

# René Girard and the Deferral of Violence

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**ABSTRACT** René Girard's anthropology goes beyond Durkheim and Freud in seeking knowledge in literary, mythical, and religious texts. Girard's primary intuition is that human culture originated in response to the danger of violent *mimetic crises* among increasingly intelligent hominins, whose *imitation* of each other's desires led to conflict. These crises were resolved by the *mechanism* of *emissary murder*: the proto-human community came to focus its aggression on a single *scapegoat* whose unanimous lynching, by "miraculously" bringing peace, led to its ritual repetition in *sacrifice*. Because this theory fails to found the *signs* of human language and worship on the *deferral* of spontaneous action, Girard can only attribute the internal peace necessary to the human community to the exhaustion of violent aggression. Instead, *generative anthropology* proposes that, beginning from the premise that the need to control internecine violence was the source of the human, an appropriative gesture toward an object of common desire, deferred out of fear of violence, becomes understood as a *sign* of the object's *sacred/interdicted* status, after which it can be peacefully divided among the group. Following this *originary event*, the *sacred/signifying* universe of language and religion gradually comes to include the totality of human activity.

**KEYWORDS** deferral; *différance*; generative anthropology; originary hypothesis; violence

René Girard's signal contribution to anthropology is his analysis of mimetic desire as the root of a specifically human violence that culture comes into existence to control. Those who would apply his insights directly to everyday life should remember that he originally found his examples not in history, but in literary texts, reflecting the problematic nature of the mimetic phenomenon, which is more appropriately understood through the analysis of works of art—and of religion—than by straightforward empirical analysis.<sup>1</sup>

In Girard's thought, this is not a bug but a feature. Girard's particular merit was that he dared to construct a fundamental anthropology, not from a simplified set of traits culled from the social-science literature, but from the study and analysis of the most paradoxical of human creations, which are for that very reason among the most revelatory. His later work on myth and religion remained within this same problematic cultural domain.

Yet given the importance of cultural representation for Girard's construction of the human, one cannot fail to be struck by his failure to construct a consistent theory of symbolic representation, the central mediating function between the human and the world. I believe that the absence of a viable Girardian theory of language can be rectified without taking anything essential away from the originality of his contribution to anthropology, albeit at the price of a more nuanced judgment of the place of violence in the human construction of the sacred.

What is missing in Girard's conception of human violence is best expressed by a term put forward in a semiotic context by Jacques Derrida:

1. Given the breadth of Girard's work, I think it important to justify the limited selection of texts I refer to in this essay. I did my graduate study with Girard at Johns Hopkins University from 1960 on, and am familiar with nearly all his writings. Because my focus here is on language/signification, I have chosen relevant texts from his two major anthropological works, *La violence et le sacré* (Paris: Grasset, 1972) and *Des choses cachées depuis la fondation du monde* (Paris: Grasset, 1978). (English translations of these books, as well as of the other works cited hereinafter, are referenced in the bibliography.) After due reflection, I have chosen not to include a selection from the much later volume, *Les origines de la culture* (Paris: Desclée de Brouwer, 2004). Like the preceding, this work is structured as a dialogue with two researchers, whose questions enable Girard to expound his ideas. But whereas in 1978, his replies were carefully composed and presented what was at the time new material, the discussion in the later volume is much more dogmatic and perfunctory, and even less sensitive to the problems of constructing a sign-system. This later text also contains, in response to a question, a dismissive discussion of my work (p. 178ff). Any attempt to refute Girard's remarks would lend a polemic tone to this essay, whereas its overriding point is that, despite what I consider his misunderstanding of my "originary hypothesis," it is fully compatible with the essence of his fundamental anthropology, which was its primary inspiration. Girard was 81 years old in 2004 and has since passed away; I hope the reader will understand why I prefer not to engage in polemics with one no longer able to respond.

the notion of *deferral* or *différance*, a neologism that plays on the use in French of a single word, *différer*, for both *defer* and *differ*.<sup>2</sup> This (non-) concept, which Derrida defines as the delay/reflection required to choose a signifier for a given referent by picking a member out of a paradigm, can be understood in more fundamental anthropological terms as the deferral of “instinctive” action embodied in the symbolic sign itself, the manifestation of a specifically human self-consciousness. Deferral is implicit in the *néant* or empty space that Sartre described as standing between the human subject or *pour-soi* (Hegel’s *für-sich* or *for-itself*) and its objects. This is in contrast to the world of the *en-soi* or *in-itself*, to which Sartre assimilates in classic Cartesian fashion animal minds as well as inanimate objects, describing the whole as explicable in terms of unreflective physical interaction rather than the pulling-back inherent in human consciousness.

