

# ***Deceit, Desire, and the Literature Professor: Why Girardians Exist***

---

Joshua Landy

*Mr. Casaubon called the future volumes . . . the Key to all  
Mythologies.*

—George Eliot, *Middlemarch*

HERE ARE TWO READINGS OF SHAKESPEARE'S *HAMLET*. Which do you think we should be teaching in our schools and universities?<sup>1</sup>

*READING 1.* Hamlet is unhappy because he, like all of us, has no desires of his own, and therefore has no *being*, properly speaking. The best he can do is to find another person to emulate, since that's the only way anyone ever develops the motivation to do anything. Shakespeare's genius is to show us this life-changing truth.

---

<sup>1</sup> What follows is largely the text of a talk given at the "*Deceit, Desire, and the Novel 50 Years Later*" conference (Stanford, April 2011); hence the rather casual tone, which I hope the reader will forgive. My thanks are due to Remo Ceserani, Malcolm DeBevoise, Jean-Pierre Dupuy, Dan Edelstein, Akiba Lerner, Thomas Pavel, Christy Pichichero, Jeremy Sabol, and Steven Weitzman for their very helpful comments. Here in the notes, I will be using the following system of abbreviations for works by René Girard: "AC": "The Anthropology of the Cross," in *The Girard Reader*, ed. James G. Williams (New York: Crossroad, 1996), 262–88; CSA: *Celui par qui le scandale arrive: Entretiens avec Maria Stella Barberi* (Paris: Desclée de Brouwer, 2001); DDN: *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel: Self and Other in Literary Structure*, trans. Yvonne Freccero (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1965); EC: *Evolution and Conversion: Dialogues on the Origins of Culture*, ed. Michael Kirwan, Pierpaolo Antonello, and João Cezar de Castro Rocha (New York: Continuum, 2008); "HDR": "Hamlet's Dull Revenge," in *Literary Theory / Renaissance Texts*, ed. Patricia Parker and David Quint (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986), 280–302; MT: *Mimesis and Theory: Essays on Literature and Criticism, 1953–2005*, ed. Robert Doran (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2008); "MV": "Mimesis and Violence," *Berkshire Review* 14 (1979): 9–19; "PTW": "Python and His Two Wives," in *René Girard and Myth*, ed. Richard Golsan (London: Routledge, 2002), 151–59; QCC: *Quand ces choses commenceront: Entretiens avec Michel Treguer* (Paris: Arléa, 1994); S: *The Scapegoat*, trans. Yvonne Freccero (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986); TH: *Things Hidden since the Foundation of the World*, trans. Stephen Bann and Michael Metteer (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1987); "VDS": "Violence, Difference, Sacrifice," *Religion and Literature* 25 (1993): 22–26; VS: *Violence and the Sacred*, trans. Patrick Gregory (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1979).

*READING 2.* Hamlet is unhappy because he, like all of us, is full of *body thetans*, harmful residue of the aliens brought to Earth by Xenu seventy-five million years ago and disintegrated using nuclear bombs inside volcanoes. Since it is still some time until the practice of auditing comes into being, Hamlet has no chance of becoming “clear”; it is no wonder that he displays such melancholy and aimlessness. Shakespeare’s genius is to show us this life-changing truth.<sup>2</sup>

Whatever you make of the first, I’m rather hoping that you feel at least a bit uncomfortable with the second. If so, I have a follow-up question for you: what exactly is wrong with it? Why not rewrite the textbooks so as to make it our standard understanding of Shakespeare’s play? Surely you can’t fault the logic behind it: if humans have indeed been full of body thetans since they came into existence, and Hamlet is a representation of a human being, Hamlet must be full of body thetans. What is more, if everyone is *still* full of body thetans, then Shakespeare is doing his contemporaries a huge favor by telling them, and the new textbooks will be doing us a huge favor by telling the world. Your worry, presumably, is that this whole body thetan business is *just not true*. It’s an outlandish hypothesis, with nothing whatsoever to support it. And since, as Carl Sagan once said, “extraordinary claims require extraordinary evidence,”<sup>3</sup> we would do better to leave it alone.

I think you see where I’m going with this. The fact is, of course, that the first reading is just as outlandish as the second. As I’m about to show (not that it should really need showing), human beings *do* have desires of their own.<sup>4</sup> That doesn’t mean that *all* our desires are genuine; it’s always possible to be suckered into buying a new pair of boots, regardless of the fact that they are uglier and shoddier than our old ones, just because they are fashionable. What it means is that *some* of our desires are genuine. And having *some* genuine desires, and being able to act on them, is sufficient for the achievement of authenticity. For all we care, Hamlet’s inky cloak could be made by Calvin Klein, his feathered hat by Diane von Furstenberg; the point is that he also has motivations (to know things, to be autonomous, to expose guilt, to have his story told accurately) that come from within, and that those are the ones that count.

To my knowledge, no one in the academy actually reads *Hamlet* (or anything else) the second way. But plenty read works of literature the first way.<sup>5</sup> René Girard, the

---

<sup>2</sup> This is a made-up reading, on the basis of claims that have been ascribed to the Church of Scientology. I take no stand on the question of whether they really *are* the core beliefs of Scientologists; one would have to join the church to know for sure, and for me at least, that price is way too high.

<sup>3</sup> *Cosmos*, PBS, December 14, 1980.

<sup>4</sup> To be clear, I am leaving aside debates about the freedom of the will; my claim is the more modest one that our desires, however they originate, are not always borrowed from other people.

<sup>5</sup> The above reading of *Hamlet* is essentially Girard’s own. Hamlet, writes Girard, has “faith in his model and rival as the embodiment of being” (which is to say, as the embodiment of spontaneous desire); he is, as a result, “aping the well-adjusted personality of Laertes.” “The madman,” continues Girard, “makes us feel uneasy not because his game is different from ours but because it is the same. It is the same old mimetic game in which we all engage but a little too emphatic for our taste. . . . We prefer to leave the matter alone and not to look at ourselves in the mirror offered to us” (“HDR,” 291). I use this example because *Hamlet* is so well known, although Girard’s readings of other works of literature (such as Dostoevsky’s *Eternal Husband*) illustrate his procedures more straightforwardly. What complicates the *Hamlet* case is that Girard sees Hamlet as having a *specific* reason to require outside motivation, namely the groundlessness of

founder of the approach, was rewarded for doing so with membership in the Académie française, France's elite intellectual association. People loved his system so much that they established a Colloquium on Violence and Religion, hosted by the University of Innsbruck, complete with a journal under the ironically apt name *Contagion*. More recently, Peter Thiel, the co-founder of PayPal, loved it so much that he sank millions of dollars into Imitatio, an institute for the dissemination of Girardian thought. And to this day, you'll find casual references to the idea everywhere, from people who seem to think it's a *truth*, one *established* by René Girard. (Here's a recent instance from the *New York Times* opinion pages: "as we have learned from René Girard, this is precisely how desires are born: I desire something by way of imitation, because someone else already has it.")<sup>6</sup> All of which leads to an inevitable question: what's the difference between Girardianism and Scientology? Why has the former been more successful in the academy? Why is the madness of theory so, well, contagious?

### A FOUR-STAGE THEORY

Before we get to that, let's take a closer look at just how peculiar the Girardian theory is. There are, in fact, four parts to it, each problematic in its own way. Stage One, as we just saw, is that all desire is "mimetic": we never want something because it is objectively valuable, or even because it meets our own subjective needs, but only because someone else wanted it before us.<sup>7</sup> If I decide to go swimming, for example, it is not because the human metabolism thrives on exercise, or because my physique in particular demands an upper-body workout, but only because I see the Joneses next door packing their towels. If I yearn for Zooey Deschanel rather than Ann Coulter, my preference has nothing to do with certain qualities that one has and the other lacks, or to the fact that my individual temperament gravitates toward a certain kind of partner, but only to do with what my peers have told me to value. I may *believe* that Zooey Deschanel and Ann Coulter are poles apart, but this is the famous *mensonge romantique*, that romantic delusion which Girard decries from one end of his career to the other.<sup>8</sup> In reality, the object is never special, never unique; no such differences exist, the kind of differences that would give us a reason to desire *this* rather than *that*. As Girard uncompromisingly puts it, "similarities alone are real."<sup>9</sup>

Stage Two of the theory piggybacks on Stage One. Since all desire is mimetic, that means that any given object in the world is either not desired by anyone or desired by

---

revenge ("HDR," 287–88). As we will see, however, Girard is committed to the view that no such specific reasons are required, so my reading is entirely in keeping with his general approach.

<sup>6</sup> Costica Bradatan, "Scaling the 'Wall in the Head,'" *New York Times*, November 27, 2011, <http://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2011/11/27/scaling-the-wall-in-the-head/>.

<sup>7</sup> "The romantic *vaniteux* always wants to convince himself that his desire is written into the nature of things, or . . . that it is the emanation of a serene subjectivity. . . . The objective and subjective fallacies are one and the same. . . . Subjectivisms and objectivisms, romanticisms and realisms . . . all depend directly or indirectly on the lie of spontaneous desire. They all defend the same illusion of autonomy to which modern man is passionately devoted" (*DDN*, 16).

<sup>8</sup> Thus Girard is still insisting in *The Scapegoat* (1982) that "human beings have no desire of their own; men are strangers to their desires; children don't know how to desire and must be taught" (*S*, 130–31; translation modified to approximate more closely the original French).

