to do with dominance patterns. You understand that in animals, when mimetic desire is played out, you have, as the result of the playing-out, a dominance pattern. The dominated animals will prefer to retreat rather than challenge the dominator. While dominance patterns aren't exactly the same thing as mimetic desire, they prefigure it. We ought not, therefore, confuse mimetic desire, or mimetic appropriation, with the struggle for goods which takes place in the situation of scarcity, as Marxist economics describes it.

There's an interesting example that I like to use to illustrate this. It has to do with an experiment in which five children of about four years of age were placed in a room with five identical toys. The toys were of the mass-produced type and were indistinguishable from one

another. Now, the first child chooses a toy. The other children, in fact, see no difference between the toys, and, as their behavior shows, the only criterion they have for preferring one toy over another is that someone else has chosen it first. It's rational. I mean, the first child may have seen something special about the toy he chose which is not yet apparent to me. It becomes the superior object and I have reason for desiring it.

Bertonneau: When you call such behavior "rational," I take it that you don't mean that it's particularly reflective, but that it has a certain unconscious but predictable grammar.

Girard: No, no, of course. I contend that most, if not all of the time, mimetic behavior is not aware of itself. But I don't know that much about mimetic desire. What interests me is the conflictual mechanism; and also reversals of mimetic desire: the fact that an obstacle becomes immediately desirable in some situations. All such phenomena, so-called, fall neatly into the mimetic pattern. That must be my systematic penchant at work again.

Right now, as a matter of fact, I'm reading Shakespeare's comedies. I feel certain that Shakespeare wrote his comedies in the order of the conflictual configurations, as they ascend in complexity. You can base a logical theory of mimetic desire on a chronology of Shakespeare's comedies. The *Two Gentlemen of Verona* is the earliest and simplest version of mimetic desire. As you progress through the comedies, you have increasingly complex, and perhaps pathological, situations. I'd say that the comedies reflect Shakespeare's increasing understanding of the mimetic principle and are his discovery of mimeticism. The heroes of *Twelfth Night*, you know, are so defensive with one another; and they are quite unlike the heroes of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. What I would call their pseudo-narcissism is much elaborated over the characters of the previous plays. Once Shakespeare elaborates all the stages of mimetic desire, he stops writing comedies.

Bertonneau: You say that mimeticism is almost always unaware of itself. This remark points up the fact that some kind of unconscious figures prominently, if not always explicitly, in your theory. How does your notion of the unconscious differ from the classic notions of the unconscious, say Freud's?

Girard: It differs from the Freudian unconscious in that there's no great treasure or mystery to be found in my unconscious. It is, you

might say, a purely negative unconscious. Enmeshed in ritual, we see nothing. Insight comes only when we are jolted out of ritual practices, or out of our habits. I don't, in fact, like to use the term "unconscious," because it makes everyone think of Freud. And, then, of course, in some of these matters, I remain uncertain. The most that I can say is that up to a certain point in the historical development of the human condition, aspects of that condition remained concealed. Later, they "came to consciousness." The configurations of desire are, after all, supra-individual. The individual isn't much in mimeticism. It's always a pattern, a triune pattern, or something of that sort.

Bertonneau: For Freud, then, the unconscious is the repository of various drives and contents; for you, on the other hand, the unconscious is simply the lack of content—behavior without reflection.

Girard: I'm not certain that I could accept that entirely, but as an approximate formulation it's satisfactory. Somehow, you see, I think we need to get away from the Freudian idea of the unconscious. I mean, Lacan says that the unconscious is language, and that's a good way out if you want to get out of Freud. I can say no such thing, however. But you're right. Freud wanted the unconscious to be a kind of storehouse or determinant. And, if the unconscious is a store, well, somebody has got to mind the store—do you see what I mean? And then, Freud wanted to create a psychoanalytical school, and so forth. He lived in a more substantial—the deconstructionists would say a more metaphysical—world than our own. In those days, one believed in substance. I believe in substance. I mean, I don't deny reality. But what I'm talking about are patterns of human relationships that affect the view one has of reality. Just keep in mind, please, that there *is* a reality that remains unaffected. When the deconstructionists tell us, therefore, that the structure of something—it might be human culture—is decentered, then I think that they're wrong. I'd say that there are historical periods when structures are decentered. But if something is decentered now, then it was centered at some point.

Bertonneau: This is perhaps the crucial difference between your view of the Western tradition and Derrida's.

Girard: That's right. I would say that the elements of decentering were always there. Derrida would be correct [in pressing for what usually goes by the name of undecidability] insofar as a center

always implies a desirable locus, a locus of power, and implies as well its counter-locus. Between the two points a tension will develop. Therefore one welcomes an approach that obviates the necessity of choosing. The verb "to decide" comes—I take it you know this—from the Latinism *decidere*, "to cut the throat." Decisions, then, always echo, however faintly, and reproduce, a certain originary violence. The logocentric demand that we decide partakes, to some extent, of the old sacred, or could at least be traced back to it. The sacred is always violent. But let me say this, that religion is always for peace.