Yet, as is characteristic of the Western philosophical tradition that includes phenomenology, Sartre never associates this state directly with our unique possession of language. From the standpoint of generative anthropology, deferral as a specifically human phenomenon can be traced to the originary instance of language, where, given a critically enhanced level of mimetic tension, in confronting an animal source of nourishment that would have in the past been distributed according to the serial pecking-order of primate society, a gesture of appropriation, aborted out of fear of provoking conflict, comes to be understood as a *sign* that designates the object as sacred/interdicted rather than seeking its immediate appropriation.<sup>3</sup>

The absence of this crucial element of deferral suffices to explain Girard’s failure to include in his account of human origin a satisfactory theory of language to accompany his theory of the sacred, and more broadly, to mediate the complex relationship between violence and the sacred, both before and within Christianity, in a more nuanced fashion than that permitted by his *boutade*, “la violence *ou* le sacré.”<sup>4</sup>

2. The best introduction to this term is found in the lecture/essay entitled simply “La différence,” included in *Théorie d’ensemble* (Paris: Seuil, 1968), 41–66, and available online at <https://ia800401.us.archive.org/6/items/1968J.DerridaLaDifférance/1968J.Derrida-LaDifférance2.pdf>

3. For a brief account of the originary hypothesis that is the foundation of generative anthropology, the reader is invited to consult the *Anthropoetics* website: <http://anthropoetics.ucla.edu/gaintro>

4. “Nous venons de dire: la violence *et* le sacré. Nous pourrions dire également : la violence *ou* le sacré. Le jeu du sacré et celui de la violence ne font qu’un.” Girard, *La violence et le sacré*, 357. “We have just said: violence *and* the sacred. We could say equally well: violence *or* the sacred. The operation/play of the sacred and that of violence are one.” Unless otherwise noted, all translations are my own.

Of Girard's two major anthropological works, *La violence et le sacré* and *Des choses cachées depuis la fondation du monde*, only the second mentions the biblical or Judeo-Christian religions. This gives the anthropologically-oriented reader who is unfamiliar with Girard's earlier, literary-critical work the impression that it was only at the latter date that he revealed his Christian beliefs. Nor is it a coincidence that *Des choses ...* is, in conception if not in spirit, a "collective" work. In eliciting the exposition of his thinking about Judeo-Christian religion, Girard's two collaborators serve as indispensable midwives without whose presence Girard would probably have been far more reticent about making explicit his revolutionary religious epistemology, in which the revelations of the Bible, independently of their divine inspiration, are presented as revealing fundamental *anthropological* truths.

But it would be a huge mistake to think that Girard only discovered, or rediscovered, Christianity between 1972 and 1978. Girard's thought was undeniably Christian from the first, at a time when he had not yet thought to extend its psychological doctrines into a full-fledged anthropology. His first and still most popular work, *Mensonge romantique et vérité romanesque*,<sup>5</sup> which appeared in 1961, is a study of the European novel that is suffused with Christian values.

For Girard, after as before the advent of Christianity, the original sin of the human subject is its alienating subjection to mimetic desire. Each of five novels—Cervantes' *Don Quixote*, Stendhal's *Le rouge et le noir*, Flaubert's *Madame Bovary*, Dostoevsky's *The Possessed* (some of this author's other works are also discussed) and Proust's *A la recherche du temps perdu*—is read as a conversion story, a putting away of childish things, which Girard interprets both as demonstrating and as offering a parallel with the author's own transcendence of the *romantic lie* of mediated desire to arrive at the salvation of *novelistic truth*. Not coincidentally, all five works end, not just with the dissipation of illusion, but with the renunciation of worldly desire: through death and world-rejection, as with Julien Sorel and Emma Bovary, or through retirement from the world of desire, as with Don Quixote, who renounces his illusions before death, Dostoevsky's heroes, with the exception of the exemplary Christian Alyosha, and Proust's quasi-autobiographical Marcel, who ends the book by retiring from active life in order to write its fictional equivalent.