<sup>9</sup> "HDR," 297.

more than one person. This inevitably leads to rivalry, and rivalry in turn leads to violence. (“As soon as we desire something that is desired by a model sufficiently close to us in space and time . . . we strive to snatch the object away from him, and rivalry between him and us is inevitable.”)<sup>10</sup> In fact, there is no other possible cause for violence: *all* violence, without exception, is a direct result of mimetic rivalry. “Mimeticism is the original source of *all* man’s troubles,” writes Girard, “the source of *all* disorder” (my emphasis); “violence is . . . a by-product of mimetic rivalry”; “the true secret of conflict and violence is . . . mimetic desire.”<sup>11</sup>

For most of human history, continues Girard, the best that could be done about this was to channel the murderous rage onto a single victim, rather than have it tear society apart. This is Stage Three of the theory, the scapegoat mechanism. According to Girard, every single community in the world started exactly the same way: a loose assemblage of individuals, an escalation of mimetic rivalry, then an actual murder of an actual human being.<sup>12</sup> (“The escalations of mimetic rivalry to which archaic societies are prone stir up all kinds of disorders until their very intensity produces a unanimous polarization against a more or less random victim. Mimetically carried away, the entire community joins in, and as a result, mutual suspicions are extinguished; peace returns.”)<sup>13</sup> Without that actual murder of an actual human being, all those lovely laws and customs and traditions would never have been established.

Of course, the scapegoat is only a temporary measure for the calming of rivalrous rage. We need something more reliable. Enter Stage Four, in the form of the Bible. The Bible—New Testament especially—makes it clear that the victim of collective violence is innocent; it thus reveals the founding mechanism of society, and, by so doing, puts it out of action. “There will be no more victims from now on who are persecuted unjustly,” proclaims Girard; “no more myths can be produced to cover up the fact of persecution. The Gospels make all forms of ‘mythologizing’ impossible since, by revealing the

---

<sup>10</sup> CSA, 19, my translation. “This,” Girard continues, “is mimetic rivalry. . . . It is responsible for the frequency and intensity of human conflict, but strangely enough, no one ever mentions it.”

<sup>11</sup> S, 165; “MV,” 12; CSA, 24, my translation. Elsewhere in “Mimesis and Violence,” Girard states that “if the appropriative gesture of an individual named A is rooted in the imitation of an individual named B, it means that A and B reach together for one and the same object. They become rivals for that object. . . . Violence is generated by this process” (9). One striking consequence of Girard’s view is that there are never any guilty parties: “under the influence of the judicial viewpoint and of our own psychological impulses . . . we want to distinguish the culprit from the innocent and, as a result, we substitute discontinuities and differences for the continuities and reciprocities of the mimetic escalation” (“MV,” 9). I find it hard to believe that if a Girardian were mugged, she would put it down to mimetic desire and forgo pressing charges. But as yet I have no evidence either way.

<sup>12</sup> “Sacrificial immolation suggests a real event behind blood sacrifice that takes place in all human communities. . . . The religious communities try to remember that event in their mythologies, and they try to reproduce it in their sacrifices. Freud was right when he discovered that this model was a collective murder” (“MV,” 11). Elsewhere, Girard insists again that he is not speaking metaphorically: “these imitations had their origin in a real event” (VS, 309). Please note that I am objecting to *this* part of the Girardian scapegoat theory, not to the idea that there is such a thing as scapegoating. No one would deny that communities sometimes vent their frustrations on innocent individuals; that is a well-known fact. What is odd is the idea that every community was founded on an actual murder of an actual person. What are the chances? And who could know?

<sup>13</sup> “PTW,” 151.



founding mechanism, they stop it from functioning.”<sup>14</sup> And while they thus place humankind even more at risk, depriving it of the outlet it once had, they also offer a solution, definitive this time: if all of us simply follow the example of Christ (*imitatio Christi*, a good form of imitation)<sup>15</sup> and direct our yearnings toward God (*amor Dei*, a good kind of desire), we will finally live in a world without violence.<sup>16</sup>

### IMITATION-FREE VIOLENCE

Stages Three and Four are so fanciful that it’s hard to know what to say about them. (Wolfgang Pauli once said of a scientific theory that it was “not even false”; I think that’s an apt characterization of all primordial fantasies, whether Sigmund Freud’s “Original Father,” Denis Dutton’s “Pleistocene campfire,”<sup>17</sup> or René Girard’s founding scapegoat.) But let’s spend a moment on Stages One and Two. Since the theory as a whole builds on these claims, it seems to me that if we can show they are bankrupt, the remaining postulates will take care of themselves.

Is it really true that all violence is a by-product of mimetic rivalry? Here’s the kind of situation Girard is asking us to imagine. Two men, Jimmy and Joey, stand beside a lake on a hot day. Jimmy decides to go for a swim. Joey, who would never have had this idea in his life, immediately decides to do likewise. Inevitably, this causes a death struggle between the two men as they fight over the lake.

---

<sup>14</sup> *TH*, 174. Not surprisingly, Girard’s claim about the Gospels has been much contested. One question concerns what exactly is supposed to have changed since the arrival of Christ. Is it that we now know that all victims of collective violence are innocent? That can’t be right, since some of them are guilty. (Surely there’s a difference between, say, Timothy McVeigh and Jesus Christ.) Is it that we now know that *some* victims of collective violence are innocent? That can’t be right either, since Socrates was executed over four hundred years before the Crucifixion, in what was quickly understood to have been a travesty of justice. Is it that we now know that whenever there is an innocent victim of collective violence, the reason is mimetic desire? That is absurd for numerous reasons. First, it’s not true (I’ll return to this point later). Second, it’s not clear what difference such “knowledge” would make: what really counts, of course, is the innocence or guilt of the victim. And above all, *nobody apart from Girardians has ever derived this “lesson” from the Gospels*. If the Crucifixion so clearly indicated the inseparability of scapegoating from mimetic desire, why has it taken two thousand years for anyone to see it?

<sup>15</sup> “A good model will make our mimesis good (Christ); a bad model will make our mimesis rivalrous” (“AC,” 269).

<sup>16</sup> Girard sees a glimpse of this in the endings of the novels he likes: “Deception gives way to truth, anguish to remembrance, agitation to repose, hatred to love, humiliation to humility, mediated desire to autonomy, deviated transcendence to vertical transcendence. This time it is not a false but a genuine conversion. . . . [T]he death of pride is [the hero’s] salvation” (*DDN*, 294).

<sup>17</sup> See, e.g., Denis Dutton, “The Pleasures of Fiction,” *Philosophy and Literature* 28, no. 2 (2004): 457.



Images by Jacqueline Basu

The scenario above is of course absurd. Not only is it ludicrous to imagine that Joey couldn't have had his own, autonomous hankering to take a dip (we'll come to that in a moment); it's also ludicrous to imagine that anyone in their right mind would start a fight in these circumstances. (Beaches are simply littered with people not fighting with each other.) But why not? Isn't it true that "as soon as we desire something that is desired by a model sufficiently close to us in space and time . . . we strive to snatch the object away from him"? No, of course it isn't. Jimmy and Joey are standing right next to each other, yet Joey has no desire whatsoever to deprive Jimmy of his opportunity to swim. And the reason is simple: *there's plenty of lake to go around*. Mimetic desire is not enough to cause rivalry; in order to have rivalry, you also need scarcity of resources.<sup>18</sup>

The same is true, in fact, even in cases of actual envy. Let's say Jimmy is carrying a nifty new cell phone, and Joey takes a shine to it. (Let's even assume, for the sake of argument, that Joey wants it only because Jimmy has it.) Does he bash Jimmy over the head so he can take it? Or does he ask Jimmy where he got it, so he can get one too?<sup>19</sup> And does Jimmy jealously guard the information, or does he eagerly *recommend* the phone, hoping he'll soon be able to play word games with his friend over great distances? Once again, if there are enough similar objects to go around, and enough money to buy them with, the chances are that we will be quite happy to let everyone else have theirs, just as long as we can have ours. (Think of whatever technological device is currently most popular, and whether its existence is causing mass conflict.)

Mimetic desire, then, is not sufficient to cause rivalry. More than that, it's not even *necessary*. Consider the case of oil. Many assume, with some justification, that the main cause of the 1990–91 Gulf War had much to do with access to oilfields. Shall we say that the United States and its allies took an interest in those oilfields—to the point of being willing to kill and die for them—only because the Iraqis had taken an interest in them

<sup>18</sup> Bizarrely, Girard explicitly *rejects* scarcity of resources as a factor in conflict: "in animal life, scarcity also occurs and it is not sufficient, as such, to cause low-ranking individuals to challenge the privileges of the dominant males" ("MV," 10). I suppose we are meant to infer from this that mimetic desire is also required. In fact, of course, the only additional thing required here is the urge to reproduce. When a beta elephant seal tries to mate with a female, it's hard to imagine that what's driving him is a desire to be like the alpha, as opposed to an impulse to procreate.

<sup>19</sup> I am grateful to Jean-Pierre Dupuy for this example.

first? Or should we rather say that people like oil, because (for good or ill) it helps them stay warm, make stuff, and get around?<sup>20</sup> One could multiply the examples endlessly; the world is full of conflicts, large and small, that have nothing to do with mimetic desire.

Of course *some* desire is mimetic. And of course *some* mimetic desire leads to rivalry, and of course *some* rivalry leads to violence. But not *all* violence derives from this, and indeed probably not very *much* violence derives from this. All you need is a desire—not mimetic desire, *any* desire—plus scarcity of resources. (Under conditions of scarcity, even a physical need will do.) That’s why Thomas Hobbes’s theory is, and has always been, far more helpful than Girard’s. “If any two men desire the same thing, *which nevertheless they cannot both enjoy*, they become enemies,” said Hobbes,<sup>21</sup> long before Girard was born, in a book that most serious thinkers have read, and without any need for fanciful metaphysical speculation.