Bertonneau: We're back in the topos of the sacred and the supernatural.

Girard: Yes, and the supernatural, in the Christian sense, respects freedom. Quite literally, it cannot make itself felt as a commanding force. To a certain world, therefore, it remains absolutely out of reach. [The supernatural] is incredibly dangerous to human, especially to bureaucratic, organization.

Bertonneau: You appear to share some common ground with some of the Christian existentialists—I'm thinking especially of Søren Kierkegaard, but also of Gabriel Marcel—in that you distinguish strongly between the Gospel message and its all-too-human appropriation by various and sundry institutions.

Girard: That's true. At the same time, I caution myself that it is deceptively easy to posture as a totally pure individual who can curse institutions because he belongs to none. That's the intellectual's position, isn't it? And I think that the intellectual is right to do that. At the same time, it can be rather facile.

Bertonneau: Especially in the usual case, where the intellectual is employed by some university.

Girard: Yet very often they do curse it and try to undermine it. I've heard some French scholars make speeches in which the first half is "How we can destroy the French University," and the second half is "How the Minister of Education asked me to found a New Department." [Laughter] It can get pretty ridiculous. We should avoid that. There's a tendency today to turn institutions into scapegoats.

Bertonneau: Is there anything else that *can* be turned into a scapegoat nowadays?

Girard: None that comes immediately to mind. [Laughter] Institutions are the only possible scapegoat today for people who, so to speak, know too much. You can always make the institution appear

responsible, or reprehensible. If you make such an accusation, you will always sound pure. Do you see what I mean?

Bertonneau: I think so. An example might be the love-hate relationship between the American electorate and the institution of the presidency. Someone suggested today that we don't elect presidents so much as scapegoats. It was meant as a joke, but there's some truth to it.

Girard: I'd say that this turning against institutions is almost a worldwide phenomenon. Look at the French and DeGaulle. Or look at Gorbachev blaming the Soviet Bureaucracy for the woes of the Soviet economy. What does it mean to solve one's political problems? It probably means to have some sort of . . . democratic regicide! [Laughter] You will pardon me; I don't mean to be cynical.

Bertonneau: I'd like to ask a question about the development of your thinking. In *Violence and the Sacred* you appear to be much more interested in reconstructing the originary scene than in subsequent books. Is this a correct perception?

Girard: I think I've said something that bears on this. When I wrote *Violence and the Sacred*, I thought that my natural interlocutors would be the anthropologists. I reached some of them but not many; usually they've rejected dialogue. People have said that this is because I was too polemical with Lévi-Strauss. Maybe. But it also has to do with my own training, which was first in history, and only later in literature. I'm not a philosopher, and it might be because I'm not a philosopher that I started to read anthropology from the viewpoint of its drama. I read it as I would Greek tragedy. Euripides, Socrates, and later Shakespeare and Racine—these were great mediators for me. At the same time, I was probably philosophically rather naive.

Bertonneau: As someone whose scholarly activity crosses so many boundaries, would you be willing to endorse the observation that modern academics is too confined inside special disciplines?

Girard: Yes, and, in fact, that's what I was thinking of when I warned against the dominance of what I called, borrowing Husserl's term, the regional ontologies. As a matter of fact, the greatest scholarship in recent times seems to have been generated by people who crossed disciplines: Lévi-Strauss, Foucault and others. I would ask of myself today, what exactly is the status of my hypothesis? Is it anthropology or something else? Maybe I should try new titles. There has been a lot of misunderstanding as to what, exactly, I'm

about. Your notion of eidetic anthropology is fairly interesting. At the same time, there's something static, or motionless, about phenomenology. But one should try new words.

Bertonneau: What you've said anticipates my next question and answers it, in part. Doesn't your theory lack a fully worked out epistemology? How, precisely, does desire affect the individual? How does it shape perception?

Girard: Since the individual figures in my scheme only as far as he is involved with other individuals, the epistemology of the isolated consciousness wouldn't make a great deal of sense for me. I feel that one of the advantages of my theory is its pragmatic effectiveness. You can generate explanations with it. You could say, coming back to our initial exchange, that it produces *too much*; but what is our business as intellectuals if not to explain things? Today great theories are unfashionable. In the last century they were rife. People felt that everything was amenable to explanation, so you had these comprehensive schemes in Frazer and so forth.