Girard's decision to conclude his book with the scene of Alyosha in *The Brothers Karamazov* telling his young disciples of the joys of the after-life makes clear that we should understand the book's lesson concerning

5. René Girard, *Mensonge romantique et vérité Romanesque* (Paris: Grasset, 1961).

the evils of “metaphysical desire” not simply as that we must learn, like Quixote or Emma, to renounce mediated desire, but that we must come to choose Christ rather than a real or fictive hero or a neighbor as our “mediator,” our mimetic model. This lesson illustrates the book’s epigraph, from Max Scheler: “Man believes in either a God or in an idol.”<sup>6</sup>

In Girard’s analyses of worldly desire, the question of deferral, the empty space of reflection, never arises. The literary subject is not shown as *choosing* his or her “mediator,” whether “external” (literary figures or celebrities outside the subject’s universe) or “internal” (charismatic figures within the subject’s own sphere), let alone choosing whether to do without one. He or she is already “mediated” from the outset, whether Don Quixote by Amadis de Gaul, Julien Sorel by Napoleon, Emma Bovary by the heroines of romantic fiction, Stepan Verkhovensky by Stavrogin, or Proust’s Marcel by members of the old French aristocracy. In the novelistic world, the Christian Alyosha is an outsider; his role in *The Brothers Karamazov* is, like Father Zossima’s, to provide a counter-example for the worldly characters whose actions form the storyline.

The success of *Mensonge* as a masterpiece of literary criticism demonstrates that in this context, no further analysis was necessary. A fuller typology of the novel would have had to include what Gyorgy Lukács had called the “novel of virile maturity” (exemplified by Goethe’s *Wilhelm Meister*),<sup>7</sup> in which the protagonist learns to adapt his desires authentically to the world and to arrive at the novel’s typical tragi-comic “happy ending”; but these tragic novels make the author’s point more strikingly.<sup>8</sup> Girard offers the reader a psychological analysis of “triangular” desire that is already a challenge to the family-based Freudian analysis current at the time; the “Oedipus complex” is reduced to the basic structure of subject, object, and mediator, where the identification of the desire-object with the mother and the mediator with the father is secondary to the structure itself. The reader, of the novels as well as of Girard’s book, is presumed able to profit from Girard’s literature-based analysis of the mimetic character of human desire and its pitfalls to grasp the spiritual lesson that literary works provide us.

6. Max Scheler, *On the Eternal in Man*, trans. B. Noble (New York: Harper, 1961), 399.

7. Gyorgy Lukács, *Die Theorie des Romans: Ein geschichtsphilosophischer Versuch über die Formen der grossen Epik* (Berlin: Paul Cassirer, 1920).

8. I have learned from those who knew Girard in his later years that one of the last authors he took an interest in was Jane Austen. Girard’s fellow doctoral student Andrew McKenna’s recent conversational reference to Darcy’s non-tragic “conversion” in admitting his love for Elizabeth in *Pride and Prejudice* reflects, if not Girard’s own words, the spirit of his analyses, “humanized” with the years.

*La violence et le sacré*, published in 1972, was the work that made explicit Girard's intention to go beyond the domain of literary criticism to offer not merely a fundamental psychoanalysis of desire, but a full-fledged anthropology.

As Girard explained to me at the time,<sup>9</sup> the absence of reference to the biblical religions in *La violence* was a deliberate strategic choice, made to allow his anthropological research to stand on its own rather than risk appearing, however unfairly, as an apology for Christianity. The prejudice against religion as a source of anthropological understanding has only increased in the forty years since, but Girard was already sensitive to the difference between scientific thought about religion and religious thought itself. Thus although his anthropology was a genuine attempt to reduce this difference, if not to dissolve it altogether, it struck him, no doubt rightly, that attempting at the same time both to lay the foundation of a new anthropology and to demonstrate the epistemological superiority of the biblical religions as a means of understanding the human was a task too great for a single work, and that taking it on would weaken the impact of *La violence*. Girard was a skillful literary strategist, keenly aware of his audience—a quality he shared with, and respected in, Marcel Proust.