### IMITATION-FREE DESIRE

But the hardened Girardians will say, “What do you mean, *any* desire, even non-mimetic? There is no such thing as non-mimetic desire!” So let’s return to Stage One of the theory: all desire is mimetic; we do not desire things for intrinsic reasons, but only because a person we admire in some way (a “mediator”) has desired them first. Where to begin with such a claim? Well, let’s begin with pica. Pica is an eating disorder whose sufferers feel an overwhelming desire to eat odd things—things like paint, or pillow stuffing, or candle wax. Pica sufferers tend to harbor deep shame about their desires, and as a result, they do not talk about them; their condition is typically discovered when they are rushed to the emergency room with stomach pains. So I ask you: where is the model for someone’s desire to eat paint? Nobody talks about it, so nobody knows about it, so there simply cannot be a model.<sup>22</sup>

To turn from something rather unhealthy to something perfectly healthy, but still stigmatized in many contexts, consider homosexuality.<sup>23</sup> If a young woman growing up

---

<sup>20</sup> Similarly, people often come to blows over nourishment, as for example during the French subsistence crisis of 1709–10. (“There was an open war with the peasants to get their grain,” one priest reported at the time. See Louise A. Tilly, “Food Entitlement, Famine, and Conflict,” *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 14, no. 2 [1983]: 339.) Now on Girard’s own theory, the things we do to stay alive—eating food, drinking water—are driven by inherent impulses, not by borrowed cravings; in his terminology, these count as *appetites* rather than as *desires*. (See *EC*, 56.) When people kill each other for food or water, therefore, we cannot be dealing with conflicts emerging from mimetic desire. Again, not all violence is mimetic.

<sup>21</sup> Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), chap. 13, p. 87; my emphasis. Subsequent to drafting this talk I was embarrassed to find the same line from Hobbes quoted on the Girard page in Wikipedia; stunningly, however, the author of the segment in question considers Hobbes to be saying the same thing as Girard. A great deal of Girard’s success seems to come down to confusions like these, which have been greatly to his benefit. I will mention one or two more of them below.

<sup>22</sup> On mental disorders, compare René Pommier, *René Girard, un allumé qui se prend pour un phare* (Paris: Kimé, 2010), 45. (Pommier does not, however, mention pica.) Pommier’s book is a wonderful resource for the non-Girardian; I will be citing it often in what follows.

<sup>23</sup> Compare *ibid.*, 38.

in Victorian England (or in today's Iran<sup>24</sup>) turns out to be someone who desires other women, not men, where should we say she got this desire from? There is, quite probably, no one around to serve as a model: she may indeed feel horribly alone at first, precisely because she knows no one else who professes to having such inclinations. But perhaps a day comes when she discovers like-minded individuals and, as a result, is finally able to divulge and indulge them. Surely it makes no sense to say that she got these desires from her new friends. Where, then, are the models that ostensibly inspired them?

Maybe you'll say that Girard isn't thinking about general preferences like that; he's thinking about specific objects of desire. He's thinking, say, about the time I watched Quentin Tarantino's *Kill Bill* just because my good friend Lanier recommended it to me. Fair enough; I *did* watch that movie just because Lanier recommended it to me, and because I trust his judgment. But then it turned out to be one of the worst films of all time, and when Lanier suggested I also watch the sequel, *Kill Bill 2*, strangely enough I was not filled with a burning desire to do so. Why not? What went wrong? How did I manage to be unaffected by the very same "mediator"?<sup>25</sup> Perhaps you'll want to say that a *different* mediator was the model—*another* friend, this time someone who loathes Tarantino. But then, who was the meta-model who told me to pick the second model rather than the first model for advice on what to watch? And who was the meta-meta-model—let's call it a super-model—who told me to trust *that* meta-model rather than some *other* meta-model who might have told me to stick with Lanier's judgment? These regresses have to end somewhere, and I don't think it's with Gisele Bündchen.<sup>26</sup>

What Bakhtin understood—and Girard apparently did not—is that most situations present us not with one but with *multiple* possible models. I can join the left-wing party, like my brother David, or the right-wing party, like my brother Aron. I can drink Coke, as Penélope Cruz appears to be urging, or Pepsi, following the promptings of Cindy Crawford. (I can even stick to water, following my doctor's more sensible advice.) I can take up arms like Malcolm X or resist nonviolently like Martin Luther King. I can be good like Abel or bad like Cain, gracious like Saint Francis or vicious like Sade. For Girardian hermeneuts, finding an apparent model is like shooting fish in a barrel: there is always *someone* they can point to as the ostensible origin of my actions. But what they can't do is to explain the mysterious *lack* of force field surrounding everyone else. Why, when I joined the left-wing party (ostensibly borrowing brother David's example), was I not infected by my *other* brother's desire? Why, when I chose the glass of water, was I immune to the combined charms of Mss. Crawford and Cruz? It's true that we tend not to make choices in splendid isolation—I didn't *invent* the left-wing party, or nonviolent re-

---

<sup>24</sup> Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, the president of Iran, famously said in 2007 that "in Iran, we don't have homosexuals like in your country. In Iran, we do not have this phenomenon. I don't know who has told you we have that." See <http://abcnews.go.com/US/story?id=3642673>.

<sup>25</sup> Compare Pommier, *René Girard*, 33–34.

<sup>26</sup> There is of course a second regress, equally damaging for Girard. Let's say I like Kundera because Lanier does. Well, *he* must like Kundera because somebody *else* does. And so on, and so on. Surely *someone* must have liked Kundera first; otherwise, how could this whole sequence of events ever have been set in motion? (Compare Pommier, *René Girard*, 18.) To put it another way, the Girardian theory does not seem to leave any room for *innovation*, for individuals striking out in entirely new directions, unconstrained by prior models. How did Cain, for example, come up with the idea of killing Abel? Who was his model for that?

sistance, or sugary drinks—but we do *make* the choices. Other people cannot make them for us, precisely because there are too many other people, with too many different opinions.



*This model?*<sup>27</sup>



*Or this model?*<sup>28</sup>

Superficially, of course, advertising seems like a highly propitious field for Girardians. Many commercials, like the ones above, feature prestigious individuals (film stars, for example) associated with products (soft drinks, for example); shouldn't we say that if I buy the soft drink, it is only because I am borrowing the imagined desire of the star? That may well, at times, be true.<sup>29</sup> But the odd thing is that advertising *does not always work* (any more than my best friend Lanier's recommendations always find me receptive). "New Coke" and "Crystal Pepsi," for example, were infamous failures, in spite of their respective multi-million-dollar campaigns. Part of the reason is that for a product to succeed, it's not enough for consumers to sample it once: they have to be tempted to come back for more. (A massively important source of desire, one might say, is *liking*.) And the reason people keep coming back for more is not that they keep seeing commercials; it is that they enjoy the product. You could saturate the airwaves with glamorizing visions of Ann Coulter, but you're never going to get me to prefer her over Zoey Deschanel.

Perhaps nowhere is this phenomenon—the resistance to contagion—more apparent than in the high chair at dinnertime. "Nothing is more mimetic," declares Girard, "than the desire of a child."<sup>30</sup> One wonders, has he ever *met* a child?<sup>31</sup> Has he ever tried to feed one a brussels sprout? "Yum yum," we say, absurdly hoping that our desire for healthy food will carry over mimetically. "Blech," says the child, unceremoniously spit-

<sup>27</sup> Still image from a 2003 advertisement for Coca-Cola. See [http://www.dailymotion.com/video/xikwmf\\_penelope-cruz-coca-cola-commercial\\_lifestyle](http://www.dailymotion.com/video/xikwmf_penelope-cruz-coca-cola-commercial_lifestyle).

<sup>28</sup> Still image from a 1992 advertisement for Pepsi. See <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=B02DGmkqDDU>.

<sup>29</sup> Of course, not all advertising works this way: in many cases the implication of a commercial is not that if we consume X we will become like Y, but rather that if we consume X we will have Z. (Certain infamous beer commercials, with their implicit promise of sex, are a case in point.)

<sup>30</sup> "VDS," 25.

<sup>31</sup> Girard, of course, *has* met children, and inevitably takes his experience with them as confirmation of his existing beliefs. When an interviewer asked him whether he had any plans to give an empirical grounding to his theory, Girard responded as follows: "I have observed a lot of mimetic rivalry lately with my grandchildren" ("AC," 277). This is like saying that all socks everywhere are black, the evidence being that I just pulled a few black socks out of my drawer.

ting it out. You can't get a child to want to eat brussels sprouts, because this kind of desire depends on liking, and children just don't like brussels sprouts. They do *not* get all their desires from parents (even in such a wonderfully closed environment, with so little outside stimulus). They can see their parents eagerly eating healthy food till the cows come home, but they will stand right by their decision to yell for marshmallows. (Not to mention their decision to yell for *more*. Where did little Suzie get the desire to hear the same story ninety-six times in a row? Surely not from the grownup she's tormenting with it.)

So Lanier couldn't get me to want to watch *Kill Bill 2*. Cindy Crawford couldn't get me to want to drink Pepsi. Fox News can't get me to find Ann Coulter appealing. Parents can't get their children to crave brussels sprouts. And neither, finally, can parents get their children to want a goodnight kiss from them. In one of the most extraordinary passages of *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel*, Girard actually tries to convince us that this scenario is what is going on in *Swann's Way*: when the young protagonist begs his mother to come and kiss him goodnight, says Girard, it is only because she has somehow "instigated" this desire.<sup>32</sup> I suppose Girard *has* to say this, because otherwise it might seem as though children have desires of their own, outside of mediation. But it's just not true about Proust's novel, and it's also not true about reality. If it were, I think it would bring about a revolution in parenting.