Bertonneau: And yet comprehensive explanations for human behavior, and for culture, have been put forth in recent times. Take E. O. Wilson, and his student Blaffer-Hrды, for example.²³ They propose Sociobiology as a reductive explanation for all human actions, institutions, and so forth. In what relation do you stand to Sociobiology?

Girard: I object to the Wilsonian type of explanation, and my objections to it would not differ much from my objections to Lévi-Strauss. Sociobiology disregards the specificity of human culture; it collapses man and animal. I am in fundamental disagreement with that. On the other hand, I think that Lévi-Strauss and his followers are wrong when they say that ethology teaches us nothing relevant to humanity. That's why mimetic theory interests me so much: you can start with it at the animal level and trace it across the threshold of hominization right into human culture. That threshold is when the victim becomes the conscious object of attention by members of the community. The behavior is then no longer purely instinctual. You can take as many eons as you want to get to that point, but at least you've got something that takes into account the animality of man without making it triumph. You have cultural specificity, a break between animal and man.

Bertonneau: It strikes me that your theory insists on the fairly contradictory requirement that there be both a continuity and a dis-

continuity between brute and true hominid. How do you reconcile the contradiction, or do you need to?

Girard: Any sound theory, you see, must have both continuity and discontinuity. It's not an either-or, it's precisely not a decision. The problem with the ethologists is that they don't have a break. The problem with the structural anthropologists is that they don't have any continuity. Both are obviously wrong. Ultimately, it seems to me, we must reveal these partialities because they prevent us from understanding our origins, and, therefore, prevent us from understanding our fate. If I am optimistic about that fate, it's because I am optimistic about the possibilities of recuperating our origins. Once we have done that, we have gained a position from which we can examine, rationally, the subject of ourselves, of our humanity.

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Notes

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2. René Girard, *The Scapegoat*, trans. Yvonne Freccero (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1986). Originally published as *Le Bouc émissaire* (Paris: Grasset, 1982). Girard's most recent book is *La Route antique des hommes pervers* (Paris: Grasset, 1985).

3. René Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*, trans. Patrick Gregory (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1977). Originally published as *La Violence et le sacré* (Paris: Grasset, 1972).

4. René Girard, *Des Choses cachées depuis la fondation du monde*, with J.-M. Ougourlian and Guy Lefort (Paris: Grasset, 1978), p. 48.

5. Jacques Derrida, *Dissemination*, trans. Barbara Johnson (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1981).

6. *Ibid.*, p. 63.

7. Girard, *The Scapegoat*, p. 100.

8. Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*, p. 20.

9. *Ibid.*, p. 22.

10. *Ibid.*, p. 39.

11. Girard, *The Scapegoat*, p. 73.

12. Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*, p. 31.

13. *Ibid.*, p. 31.

14. *Ibid.*, p. 31.

15. Girard, *The Scapegoat*, p. 72.

16. *Ibid.*, p. 165.

17. *Ibid.*, p. 122.

18. *Ibid.*, p. 115.

19. Paul de Man, *The Resistance to Theory* (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 1986), pp. 3–20. “It is a recurrent strategy of any anxiety to defuse what it considers threatening by magnification or minimization, by attributing to it claims to power of which it is bound to fall short.” (p. 5)

20. Martin Heidegger, *Die Selbstbehauptung der Deutschen Universität* (Rectoratsrede [May 27, 1933]). Reissue: Frankfurt am Main: Vittorio Klostermann, 1983).

21. See Martin Heidegger, *Introduction to Metaphysics*, trans. Ralph Manheim (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1957), p. 126 ff.


22. Michel Aglietta and André Orléan, *La Violence de la monnaie* (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 1982).

23. E. O. Wilson, *Sociobiology: The New Synthesis* (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1975) and Sarah Blaffer-Hrdy, *The Langurs of Abu: Female and Male Strategies of Reproduction* (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1977).

PAROLES GELEES

UCLA French Studies



Volume 5  1987

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Ce serait le moment de philosopher et de
rechercher si, par hasard, se trouverait
ici l'endroit où de telles paroles dégèlent.

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Volume 5  1987

Editor: Susan Delaney

Assistant Editors: Atiyeh Showrai
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Consultants: Charles de Bedts, Kathryn Bailey, Guy Bennett

Paroles Gelées was established in 1983 by its founding editor, Kathryn Bailey. The journal is managed and edited by the French Graduate Students' Association and published annually under the auspices of the Department of French at UCLA. Funds for this project are generously provided by the UCLA Graduate Students' Association.

Information regarding the submission of articles and subscriptions is available from the journal office:

Paroles Gelées
Department of French
160 Haines Hall
UCLA
Los Angeles, CA 90024
(213) 825-1145

Subscription price: \$6—individuals, \$8—institutions.

Cover: untitled monoprint by Simon Leung,
UCLA Art Department, B.A. 1987

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