Yet from the less strategic and more substantive perspective that the intervening decades allow, the absence of Judeo-Christian content from *La violence* reveals a lacuna that was in effect never filled, either by *Des choses cachées* (the title is subtly ironic: are the *things hidden* the biblical truths now being revealed by Girard, or is it Girard himself who has “hidden” until now his Christian agenda?) or any of the other religiously themed books (*Le bouc émissaire*,<sup>10</sup> *La route antique des hommes pervers*,<sup>11</sup> *Je vois Satan tomber comme l'éclair*)<sup>12</sup> that followed. Once established, the separation between Girard's originary vision of humanity and that provided, first by the Old Testament and then by the advent and Crucifixion of Jesus, could not in fact be overcome in the terms in which Girard posed it. This hyper-Augustinian separation between man expelled from Eden and man redeemed by Jesus remained a central element of his anthropology, if not one logically necessary to what I consider its most significant elements.

9. For a thorough discussion of Girard's contributions to Generative Anthropology, during my studies at Johns Hopkins from 1960–3 and during my visiting professorship in Spring 1978, see *The Girardian Origins of Generative Anthropology* (Imitatio/Amazon Digital Services, 2012).

10. René Girard, *Le bouc émissaire* (Paris: Grasset, 2007).

11. René Girard, *La route antique des hommes pervers* (Paris: Grasset, 1985).

12. René Girard, *Je vois Satan tomber comme l'éclair* (Paris: Grasset, 1999).

Once more, what is missing is the notion of *deferral* that, by providing through the sign a transcendental separation of human consciousness from its intended object, offers both the occasion for a fall into idolatrous desire and the possibility of transcending it—a possibility that for a Christian may be fully realized only with the coming of Christ and his Crucifixion, but for which any compatible secular anthropology must provide an opening. What I see as Girard's key error, that of inaugurating human culture with the "mechanism" of emissary murder, even if these originary murders were later to be redeemed by God/Jesus' willing submission to the same phenomenon, leads him to situate this redemption *outside* the realm of sacrificial violence, in which the scapegoat-victim is blamed and blameless, rather than treating this violence as *from the outset* deferred by human culture. *Mensonge romantique* had no need for a theory of the origin and essence of language. The very existence of the novel as an esthetic instrument of conversion implies that language can be an agent both of mediated desire and of liberation from it. Satan uses language to seduce, but God, and above all, Jesus, used it to free us from Satan's clutches by offering himself as the true, liberating mediator of our desire. None of this required an examination of the origin of language itself, or of its specific connection to desire.

But in *La violence*, where Girard offers us an a-theological, anthropological hypothesis of human origin, the absence of a viable theory of symbolic language is striking. The collective nature of the emissary murder as Girard describes it would imply that language was or became necessary as a means of communication among the murderers, but there is in Girard's description no scene of mutual communication among them.<sup>13</sup>

On the contrary, Girard describes emissary murder as a spontaneous occurrence in which the contagion of desire dissolves any prior organization. This murderous contagion that needs no language to mediate it illustrates the core problematic of Girard's theory of desire—and of the human. The absence of a conception of deferral makes a theory of the symbolic sign simply impossible. Without the separation between the mind and its

13. In *The Goodness Paradox* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2019), the primatologist Richard Wrangham describes a scenario largely in accord with that of the originary hypothesis, in which the existence of language is the key factor permitting human "proactive" or deferred violence: "Regardless of when coalitionary proactive aggression began against strangers, the impact of such killing within groups was limited until humans' development of language ... With the arrival of planned and communally approved executions [i.e., such as language alone permits], the bullying of an alpha male was exchanged for the subtler tyranny of the previous underdogs.... It took the mysterious dawning of a language facility, sometime between 500,000 and 300,000 years ago, to shake us into a new world" (277). See the Coda to *Chronicle* 614 for further discussion, <http://anthropoetics.ucla.edu/category/views/vw614/>

objects that this term expresses more cleanly than the more psychological *intentionality*—a term equally absent from Girard’s vocabulary—the mental space in which the action of signing takes the place of the animal’s “instinctual” reaction cannot be defined.

This is not to say that Girard does not deal with language at all in this book. In Chapter 9, devoted to “Lévi-Strauss and the rules of marriage”—essentially, the incest taboo—Girard brings up the origin of “symbolic thought.” This chapter, whose underlying subject, beneath Lévi-Strauss and structuralism, is in fact *la pensée symbolique*, is Girard’s first explicit attempt at a theory of human language. This discussion illustrates what I consider most precious in Girard’s anthropology: that it inaugurates the “new way of thinking,” neither philosophy nor empirical science nor religion, that I have called *generative anthropology*. But this way of thinking requires a far more robust theory of language, and a far greater appreciation for its foundational position with regard to human culture, than Girard is willing to furnish it here. The following is my translation of the key passage in the original edition:

Symbolic thought originates in the mechanism of the emissary victim. It is this that we have tried to show, in particular in our analyses of the myths of Oedipus and Dionysus. It is on the basis of a fundamental *arbitrage* that we must conceive the simultaneous presence of the *arbitrary* and the *true* in symbolic systems.