Let's sum up: it is perfectly possible to form desires in the absence of a model (the pica sufferer's yearning for dirt); it is perfectly possible, conversely, for others' desires to leave us cold (the child's stubborn disinclination toward brussels sprouts); the fact that we sometimes act on recommendations from admired friends and experts proves nothing, since we are entirely capable of ignoring them (*Kill Bill 2*, no thank you);<sup>33</sup> and the fact that there are always multiple potential models (brother Aron, brother David) strongly suggests that those potential models are not doing the choosing for us. In short, there is no basis at all to the central premise of Girardianism: that "human beings have no desires of their own," that there is never a reason (objective or subjective) for wanting something rather than something else, that spontaneous impulses are an illusion, that autonomy is impossible.

In fact, I sometimes wonder whether *anybody* thinks this way. Do Girardians themselves believe it? They may *think* they do—but if they *really* did, they'd act a little differently from the rest of us. They'd talk a little less warmly about the books they love. They'd spend a little less time choosing between this car and that car, this phone and that phone, this stray puppy and that stray puppy. (What difference could there be? Nothing distinguishes them either objectively or subjectively, and "similarities alone are real.") And above all, when Valentine's Day rolls around, they would give their partner a card that reads "I've loved you ever since that other guy laid eyes on you." The day I see

---

<sup>32</sup> "When the mother refuses her son a kiss she is already playing the double role characteristic of internal mediation: she is both the instigator of desire and a relentless guardian forbidding its fulfillment" (*DDN*, 35). Hence, ostensibly, "desire is triangular in the child just as it is in the snob" (*DDN*, 35).

<sup>33</sup> All around me my beloved and admired friends are yearning to eat cilantro, watch Tarantino films, and make babies. I continue to feel love and admiration for my friends, but for cilantro, Tarantino, and babies—sorry, nothing.



that card on the shelves, I will develop a newfound admiration for our friends at Imitatio.



Image by Jacqueline Basu

### THE “IT’S JUST AN EXAGGERATION” DEFENSE

I know what some of you are thinking. Fair enough, you’ll say, desire isn’t *always* mimetic; but René Girard didn’t really *mean* that. He *said* it, because it sounds better that way, but what he really meant is that desire is *sometimes* mimetic.<sup>34</sup> *Sometimes* we desire things because other people do; *sometimes* there’s no difference between choice A and choice B; *sometimes* we’re not as autonomous as we’d like to think. And isn’t this more modest observation an important one to bear in mind?

Well, yes and no. I mean, imagine if I tried to stage a comeback for Thales, that famous pre-Socratic philosopher who claimed (more or less) that everything is made of water.<sup>35</sup> Here I am, then, running around saying “everything is water” to anyone who will listen. “Don’t be ridiculous,” you tell me, “not everything is water.” “All right,” I concede, “only *some* things are water (namely, the watery things); but isn’t that more modest observation an important one to bear in mind?”

<sup>34</sup> But really, isn’t it a bit tiresome to have to keep listening to these claims that nobody could possibly mean? Back in 2009, a Republican politician, Jon Kyl, claimed on the floor of the U.S. Senate that Planned Parenthood spends over 90 percent of its time performing abortions. When he was informed that the figure is actually closer to 3 percent, his spokesman circulated a written memo declaring that “his remark was not intended to be a factual statement.” (See <http://www.politifact.com/truth-o-meter/statements/2011/apr/08/jon-kyl/jon-kyl-says-abortion-services-are-well-over-90-pe/>, [http://www.washingtonmonthly.com/archives/individual/2011\\_04/028869.php](http://www.washingtonmonthly.com/archives/individual/2011_04/028869.php).) This is bad enough in politics, where one half-expects people to lie. But do we really have to accept, in academia, the defense that what Girard said (or what Lacan said, or what Derrida said) was “not intended to be a factual statement”?

<sup>35</sup> This is a popular simplification of Thales’s position. See Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, 983b68–11, for a more nuanced presentation.



Image by Jacqueline Basu

The problem with my “Some Things Are Water” campaign is not that the claim is false; it’s that everyone already knows it. (As a bumper sticker, it probably wouldn’t catch on.) And the same is true for the (pardon the pun) watered-down version of Girardianism. Did we really need Girard to tell us that people sometimes desire things because other people do? Girardians may imagine that this is supposed to come as a shock to the rest of us. But why should it, when the expression “keeping up with the Joneses” has been in common parlance for a hundred years?<sup>36</sup> Why should it, when every god-awful sitcom at some point or other features Alice trying to get Bobby jealous by pretending to be in love with Charlie?<sup>37</sup> (And no, those sitcom writers were not secretly reading Girard: Alfred de Musset already used the device in 1834, and he was certainly not alone in doing so.)<sup>38</sup>

Again: why should the idea of borrowed desires be news to us, when La Rochefoucauld was talking about them in the seventeenth century?<sup>39</sup> Why should it, when Stendhal’s *The Red and the Black* is all about the difference between spontaneous and secondhand inclinations?<sup>40</sup> (I’ve heard literary scholars say with a straight face that we

<sup>36</sup> The first installment of the comic strip “Keeping up with the Joneses” saw the light of day in 1913.

<sup>37</sup> Here is a list I managed to assemble in about fifteen minutes: *Saved by the Bell: The New Class*, episode 63, “The Fallout,” December 2, 1995; *Full House*, episode 43, “Luck Be a Lady (1),” February 21, 1989; *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, season 3, episode 9, “The Wish,” December 8, 1998; *Frasier*, season 11, episode 6, “I’m Listening,” October 28, 2003; *The Big Bang Theory*, season 2, episode 2, “The Codpiece Topology,” September 29, 2008. I am sure there are plenty more where those came from.

<sup>38</sup> Alfred de Musset, *On ne badine pas avec l’amour* (Paris: Gallimard, 2010), act 3, scene 3. Charlotte Brontë deploys the same topos in *Jane Eyre* (1847): “I feigned courtship of Miss Ingram,” says Rochester, “because I wished to render you as madly in love with me as I was with you” (*Jane Eyre* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996], 282).

<sup>39</sup> “Rien n’est si contagieux que l’exemple” (Maxime 230); “il y a des gens qui n’auraient jamais été amoureux s’ils n’avaient jamais entendu parler de l’amour” (Maxime 136). As Pommier notes (*René Girard*, 42), Girard never mentions La Rochefoucauld.

<sup>40</sup> In *La chartreuse de Parme*, the contrast is between Italy (largely spontaneous) and France (largely imitative); in *Le rouge et le noir*, the contrast is between Paris (largely imitative) and the provinces (largely spontaneous). “In Paris Julien’s relations with Mme de Renal would swiftly have been simplified; but in Paris



wouldn't have noticed mimetic desire in Stendhal had it not been for Girard; this is like saying we wouldn't have noticed war in the *Iliad*, Christianity in Dostoevsky, memory in Proust, or adultery in *Madame Bovary* without the help of critics. It's right there on the surface, as the central theme of Stendhal's writing.) Why should it, when Gabriel Tarde, in his 1890 book *Les lois de l'imitation*, claimed that 99 percent of the population are only capable of following the trend? (Nota bene: there is still room in Tarde's theory for *innovators*, the crucial 1 percent responsible for forward movement. Tarde was not a monist; he would never have become famous in our era.)<sup>41</sup>

Similarly, did we really need Girard to tell us that innocent individuals are *sometimes* singled out for punishment by communities in need of an outlet for negative energy? No, we already had J. G. Frazer (1913) for that, and Sigmund Freud (1930), and Kenneth Burke (1935), and Gordon Allport (1954).<sup>42</sup> In fact Frazer has an entire volume of *The Golden Bough*, running to some four hundred and seventy-two pages, dedicated to the topic. My point is not that Frazer has it right (let alone that Freud does); my point is just that everyone has always known that scapegoating happens, just as everyone has always known that mimetic desire happens, and that rivalry happens, and that violence happens.

So no, this isn't a theory plus exaggeration: the exaggeration *is* the theory. Without the exaggeration, Girard is merely stating what everyone already knows. Without the exaggeration, there's no "debunking," no challenge to the purported "illusion" of autonomy.<sup>43</sup> Without the exaggeration, there's no Académie française. The exaggeration is what propelled Girard to fame; the truth, in the meantime, remained what it had always been. Mimetic desire is not even predominant, let alone ubiquitous. It might actually be useful to know just how much of the time it happens, but repeating the blanket claims of a Girard is a surefire recipe for not finding out.

---

love is born of fiction. The young tutor and his shy mistress would have found the explanation of their situation in three or four novels, or even in some couplets from the *Gymnase*. The novels would have outlined for them the parts to play, showed them the model to imitate; and sooner or later, although with no pleasure, perhaps reluctantly, vanity would have forced Julien to follow the model" (Stendhal, *The Red and the Black*, trans. Roger Gard [London: Penguin, 2002], 46–47). As in Musset, so in Stendhal we find again the familiar motif of A (Julien) trying to elicit jealousy in B (Mathilde) thanks to a feigned interest in C (the *maréchale* de Fervaques). That, however, does not mean that Stendhal agrees with Girard. On the contrary, Stendhal draws a clear distinction—unlike Girard, who actually *faults* him for it (*DDN*, 20)—between a good kind of desire (authentic) and a bad kind (inauthentic). This is an eminently sensible position, and cause for regret that the *imitatio* foundation picked Girard, and not Stendhal, as its focus of interest. But there it is: in our field, sensible positions attract none of the attention.

<sup>41</sup> I am grateful to Thomas Pavel for this reference.