The collective murder, as we have said, restores calm, in a prodigious contrast with the hysterical paroxysm that preceded; the favorable conditions for thought present themselves at the same time as the object most worthy of provoking it. The men turn back toward the miracle in order to perpetuate it and renew it; they must therefore, in a certain sense, *think* it. Myths, rites, kinship systems constitute the first results of this thought.

Who speaks of the origin of symbolic thought speaks equally of the origin of language, the veritable *fort / da* from which emerges all designation [*nominat*ion], the formidable alternation of violence and peace. If the mechanism of the emissary victim calls forth language, imposing itself as its first object, we can understand that language speaks first of the conjunction of the worst and the best, the divine epiphany, the rite that commemorates it and the myth that recalls it. For a long time, language remains impregnated with the sacred, and it is not without reason that it appears reserved to the sacred and granted by the sacred.<sup>14</sup>

14. Girard, *La violence et le sacré*, 322–3; author’s italics.



To read this text with an open mind makes clear my justification for claiming that Girard anticipates the “fourth way” of generative anthropology. In this sense, strategic considerations aside, it was fully appropriate for him to have made clear from the outset of his anthropological work that, whatever he would say later about both the historical importance of the Judeo-Christian religions and of their importance both as personal inspirations and as sources of anthropological knowledge, this form of thought can stand on its own.

The idea that language was at the origin “reserved to the sacred” is a precious one, altogether absent from the scientific discussions of language origin that have proliferated in recent years. Yet what is missing in this presentation of “symbolic thought” is an account of language itself. Freud’s *fort-da* is precisely *not* a figure of language, but of an infant’s prelinguistic object-relation. Its unresolved back-and-forth reflects the *absence* of a sign that would allow the object to appear, not alternately “here” and “not here,” but on a linguistic *scene of representation* standing in a transcendental relation to the referential world. Girard’s use of the unreflective and prelinguistic term *mechanism* (*mécanisme*) to describe the emissary murder scenario coincides with his refusal to construct an *event* of language origin.

The murder’s discharge of violent energy is said to bring about calm, but any such calm would at the same time dissipate the attention centralized on the victim. For if, as the murder scenario implies, the only reward of the action is to discharge aggressive energy without providing nourishment to the group, the men liberated from their obsessive aggression will have been freed from the scene itself, not attached to it. The idea that the conspecific victim himself, to whom the disaster that precipitated the hunt for a scapegoat is presumably attributed, would acquire from the ensuing peace a sacred status that would result in his corpse’s sacralization, is a back-projection from the myths from which Girard retrodicted the emissary event. If the victim was indeed selected, as he claims, as the result of a random process, the very notion of “blame” would be both irrelevant to the process and anachronistic with respect to these not-yet-human creatures.

There is effectively no conceptual path that permits the passage between the “emissary murder” and the controlled *ceremony* of sacrifice. Although it is impossible to prove the negative proposition that emissary murder as Girard describes it was not the origin of hominization, the fact remains that to any evidence of hominin cannibalism is opposed the far more widespread evidence of the ceremonial sharing of the meat of large animals—a practice we continue to engage in. And in contrast to the numerous hunting scenes in cave paintings that point to the animals’ sacred status, there are no comparable images of human victims.

Beyond these practical considerations, the central theoretical issue is that language, which inaugurates human history by creating cultural memory, can do so only by recording *events*. I think it is clear why Girard was loath to create a scenario of an *event* of the origin of language. Although he constantly repeats throughout *La violence* the expression *la première fois* (the first time) to refer to the origin of cultural practices in emissary murder, there never is a “first time” in his description of the passage from “nature” to “culture.”<sup>15</sup>

Girard conceives the cessation of mimetic desire by means of the emissary mechanism only in terms of the exhaustion of resentful energies, and ritual sacrifice as the formalized repetition of this exhaustion. Culture would then emerge gradually through the repetition of these murders and their eventual evolution into animal sacrifice, but he is careful to avoid positing at any point an *Aha!* moment of self-awareness. Such a moment, in Girard’s anthropology, can come only with the recognition, first partially by the Hebrews (and more ambiguously, by the Greek tragedians and philosophers), and fully only by the followers of Christ, of the *innocence of the victim*.

For Girard, Christ’s role is to discredit and hence make unviable the sacrificial outlet for mimetic violence, transforming blood sacrifice into communion. By confronting humanity with the murderous truth at the heart of its culture since the beginning, Christ and Christianity challenge it to go beyond scapegoating to renunciation, less as the pursuit of the true aim of the originary mechanism of culture than as its disavowal.

It is from this perspective that, in Girard’s view, Christ’s revelation of the *méconnaissance* behind sacrificial violence risks making humans, now no longer able to engage in its practices in good conscience, all the more vulnerable to mimetic desire rather than liberating them from it. Whence Girard’s apocalyptic vision of modernity, his fear that, having been deprived by Christ’s revelation of the outlet provided to us by the discharge of mimetic violence in blood sacrifice, we will not have the strength to bear what amounts to the voluntary deferral of violence embodied in the Christian message, and will in consequence succumb to Satan’s temptation to destroy ourselves through mimetic rivalry.

When in the second part of *Des choses cachées* Girard takes up the question of the specifically Christian nature of his anthropology, he begins by reiterating his notion of the cadaver of the victim as the “transcendental

15. E.g., 134, 231, 355, 382, 393. In the Conclusion, Girard speaks of an *événement fondateur*, a founding event (429, 439), but each reference to such an “event” is to the extrapolated “real” origin of a sacrificial myth, not to a founding *historical* event marking the birth of the human.

signifier.” Yet we observe in the later work a certain movement away from the simple discharge of aggression that can be seen as an opening to a more integrated conception of the sign.

R.G.: We have to show that one cannot resolve the problem of violence through the emissary victim without elaborating at the same time a theory of the sign and of signification.

Before even arriving at the sign, we must see, I think, in the victimary mechanism in its most elementary form a prodigious machine for initiating a new order of attention, the first non-instinctual attention. At a certain degree of frenzy, there occurs a mimetic polarization on the unique victim. After the violence is discharged on that victim, it of necessity ceases; silence succeeds commotion. This maximal contrast between furor and pacification, agitation and tranquility, creates the most favorable circumstances for the emergence of this new attention. As the victim is the victim of all, it is on *it* that is concentrated the gaze of all the members of the community. Consequently, beyond the merely instinctual object, whether alimentary or sexual or the dominant member of the group, there is the cadaver of the collective victim, and it is the cadaver that constitutes the first object of this kind of attention.

Oughourlian: This victim, is it already sacred?

R.G.: To the extent that the attention I have referred to is awakened, the victim is penetrated by the emotions aroused by the crisis and its resolution. It is on it that the compelling experience is concentrated. Weak as it may be, the “conscience” that the participants have of the victim is structurally linked to the prodigious effects that accompany its passage from life to death, to the spectacular and liberating reversal that takes place in that instant. The only meanings that can appear are those of double transference, the meanings of the sacred, those that attribute to the victim the active responsibility for the entire process. But we have to conceive stages, the longest, perhaps, in all of human history, in which these meanings are not yet present. So I must answer that we are already *en route* toward the sacred as soon as the appeal of the emissary victim is heard, however faintly, but there are not yet concepts or representations.<sup>16</sup>

The first point to make about this passage is how suggestive it is of not only a theory of language but of the *joint shared attention* that Tomasello and others associate with specifically human communication.<sup>17</sup> If there

16. Girard, *Des choses cachées*, 109.

17. See in particular Michael Tomasello, *The Cultural Origins of Human Cognition* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999).

was one phrase from this book that stuck in my mind and inspired me to see Girard's anthropology as a real advance over Durkheim, Freud, and his other predecessors, it was *la première attention non instinctuelle*. Deferral, reflection, recoil before a sacred interdiction, and the need to address it in the new way which is that of the *sign*—all are implicit in this pregnant phrase.