<sup>42</sup> Gordon W. Allport, *The Nature of Prejudice* (Cambridge, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1954); Kenneth Burke, *Permanence and Change: An Anatomy of Purpose* (1935; Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1984), 14–17; Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents*, trans. James Strachey (1930; New York: Norton, 1989), 72. "It is always possible," Freud writes here, "to bind together a considerable number of people in love, so long as there are other people left over to receive the manifestations of their aggressiveness."

<sup>43</sup> "Recognizing mimesis is a great debunking tool because it deprives us moderns of the one thing we think we still have left, our individual desire" ("AC," 283–84). If Girard were merely saying that we *sometimes* desire mimetically, there would be no "debunking": this would leave open the possibility that many of our choices, including the most important, are made "spontaneously," in which case we would retain our "individual desire."

### THE “IT MAKES US BETTER READERS” DEFENSE

Why, then, do so many people still take Girard seriously? One reason that has been advanced is that his theories—even if exaggerated—make us better readers: having taken them on board, the story goes, we will be better equipped to notice cases of mimetic desire when they actually crop up. Perhaps that’s true. But it’s worth bearing in mind that statisticians recognize two kinds of mistake, not just those involving omission (“type II” errors, or false negatives) but also those involving projection (“type I” errors, or false positives). So while it is indeed a shame to overlook mimetic desire where it exists, it is just as bad—and arguably worse—to “find” it where it does not. Conspiracy theorists are arguably better at detecting conspiracies on the rare occasions when they actually happen; in the meantime, however, you have to listen to them telling you that the Illuminati are in control of everything, that fluoride is put in our water to make us submissive, and that 9/11 was an inside job. That’s how it is with mimetic theory, too. Like all ideologies, it replaces a trickle of type II errors with a veritable tsunami of type I errors; and that, in my book, is hardly a great improvement.

The best place to look for evidence of this danger is, of course, in the writings of Girard himself. When you pay attention, it is astonishing just how frequently he gets it wrong about the texts he is reading, just how relentlessly he continues pummeling square pegs into round holes. “It is not an exaggeration,” he claims at one point, “to say that, in all of the characters of *Remembrance of Things Past*, love is strictly subordinated to jealousy, to the presence of the rival.”<sup>44</sup> Allow me to propose a friendly amendment: it *is* an exaggeration to say that. Notoriously, the parents of Proust’s narrator—hardly insignificant figures—are entirely immune to jealousy. Even Charles Swann, who *becomes* a fanatically jealous lover, does not *begin* this way,<sup>45</sup> and the narrator is quite categorical that the new jealousy, far from constituting the essence of his passion, in fact represents a denaturing of that passion.<sup>46</sup> That’s why, when Swann ceases being jealous, he is nonetheless able to remain in love.<sup>47</sup>

More important for our present purposes, consider the marvelous scene in *The Fugitive* when the narrator shows Robert de Saint-Loup a photograph of Albertine, that

---

<sup>44</sup> *DDN*, 23. Or again: “Proustian desire is *always* a borrowed desire” (*DDN*, 34; emphasis in original).

<sup>45</sup> “À la recherche des plaisirs que son agrément nous donnait, s’est brusquement *substitué* en nous un besoin anxieux, . . . un besoin absurde, que les lois de ce monde rendent impossible à satisfaire et difficile à guérir—le besoin insensé et douloureux de le posséder” (Marcel Proust, *Du côté de chez Swann* [Paris: Gallimard, 1988], 227; my emphasis).

<sup>46</sup> “Le plaisir qu’on avait le premier jour espéré des caresses, on le reçoit plus tard, *tout dénaturé* sous la forme de paroles amicales, de promesses de présence qui . . . amènent de délicieuses détente” (Marcel Proust, *Le temps retrouvé* [Paris: Gallimard, 1988], 126; my emphasis). Similar remarks could be made about *literary* models (Botticelli, Vinteuil): these, too, the narrator is quick to point out, intervene belatedly, adding a certain zest to an attraction that is, in its origin, entirely spontaneous. “Chacun a besoin de trouver des raisons à sa passion, jusqu’à être heureux de reconnaître dans l’être qu’il aime des qualités que la littérature ou la conversation lui ont appris être de celles qui sont dignes d’exciter l’amour, jusqu’à les assimiler par imitation et en faire des *raisons nouvelles* de son amour, ces qualités fussent-elles les plus opposées à celles que cet amour eût recherchées *tant qu’il était spontané*” (Proust, *Le temps retrouvé*, 402; my emphasis).

<sup>47</sup> “Sitôt que . . . le désir de l’enlever à tout autre n’était plus *ajouté* par la jalousie à son amour, cet amour *redevient* surtout un goût pour les sensations que lui donnait la personne d’Odette” (Proust, *Du côté de chez Swann*, 299; my emphasis).

woman about whom Saint-Loup has heard so much. “He regarded me as so superior a being,” writes the narrator, “that he felt that for me to be in thrall to another creature, she must be quite extraordinary.” Does Saint-Loup fall madly in love with her, then, when he finally sees her photograph? Does he heck! He is stunned, can’t believe that the marvelous Marcel can have lost his heart to such a crashingly ordinary woman.<sup>48</sup> (That happens, by the way, in real life too: when our best friend starts dating a dud, we don’t fall in love with her—we just get really depressed.) There is no room for this event on Girard’s reading. According to Girard, all of Proust’s characters are creatures of vanity (“*vaniteux*”), and “a *vaniteux* will desire any object so long as he is convinced that it is already desired by another person whom he admires” (*DDN*, 7). Now Robert de Saint-Loup is convinced Albertine is desired by the narrator; Robert de Saint-Loup admires the narrator; Robert de Saint-Loup is a *vaniteux*; ergo Robert de Saint-Loup has (ostensibly) no choice: he must desire Albertine. As we have seen, however, nothing of the sort takes place. It takes someone of Girard’s extreme single-mindedness to imply that it should.

That’s a first type of reading error budding Girardians can expect to pick up: hyperbolic inflation, an extrapolation without warrant from isolated cases to a universal law. (We find it on display again in Girard’s treatment of *Dom Juan*,<sup>49</sup> and also in his treatment of *Madame Bovary*.)<sup>50</sup> But there’s another thing Girard typically does with the texts he reads, and that is *cherry-picking*: studiously ignoring (or dismissing as irrelevant) any features that do not go along with his theory, Girard then presents those that do as cast-iron evidence for it. You’ll recall that every single culture was, according to him,

---

<sup>48</sup> “Il se figurait que j’étais un être si supérieur qu’il pensait que, pour que je fusse soumis à une autre créature, il fallait que celle-là fût tout à fait extraordinaire. . . . Enfin je venais de trouver la photographie. . . . Sa figure exprimait une stupéfaction qui allait jusqu’à la stupidité. ‘C’est là la jeune fille que tu aimes?’ finit-il par me dire d’un ton où l’étonnement était maté par la crainte de me fâcher. Il ne fit aucune observation, il avait pris l’air raisonnable, prudent, forcément un peu dédaigneux qu’on a devant un malade . . . qui . . . vous parle d’un être céleste qui lui est apparu et continue à le voir à l’endroit où vous, homme sain, vous n’apercevez qu’un édreton” (Marcel Proust, *Albertine disparue* [Paris: Gallimard, 1990], 21). The English translation cited in the main text comes from Marcel Proust, *The Captive / The Fugitive*, trans. Terence Kilmartin, D. J. Enright, and Andreas Mayor (New York: Modern Library, 1992), 588, slightly modified.

<sup>49</sup> The *real* Don Juan, says Girard, lacks autonomy, and Molière’s version (*Dom Juan*, 1665) makes this clear: after all, Molière’s Don Juan says he has decided to seduce a woman just so as to destroy the happiness she and her current boyfriend are enjoying (*DDN*, 51). This is indeed a case of heteronomy; Don Juan’s desires are indeed conditioned here by those of other people; but as Pommier remarks (*René Girard*, 25), the case is not generalizable. Don Juan tells Sganarelle that he is constantly falling for women at first sight (“la beauté me ravit partout où je la trouve” [act 1, scene 2]), and we see at least one instance of this, when he meets the attractive Charlotte and is immediately taken with her (act 2, scene 2). (Perhaps a hardened Girardian would say that he magically intuitively that she is engaged, but most of us do not believe in such magic.)

<sup>50</sup> With Flaubert the damage is less extensive, but Girard still manages to misrepresent the case, suggesting that only two very minor characters in *Madame Bovary*—Catherine Leroux and Doctor Canivet—have desires that are spontaneous. This, of course, is to ignore the far more central Charles, a much-maligned character whose reputation has only recently begun to be rehabilitated. (See my “Passion, Counter-Passion, Catharsis: Beckett and Flaubert on Feeling Nothing,” in *The Blackwell Companion to Literature and Philosophy*, ed. Garry Hagberg [Oxford: Blackwell, 2010], 218–38.) Nor does Girard mention the delightful example of love at first sight in *L’éducation sentimentale*, the infamous “ce fut comme une apparition.” See Pommier, *René Girard*, 32–33; for similar problems with Cervantes, Stendhal, and Dostoevsky, see Pommier, *René Girard*, 27–35.

founded on the collective murder of an innocent victim. Well, Girard's "evidence" for this comes from a variety of myths and Bible stories . . . suitably rewritten. The Oedipus story confirms it, for example, just as long as you ignore the fact that Oedipus kills his father and marries his mother. (Slander! Oedipus was innocent.)<sup>51</sup> The Garden of Eden story confirms it, just as long as you ignore the fact that Adam disobeyed God. (That part—but not the rest of the Eden story, mind you—was made up.)<sup>52</sup> And the Jonah story confirms it, just as long as you ignore the fact that God is driving the action.<sup>53</sup> (In the words of the song, "it ain't necessarily so.")