But this being said, Girard's problem, here as always, is his failure to thematize this element of deferral that permits the sign to open up a space between us and the world that we previously confronted by means of "instinct"—a space which, from a Christian as well as an anthropological standpoint, is properly sacred. No doubt primatologists have found elements of animal behavior that anticipate those of humans, notably the "mirror neurons" that provide, if not an explicit "theory of mind," at least a reflexive intuition of another's internal state. But it is the possession of *language* that makes us capable of the kind of withdrawal from the violence of instinct that Girard can only associate in non-specific terms with "the appeal of the emissary victim."

Thus both the most charitable and the most fruitful approach to dealing with the problem of language in Girard's anthropology is neither to take literally Girard's specific statements about language and the "transcendental signifier," nor to take them as reflecting a fundamental limitation of this anthropology in the broadest sense. Language, signification, require *signs* to which the vague "meanings" Girard refers to must be attached. Yet it is fair to say that this passage expresses a fundamentally sound historical intuition about originary language, one fully compatible in principle with a scene of language origin. We may compare Girard's thinking with, for example, that of Claude Lévi-Strauss, whose structuralism he critiqued in the earlier passage. With respect to the origin of language, the latter declared from a Saussurean perspective that:

language can only have arisen all at once. Things cannot have begun to signify gradually.... the entire universe all at once became significant.<sup>18</sup>

This affirmation is true *in abstracto*, in the sense that once the signifier/signified paradigm exists, it applies *in theory* to everything. But *in reality*, language exists only insofar as we apply it. And although it is formally true that language "arose all at once," it by no means follows from this that "the entire universe became significant." On the contrary, to the extent that

18. Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Introduction to the Work of Marcel Mauss*, trans. Felicity Barker (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1950), 60.

language is a real, worldly phenomenon and not a theoretical abstraction, it can only have come into being *one word at a time*. According to the originary hypothesis, as well as to common sense, the origin of language took place with the *first word* of language; at that moment, instead of “the entire universe,” only *a single object* became significant. This point, invisible to Lévi-Strauss, is clear to Girard’s historical intuition.

Girard’s supposition that the development of language was a long process that paralleled that of religion is fully compatible with language having its point of departure in an originary event. Conversely, it is far more difficult to understand how the substitution of a sign for a contested act of appropriation might have occurred during any one emissary murder among countless others.

Indeed, in the Girardian context, we should emphasize not so much the linguistic as the *sacred* property of the sign. It is this element that marks the progress of Girard’s thinking over the earlier passage. Rather than simply referring to the non-semiotic empty space of discharged aggression in which arises a *fort-da* relation of freedom in relation to the object of consciousness, here Girard recognizes that, however faint, the freedom attained through discharged aggression is a first step *en route* to the sacred.

Girard is above all concerned with the participant murderers’ attribution of responsibility to the victim for the crisis that preceded his murder, as well as for the subsequent peace. But in order for this event to be culturally memorable and consequently, capable of founding the cultural institutions of language as well as ritual/religion, the “violence” of appropriation and division of the central object must fall *within* the sacralized human-cultural context established by the emission of the sign. Generative anthropology’s hypothetical *sparagmos* follows a pattern typical of hunter-gatherer societies, in which it is of the greatest importance for each participant to take an “equal” share in the division of the spoils. William Robertson-Smith’s famous description of the camel sacrifice in his *Lectures on the Religion of the Semites*,<sup>19</sup> reproduced in Freud’s *Totem and Taboo*<sup>20</sup> offers a striking image of this final stage of the originary event.<sup>21</sup> Here the deferred violence

19. William Robertson-Smith, *Lectures on the Religion of the Semites* (London: Black, 1894).

20. Sigmund Freud, *Totem and Taboo*, trans. Abraham Arden Brill and James Strachey (Boston: Beacon, 1913), 230.

21. “The camel chosen as the victim is bound upon a rude altar of stones piled together, and when the leader of the band has thrice led the worshippers round the altar in a solemn procession accompanied with chants, he inflicts the first wound, while the last words of the hymn are still upon the lips of the congregation, and in all haste drinks of the blood that gushes forth. Forthwith the whole company fall on the victim with their swords, hacking off pieces of the quivering flesh and devouring them raw with such wild haste, that in the short interval between the rise of the day star which marked the hour for the service to begin, and

is not only refocused from one's fellows entirely onto the victim, but this refocusing satisfies both the participants' mimetically enhanced aggressive impulses *and* their physical appetite. It is memorable above all because it results in the successful division of the victim's flesh, resolving the crisis posed by the breakdown of the previously existing pecking-order system.

Yet the central element of the scene is the recognition of transcendence, of the sacred. As I emphasized in my address to the 2018 Generative Anthropology Summer Conference,<sup>22</sup> quoting the first verse of the Gospel of John, "In the beginning was the Logos" (Jn 1:1), at the origin, as John already understood, *the significant and the sacred are one*. That Girard uses this verse as the epigraph to the part of *Des choses* that discusses Christianity suggests that he too recognized the centrality of the victim's link with language. Although he fails to connect the Logos directly with language as such, Girard attaches an element of sacrality to the relics of the murder, analogously to the burial ceremonies that we know existed in hominins other than Sapiens. Despite the caveats with which he surrounds this glimmering of sacred revelation, it bears nonetheless an element of genuine faith, taking a step beyond the paroxysm of sacrificial violence which—as Girard never ceased to believe—would have provided before the biblical religions our only path to salvation.

In his desire to emphasize the historical role of Christianity in foregrounding the predominant role of communion in sacrifice over the violence associated with animal, if not human slaughter, the absence of a notion of deferral leads Girard to paint the contrast in black and white. But Jesus' inauguration of communion in the Last Supper should be understood less as the debunking of animal sacrifice than as the revelation of its originary core. What the Eucharist makes clear is that the primary beneficiary of this feast is not the body but the soul. It is the possessor of the newfound human soul who is able to renounce the internecine violence that at the outset risked subverting the feast and destroying the community, just as the parable of the loaves and fishes should be understood as telling us that once we resolve our mimetic conflicts with one another, the material problems of life are relatively easy to solve.

Significantly, Robertson-Smith's camel sacrifice begins with the group in stasis followed by unanimous action. In minimizing the violence of sacrifice,

the disappearance of its rays before the rising sun, the entire camel, body and bones, skin, blood and entrails, is wholly devoured." Robertson-Smith, *Lectures on the Religion of the Semites*, 338.

22. The text in question is available online as *Chronicles* 590–1, <http://anthropoetics.ucla.edu/category/views/>.

Christian communion, which even in its most severe form provides a not altogether symbolic element of nourishment, returns to the originary truth of religious ritual, in which the *sparagmos* of the victim is not a mass murder but a shared feast, one premised on the absence of conflict among the participants. The sacrificial victim is a source of nourishment that our human ancestors, in contrast to other primates, had to learn to share equally rather than serially through the mechanism of a pecking-order hierarchy.

Whether it be Christianity with its substitution of transubstantiation for ritual slaughter, Hinduism with its sacral prohibition of eating beef, Judaism, which retains the sacred nature of the feast as a family rather than a public commemoration—or Buddhism’s emphasis on emptying one’s personal scene of representation of *all* desire-objects, including those induced by language,<sup>23</sup> the great religions reveal what was implicit in the originary event—that the sparagmatic feast by which it was concluded was *already* a communion. If it was not fully self-conscious of its communal essence, neither was it defined merely by the discharge of resentment and its exhaustion—it was already, in Girard’s words, *en route* to the sacred.

We are no longer in an age when it is necessary to condemn “paganism” in order to spread Judeo-Christianity. Sacrifice, even in its most primitive form, is a matter of purification, not “scapegoating.” *All* culture implements the deferral of violence. Generative anthropology makes explicit this human solidarity that Girard sometimes appears to deny, although it is implicit in his theory of mimetic desire. For the original object of this desire is not conflict, but cooperation—the establishment of human community, a fragile locus of peaceful sustenance.

Girard’s pregnant idea that the human, its language, and its sense of the sacred, were born from the potential excess of violence enabled by the evolution of our mimetic intelligence need not be interpreted as making the paroxysmal destructiveness of such violence, of which history has provided us with all too many examples, more than an illustration of what a successful human culture must learn to avoid. For humanity to grow, however slowly, it must find ways to avoid such paroxysms, and in this regard, Girard’s insistence on the persistence of the emissary mechanism, by the very fact that it remains a *mechanism*, does not provide a helpful model of cultural evolution. I hope to have shown here that the essence of Girard’s anthropology of mimesis is better served by a conception of the Logos of language and the sacred as the products of the *deferral* of violence.

23. See *Chronicles* 515–6, <http://anthropoetics.ucla.edu/category/views/>.

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