Actually, the first chapters of Genesis need a little more work to get them to fit the Girardian theory, and that brings us to our third reading error.<sup>54</sup> It's not enough to take God out of the picture; we still need Adam's exile to be the result of a *collective* human decision, following an "escalation of mimetic rivalry." So let's move Adam out of Eden and into a larger human community. Further, let's create discord in this community. What evidence do we have for this? Why, the *tohu-va-vohu*, the primal chaos out of which God created the world. As long as we read that *tohu-va-vohu* allegorically (it's not just the shapeless mass of matter preceding creation, it's "the undifferentiated reciprocity of mimetic conflict"<sup>55</sup>), and as long as we move it from the beginning of time to some point in the Pleistocene era, everything works out. This, then, is our third reading error: the error of *resequencing*, of rearranging the order of events as is most convenient for a given interpretation.<sup>56</sup> So the *tohu-va-vohu* is not a cosmic chaos but a fully human disorder; it takes place not at the beginning of time but billions of years later; Adam is not exiled from a garden with two people in it but from a substantial community; Adam is not guilty of anything but is pure as the driven snow; yet in every other way, this is a historical reporting of something that actually happened. As Mark Twain is supposed to have said, never let the facts get in the way of a good story.

---

<sup>51</sup> "The victim cannot be perceived as innocent. . . . The myth reflects the standpoint of the scapegoaters" ("MV," 15). In other words, Oedipus's patricide is just a post hoc fabrication by the Thebans.

<sup>52</sup> *TH*, 142.

<sup>53</sup> Among so many tendentious readings (which one should perhaps call rewritings), Girard's account of the Jonah story is arguably the most stupefying of all. "The ship," he says, "represents the community, the tempest the sacrificial crisis. The jettisoned cargo is the cultural system that has abandoned its distinctions. The fact that everybody calls out to his own particular god indicates a breakdown in the religious order" (*VS*, 313). If the ship represents the community, what does the *actual* community (the Jews of Nineveh) represent? Why do we need an additional explanation for the fact that people from different regions have different gods (as we see throughout the Old Testament)? And why ignore the fact that the storm is God's punishment? Reading this is like reading Augustine on the parable of the Good Samaritan: the man, says Augustine, is Adam; the robbers who set upon him are the Devil and his minions; the Samaritan is Jesus; the inn is the Church; the innkeeper is Paul; and so on, and so on. By the twentieth century, serious theologians were no longer indulging in such unconstrained, essentially arbitrary interpretations. But Girard is still flying the flag, and his out-of-control allegoresis is on full display not just here but in his analysis of Satan (*TH*, 162), whom he characterizes as simultaneously the mimetic model, the mimetic process, and the founding mechanism, all at once.

<sup>54</sup> As Girard himself admits, "in the story of the creation of the world, the founding moment comes at the beginning and no victimage is involved" (*TH*, 143).

<sup>55</sup> See "MV," 10 for the phrase and *TH*, 142 for application to the *tohu-va-vohu*.

<sup>56</sup> Girard erects this into a general principle of interpretation: the "theme of disorder," he says, "does not always come first since it is seen as a consequence of the scapegoat's misdeed" ("PTW," 151).

A beautiful twist on this strategy, which we should count as a fourth type of reading error, consists in the paradoxical celebration of defeat. When a myth does the exact opposite of what it's supposed to—as the Oedipus myth does, by making its protagonist someone who deserves his exile—Girard comes right out and claims that this is even *more* reason to take it as supporting his view.<sup>57</sup> After all, he says, myths *have* to conceal the truth in order to function; so of *course* they do not support his theory. This is a stunningly brazen thing to say in itself (on those grounds, I can prove that the Oedipus story is really about chickens). But it's also one that you might think runs into a bit of a problem given the way in which Girard treats biblical stories. These stories (that of Joseph and his brothers, for example) somehow *do* manage to tell the truth, according to Girard, which rather suggests that myths *can* function without concealment.<sup>58</sup> Couldn't those Thebans have been getting it right all along, then, about poor Oedipus?

There's one final reading error lying in wait for aspiring Girardians, and that is the error of *fabrication*. Sometimes it's not quite enough to cherry-pick the things you like, to make as if they represent the text as a whole, to reorder them to suit your hypothesis, and to explain away what's missing; sometimes it's fun to pretend, instead, that the missing pieces are in fact there. Thus Girard wants Potiphar to be Joseph's adoptive father, so he just says he is.<sup>59</sup> Girard wants the Crucifixion to look like a purely human event, not an act of cosmic redemption ordained by God, so he makes it so.<sup>60</sup> He wants it to be desired by the entire community, so he tells us (amazingly) that the disciples themselves were in favor.<sup>61</sup> And he wants the Python myth of the Venda to be about a

---

<sup>57</sup> "The Oedipus myth does not tell us Oedipus is a mimetic scapegoat. Far from disproving my theory, this silence confirms it" ("MV," 15). "Myths, they would say, are not about scapegoating because they don't talk about it. But that's just the point: they don't talk about it; they disguise their generative center" ("AC," 267).

<sup>58</sup> Notice that Girard insists on "the *necessary* misinterpretation and transfiguration of the event by the religious communities themselves" ("MV," 11), writing that "mythology and religious cults form systems of representation *necessarily* untrue to their own genesis" ("MV," 14). Since Christianity is a religion, this should presumably mean that it too necessarily falsifies its origins, concealing both the innocence of the victim ("the victim *must* be perceived as truly responsible for the troubles that come to an end when it is collectively put to death . . . the victim *cannot* be perceived as innocent" ["MV," 14–15]) and the reality of the founding murder ("the inaccessible character of the generative event is not merely an obstacle unrelated to the theory . . . ; rather, it is an essential part of that theory" [VS, 310]; "the generative violence *must* remain hidden" [VS, 310]; "all human religions and all human culture . . . come down to the collective expulsion of the victim . . . [but] this foundation can remain a foundation only to the extent that it does not become apparent" [TH, 178]). (My emphasis throughout.) Yet of course Christianity does nothing of the sort: it makes no secret of the fact that a collective murder took place, or of the fact that the victim (Jesus) was innocent.

<sup>59</sup> "If we take into account that Joseph's Egyptian master behaved toward him as a father, then the accusation of [Potiphar's] wife has an almost incestuous character" (TH, 152; see also "MV," 17). To be sure, Potiphar is kind to Joseph, but there is absolutely nothing to suggest that he treats him like a son. On the contrary, when Potiphar's wife makes advances to him, the Bible is careful to repeat that she is the wife of his *master* (*adon*) (Gen. 39:7, 39:8), reminding us that he is a slave. The word recurs two more times in the chapter, at 39:19 and 39:20.

<sup>60</sup> In all three of the synoptic Gospels, Jesus attributes his impending fate to the will of God: "not what I will, but what thou wilt" (Mark 14:36, Luke 22:42, Matt. 26:39). Girard, however, insists that it is a catastrophe entirely engineered by human actors. "If the Passion is regarded . . . as only a violent event brought about by God," he writes, "it is misunderstood" ("AC," 282; cf. TH, 213).

<sup>61</sup> "Jesus is presented to us as the innocent victim of a group . . . which, for a time at any rate, is united against him" (TH, 167). Again, this unity is required for Girard's scapegoat theory, but it is just not accurate. (On the case of Peter, see Pommier, *René Girard*, 102.) Compare Girard's statement that "the refusal of the

woman being killed by her community, not a woman disappearing on her own, so he says that too.<sup>62</sup>

Over and over again, it's the same thing: Shakespeare,<sup>63</sup> Molière, Dostoevsky,<sup>64</sup> Proust,<sup>65</sup> the Eden story, the Exodus story,<sup>66</sup> the Jonah story; the wicked husbandmen,<sup>67</sup>

Kingdom by Jesus' listeners will logically impel them to turn against him" (*TH*, 211): here Girard is ignoring the perfectly reasonable option of simply going about one's business, not taking either side.

<sup>62</sup> This is a myth told by the Venda tribe of South Africa. The water god Python has two human wives. One of them discovers his true identity; a drought follows; then the wife disappears, and the drought ends. Girard concludes, of course, that "there must be a real victim" ("PTW," 155): in other words, there once was an *actual* woman who was *murdered*, the victim of a collective assault that was taken to have ended a drought. In Girard's version, then, *disappearing quietly on your own* means *being killed by lots and lots of people*.

<sup>63</sup> We saw above what Girard does with *Hamlet*. Elsewhere he calls Romeo and Juliet "little mimetic snobs" (*MT*, 288).

<sup>64</sup> In Dostoevsky's novella *The Eternal Husband*, Character A (Pavel Pavlovitch Trusotsky) marries Character B (Natalya Vasilyevna), who then goes on to have an affair with Character C (Alexei Ivanovich Veltchaninov). Most of us would agree that C is now a *rival* of A, competing with him for the affection of B. But Girard goes further, calling him a *mediator*, the cause of A's desire for B: "Pavel Pavlovitch can desire only through the mediation of Veltchaninov" (*DDN*, 47). The problem, of course, is that C became A's rival only *after* A had fallen in love with B; in fact, A had been married to B for *ten full years* before C came on the scene. (See Pommier, *René Girard*, 35.) Once again, *resequencing* is at work in Girard's tendentious reading.

<sup>65</sup> One of the things Proust's novel is most famous for is its celebration of art. In *The Captive*, for example, we find the following well-known sentence: "all the residuum of reality which we are obliged to keep to ourselves, which cannot be transmitted in talk, even from friend to friend, from master to disciple, from lover to mistress, that ineffable something which differentiates qualitatively what each of us has felt and what he is obliged to leave behind at the threshold of the phrases in which he can communicate with others only by limiting himself to externals, common to all and of no interest—are brought out by art, the art of a Vinteuil like that of an Elstir, which exteriorises in the colours of the spectrum the intimate composition of those worlds which we call individuals, and which, but for art, we should never know" (Proust, *The Captive / The Fugitive*, 343). In Girard, such beautiful and powerful statements, which correspond to Proust's own views (see *Essais et articles* [Paris: Gallimard, 1994], 255, 365, 669), magically shrink to "a few isolated passages" of no significance (*DDN*, 299). (There's that cherry-picking again.) This permits Girard to claim, quite shockingly, that the Proustian true self "imitates constantly, on its knees before the mediator" (*DDN*, 298). Nothing in the novel speaks for such a reading, and everything speaks against it—not just the sections on art but also what we learn about metaphor, about love (our individual temperament selects partners appropriate to it: Marcel Proust, *A l'ombre des jeunes filles en fleurs* [Paris: Gallimard, 1988], 456), and about plenty else besides.

<sup>66</sup> "Moses is evidently playing the part of the scapegoat," says Girard. This of course means that the Jews have for millennia been repeating an *Egyptian* myth, foolishly believing it to be one of their own. "In order to 'function' normally . . . Exodus would have to be an Egyptian myth; this myth would show us a sacrificial crisis resolved by the expulsion of the trouble-makers, Moses and his companions" (*TH*, 153).

<sup>67</sup> In the parable of the wicked husbandmen (Mark 12:1–12, Matt. 21:33–44, Luke 20:9–19), Jesus speaks of a man who lets his vineyard out to tenant farmers. These tenant farmers then decide to keep all the fruit for themselves. Each time the owner sends a servant to collect the rent, they beat the servant and send him back; finally the owner sends his son, and the tenants murder him. In two of the three versions, Jesus says that the owner will respond by killing the tenants: "What shall therefore the lord of the vineyard do? he will come and destroy the husbandmen, and will give the vineyard unto others" (Mark 12:9; see also Luke 20:15–16). It is fairly clear that this parable, probably not authentic, is a reference to God's impending punishment of those who crucified his Son. On Girard's topsy-turvy reading, however, it indicates that apocalyptic violence will come not from God but from human beings. Girard's "evidence" is that in the Matthew version (only!), Jesus does not actually *say* that the owner will come and take his revenge. But even here, Jesus asks the same question ("When the lord therefore of the vineyard cometh, what will he do unto those husbandmen?"); he receives the same answer ("They say unto him, He will miserably destroy those wicked men, and will let out his vineyard unto other husbandmen, which shall render him the fruits in their seasons"); and he appears entirely satisfied with it. Girard's account is at *TH*, 187–90; the analysis is Pommier's (*René Girard*, 95–98).



the Crucifixion; the Oedipus myth,<sup>68</sup> the Cyclops myth, the Python myth . . . Every narrative has to be “fixed” before it can count as evidence of Girard’s theory. But if a tale has to be fixed, it can’t count as evidence. If you want to convince me that all cats are green, it won’t do to round up all the cats and paint them green before handing them to me to prove your point. Girard loves to tell us that his claims are “fully demonstrated”<sup>69</sup> and “scientific”: “our theory should be approached,” he says, “as one approaches any scientific hypothesis.”<sup>70</sup> Well, I’m sorry to have to say this, but if you tamper with the evidence, you cannot claim to be doing science.<sup>71</sup>

Is it really true, then, that exposure to Girard will make people better readers? Might it not tempt them, instead, into becoming cherry-picking, evidence-disdaining, overgeneralizing, plot-rearranging fabricators? Might they not start seeing every literary or mythical text as having more or less the same function as every other? And wouldn’t that be the textbook definition of bad reading?

### THE REAL REASON

To be fair, very few people have been taken in, all in all, by the Girardian theory and method; as Girard himself recognizes, *actual* anthropologists (and, one might add, actual psychologists) have not paid him that much attention.<sup>72</sup> Still, as we saw at the outset, he has a number of admirers in high places. I am sure it helps that he writes truly beautifully, with a wonderful combination of clarity, punch, and systematic rigor. I am also sure it

<sup>68</sup> Girard wants the blinding of the Cyclops in Homer to look like a sacrifice; to this end, he claims that it is something both collectively decided and collectively enacted. (“It is as a unanimous group that Odysseus and his companions plunge the red-hot stake into the Cyclops’ eye” [VS, 100; see also VS, 6].) Neither, however, is true, as a cursory reading of the *Odyssey* makes clear. In fact, Odysseus comes up with the plan on his own, and he implements it with the help of only four crew members. See Pommier, *René Girard*, 72–73. As Pommier points out (*René Girard*, 74), the notion that this attack could in any way be seen as a *sacrifice* is quite outlandish.

<sup>69</sup> “The thesis of the scapegoat owes nothing to any form of impressionistic or literary borrowing. I believe it to be fully demonstrated on the basis of the anthropological texts. That is why I have chosen not to listen to those who criticize my scientific claims” (*TH*, 176). Choosing not to listen to those who criticize: not very scientific either.

<sup>70</sup> VS, 316. For an early critique of this claim, see Hayden White, “Ethnological ‘Lie’ and Mythical ‘Truth,’” *Diacritics* 8 (1978): 7.

<sup>71</sup> Perhaps this is why Girard at one point confesses that there is in fact nothing scientific about any of it. “The theory as a whole,” he admits, “cannot be subjected to empirical verification or falsification” (“AC,” 277); “it is the sort of thing you either see or do not see. It’s like a flash of lightning; you either get it or you don’t get it. Ordinary reasoning just loops back on its own premises. . . . Everything great is always a question of faith” (“AC,” 267). One should bear in mind Karl Popper’s famous statement: “in so far as a scientific statement speaks about reality, it must be falsifiable.”

<sup>72</sup> “Many ethnologists, classicists, and theologians say that squint as they may, they can see no scapegoat in the myths. They do not understand what I am saying” (*QCC*, 41, my translation). One of the ethnologists in question is Elizabeth Traube, who takes issue with Girard’s oft-repeated claim that the apparently absurd rituals of various cultures (Nuer, Dinka, Swazi, etc.) only become intelligible in the light of the scapegoat mechanism. But, notes Traube, the anthropologists from whom Girard borrows the data—Evans-Pritchard, Lienhardt, Beidelman—had *already* made the rituals intelligible, and had done so in ways that preserved the specificity of each culture. See Elizabeth Traube, “Incest and Mythology: Anthropological and Girardian Perspectives,” *Berkshire Review* 14 (1979): 48–49. Girard, by contrast, forcibly lifts a scattered set of fragments out of their respective contexts and thereby “loses . . . the ability to tell us anything about cultural products themselves, for the simple reason that he has annihilated the cultures which produced them” (Traube, “Incest and Mythology,” 49–50).

helps that he is an extremely nice person. (I've met him personally, and can attest to this.) But an election to the Académie française and a creation of an institute require more of an explanation than that. What, then, shall we say?

It seems to me that his followers have four reasons for being so passionate about his work. One group is primarily attracted by its religious dimension, in the hope perhaps that mimetic theory can bring new souls to Christianity. That is a pious wish explicitly expressed by Girard,<sup>73</sup> and it may seem to draw some plausibility from the fact that he himself, as he tells us, converted to Christianity because of his discovery of the scapegoat mechanism.<sup>74</sup> (Fascinatingly, mind you—and to my knowledge, no one has noticed this before—that last claim is very unlikely to be true. Girard converted in 1959,<sup>75</sup> while working on *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel*, a book he published in 1961; while there is plenty of Christianity in that book,<sup>76</sup> there is not a single scapegoat, and *Violence and the Sacred*, which contains plenty of scapegoats, was published some eleven years later.) What is more, the Girardian theory appears to offer an answer to the question why the messiah has to come twice, not just once—or to put it another way, why the First Coming appears to have changed so little.<sup>77</sup>

A second group of followers hails from literature departments. Such followers delight, I imagine, in the combination of negativity and hyperbole—that promise to provide a single unified explanation of all phenomena while striking the proper world-weary, Gauloise-smoking, leather-jacket-wearing pose—that has been such catnip for critics over the years. And they probably also enjoy the ease with which the Girardian theory can be applied to works of fiction. All you need to do is find, or indeed invent, a “triangular” relationship among characters, then append Girard’s magic name, and hey presto, you have

---

<sup>73</sup> “The knowledge of mimesis,” says Girard, “is really tied to conversion” (“AC,” 268). The strategy is perhaps a Pascalian one: convince nonbelievers of the misery of their condition in order to bring them to faith.

<sup>74</sup> “All that I did in *Violence and the Sacred* was to retrace . . . my own intellectual journey, which eventually brought me to the Judeo-Christian writings, though long after I had become convinced of the importance of the victimage mechanism. . . . I remained for a long period as hostile to the Judeo-Christian texts as modernist orthodoxy could wish” (*TH*, 176; my emphasis).

<sup>75</sup> “I had an extremely bad period, and this period coincided with the liturgical period of Lent in 1959. I was thirty-five years old. . . . I went to confession and I had my children baptized. My wife and I were remarried by a priest” (“AC,” 285).

<sup>76</sup> “Christian symbolism is universal for it alone is able to give form to the experience of the novel” (*DDN*, 310); “novelistic conversion calls to mind . . . the Christian rebirth” (*DDN*, 308); “conversion in death [is] an almost miraculous descent of novelistic grace” (*DDN*, 309–10).

<sup>77</sup> I can’t say much about this here, but hope to on another occasion. It seems fairly clear that Jesus was initially greeted by some as the Messiah, with expectations that he would fulfill during his lifetime all relevant Old Testament prophecies (an end to injustice, a reign of peace, universal monotheism, flowers in the desert, and so on: see Isa. 2:2–4, 9:6–7, 11:6, 43:19–20, 54:5; Jer. 31:34). When he died without any of those things having taken place, it was assumed he would return almost immediately to finish the job: in all three synoptic Gospels, Jesus proclaims that “there are some standing here who will not taste death before they see that the kingdom of God has come with power” (Mark 9:1; see also Luke 9:27, Matt. 16:28). (Fascinatingly, we witnessed an identical reaction in recent times to the death of Menachem Mendel Schneerson, the Lubavitcher Rebbe.) But of course that generation died off, too, so a new theory was needed. The “inaugurated eschatology” position, which is perhaps the most prominent in our day, holds that the Crucifixion set in motion a process that requires time to be completed. For those who adopt it, one question remains pressing: why did Jesus have to suffer? Why not just come once, in glory? The attractiveness of a theory like Girard’s is that it seems to offer a reason: the scapegoat mechanism had to be put out of action in order for the process even to get under way in the first place.



yourself an article. The world of literary theory, like the world of fashion, is one of those places where mimetic mechanisms *do* function; with ironic appropriateness, the primary reason that people drop the name “Girard” is that other people do.<sup>78</sup>

The third, and most depressing, group comprises those who use the dread word “*generative*” when speaking about Girard’s approach. Such people do not care whether a given theory is true or false; all they care about is whether it spawns “interesting” readings. Now I’m prepared to concede that a reading of *Hamlet* according to which the main character has no desires of his own is an interesting one. But I think a reading of *Hamlet* according to which the main character is riddled with body thetans is an even *more* interesting one. (It has rockets! and aliens!) Generative brigade, what I said about Scientology was for you. If you wish to rule Scientology out of court (and I tend to think you do), it is not on the grounds of its generativity but on the grounds of its *accuracy*; and you should, it seems to me, start applying the same standards to everything else.

There is, however, a fourth reason for taking an interest in Girard, and I believe it has been the single most influential. This reason can be simply stated: Girardian doctrine is *a theory of everything, on the cheap*. It’s one of those systems that make you feel as though you know everything about everything while in fact requiring you to know almost nothing about anything; it’s enough to “know” the four stages mentioned above and bingo, you have an explanation for the stock market crash, the evils of capitalism, and your neighbor’s ugly divorce. (As a bonus, you can also feel superior to those who *don’t* see the deep truth of such things.<sup>79</sup> From his surprisingly caustic condemnations of people like Frazer and Auerbach and Plato<sup>80</sup>—not to mention of ethnologists, classicists, and theologians at large,<sup>81</sup> or indeed academic readers *tout court*<sup>82</sup>—it is clear that Girard himself is no stranger to that particular feeling.)

---

<sup>78</sup> Perhaps this is the moment for me to confess that I too have cited Girard in various places over the years. To be sure, I have done so sparingly, and sometimes critically, but nonetheless I now think I should have done so less. I was, I now see, making a telling mistake about the nature of his project. It was not until I began work on this talk that I really came to understand it.

<sup>79</sup> It may also be that some Girardians believe *other* people are susceptible to mimetic desire, but not themselves. The feeling that “this holds true of everyone—except *us*” (*DDN*, 38) is in fact something Girard warns against in *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel*. “Romantic pride willingly denounces the presence of the mediator in Others,” continues Girard (*DDN*, 38), but not its presence in our own lives.

<sup>80</sup> “Frazer’s own thesis . . . is naïve” (*TH*, 169); “many later writers have in effect done little more than repeat in somewhat different form Frazer’s own profession of ignorance. . . . Such phrases as ‘physical loads’ and ‘bodily and mental ailments’ recall nothing so much as the platitudes of second-rate theologians” (*VS*, 317); “Auerbach, like other interpreters, misses what for me is essential” (*EC*, 209); “where Plato fails is . . . right at the heart of the matter” (*TH*, 15–16).

<sup>81</sup> Again: “Many ethnologists, classicists, and theologians say that squint as they may, they can see no scapegoat in the myths. They do not understand what I am saying” (*QCC*, 41, my translation).

<sup>82</sup> “If you read the commentaries customarily written . . . not only by Christians but also by so-called ‘scientific’ exegetes, you will be amazed by the universal inability to recognize meanings that are . . . obvious” (*TH*, 179); “let’s face it, readers, including academic ones, usually read texts pretty simplistically” (“AC,” 267). On Girard’s healthy degree of self-belief, see Pommier, *René Girard*, 8–9, from where I am also borrowing some of these quotations. It is perhaps wrong of me, but I find such statements (and the ones above) especially surprising in light of the biblical pronouncement that “whosoever shall exalt himself shall be abased; and he that shall humble himself shall be exalted” (Matt. 23:12, Luke 14:11; cf. Rom. 12:16 and Augustine, *On Nature and Grace*, chap. 36). My favorite example, though, comes from an essay Girard published in 1976, titled “French Theories of Fiction: 1947–1974” (*Bucknell Review* 22, no. 1 [1976]: 117–26). After having mentioned such figures as Jean-Paul Sartre, Roland Barthes, and Claude Lévi-Strauss, Girard concludes with—himself. Comparing his own

This illusion is strengthened, of course, by confirmation bias (whenever a case of mimetic desire presents itself, it is easy to think “see? Girard was right!”; whenever a case of spontaneous desire presents itself, it is easy not to notice).<sup>83</sup> And it’s also strengthened by a number of convenient confluences. Envy, for example, may look superficially like mimetic desire, but it doesn’t have to be: it may well be that I want what you have because it’s intrinsically valuable, not because you wanted it first.<sup>84</sup> The same goes for peer pressure (maybe I join your knitting circle just to fit in, but I do so without adopting your desire to be there)<sup>85</sup> and for taking expert advice (reading reviews, say, before buying a new camera). It goes, too, for revenge, whose psychic origins have little to do with imitation.<sup>86</sup>

In every one of these cases, we are dealing with illicit extensions of the term “mimetic desire.” Some admirers of Girard may feel that his theory gains support from the fact that I park where other cars are parked,<sup>87</sup> that Pontius Pilate succumbs to peer pressure, that Joseph’s brothers are envious of him, or that people sometimes retaliate for injuries done to them. (They may also, equally fallaciously, believe that it gains support from the existence of mirror neurons.) Such phenomena, however, are irrelevant. Girard’s style—his repeated use of the word “mimesis” in a variety of different contexts—cunningly invites the inattentive reader to conflate them, and many inattentive readers have gleefully accepted his invitation. That is no reason for us, however, to follow suit.

All in all, then: the Girardian theory is not true; it does not make us better readers; and it’s not an exaggeration of anything important. Like the “everything is water” claim attributed to Thales, the “all desire is mimetic,” “all violence is mimetic,” and “all culture

---

approach to that of thinkers like Freud and Marx, he writes that it “simply works better than any of these theories” (122). What can one say: Girard is not lacking in self-esteem.

<sup>83</sup> If you’ll permit me, let me issue here a dramatic new hypothesis about the world: *the only thing anyone ever eats is cheese sandwiches*. From now on, every time you see someone eating a cheese sandwich, I’d like you to say, “My goodness, how very *Landyan* that is.” If I’m lucky, perhaps in time people will stop noticing all the other things people eat. And then I’ll be a famous theorist.

<sup>84</sup> Here’s what Girard says about Joseph: “the biblical text . . . sees Joseph as an innocent scapegoat, a victim of his brothers’ jealousy, the biblical formulation of our mimetic desire” (“MV,” 17). What the brothers envy Joseph for is the affection of their father. This, however, is something that is *good to have*, something they would have wanted if Joseph had never existed, something pretty much everyone (siblingless children included) has a reason to wish for. It is not, therefore, a case of mimetic desire.

<sup>85</sup> This is Pommier’s point (*René Girard*, 94, 112–14). When Herod accedes to the will of his wife and brings her the head of John the Baptist, he is purportedly “controlled by mimesis” (*S*, 144); when Pilate accedes to the will of the Pharisees and condemns Jesus to execution, this, too, is ostensibly a case of mimetic desire (*TH*, 167). We have, however, no reason to think that Herod *wants* the death of John, or that Pilate *wants* the death of Jesus. If Herod accedes to the will of his wife, and if Pilate accedes to the will of the Pharisees, then they do so *strategically*, not passionately.

<sup>86</sup> As Pommier delightfully phrases it (*René Girard*, 52), when someone starts shooting at you, you do not think “hey, that’s a great idea, I’ll do that too!” To put it another way, the desire of your attacker is for you to be dead; if desire were really contagious, you would wish to kill *yourself*, not him.

<sup>87</sup> I live on a street where parking is illegal between 12 and 2 p.m. on Thursdays. The parking enforcement officers come by only once during that period, however, and after they have gone, it is safe to park. If I return home at 1:45 p.m. and see that several cars are parked on my street without tickets, I take this as a sign that the parking enforcement officer has already been and gone, and I will park my car. In such cases I am following the example of the drivers before me, without for all that borrowing their desire. (I am grateful to Lee Konstantinou for this example.)

comes from violence” claims reduce, at best, to something trivial. And while Girardianism may well be “generative,” it is surely no more so than Scientology. Yet there it is, still going strong at a literature department near you. I’m not sure how we can stop it. Maybe an advertising campaign? Involving Cindy Crawford *and* Penélope Cruz? Maybe I could just hang around the Imitatio foundation and wait until everyone has mimetically adopted my desire not to have to listen to people saying all these outlandish things? If only desire worked the way they say it does . . . A

DRAFT