

# Circles of Failure, Strategies of Hope

## A Girardian Perspective on the Tragic Vision


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**ABSTRACT** This paper asks whether there are grounds for viewing Girard's work as a tragic vision, and explores the criteria and contexts that might figure in such an investigation. Mimetic anthropology is built on references to the tragic perspective, but its tragic aspect is complex and diaphanous in respect of its structuring and dynamics. Its framework is difficult to explore without engaging with contemporary Christian theological thought—something that significantly affects its implications. As for the latter, the transformative potential of Girard's tragic anthropology, directly engendered by its critical approach to its own theses, tends to shatter the stability of its assumptions. Therefore, from the earliest interpretations of ancient tragic drama, through the pitfalls of the notion of sacrifice and the dialogue with the philosophy of existence and dramatic theology, all the way to the so-called apocalyptic phase in Girard's thought, we can observe shifting relationships between the broadening areas of human failure on the one hand, and the elusive horizon of hope on the other. Within this vision, the last strategy of hope seems to lie in the decision of the individual as a witness to a man-made apocalypse—and/or the apocalypse itself.

**KEYWORDS** apocalypse; mimetic theory; tragedy; tragic theology; tragic vision

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## 1. THE TRAGIC VISION

But where danger threaten  
That which saves from it also grows<sup>1</sup>

“The tragic vision,” as a philosophical term, is an exceptionally comprehensive category. Although on the whole it is linked with specific conceptions derived from Miguel de Unamuno’s proposals, especially typical for the twentieth century, scholars have found traces of it across the entire history of Western thought, both in philosophy and theology, frequently broadening its scope of reference so much<sup>2</sup> as to make it possible to say that “true metaphysical speech is always tragic.”<sup>3</sup> After all, it always originates with three elements: a desire for the truth, a barrier of representation, which only “marks” it, and the “tragic motif of illusions concerning the human capacity for achieving it.”<sup>4</sup> Thus, the scope of the tragic vision—regardless of whether it is a vision of an objective property of a *universum* (e.g. Scheler’s “heavy breath”), a conception of human fate and its finitude, a religious-ethical challenge, or something involving a turn towards aesthetic experience—is a result of the overlapping experiences of the culture we agree to call Western, in the sense of those which have shaped our understanding of the tragic.<sup>5</sup> It is deeply rooted in the cultural layers of our mode of perceiving the world, in the “attempts to grasp the aporia between essence and existence” carried on since Plato even though we know “that this disparity can never be explained”<sup>6</sup> in a world built on a duality of things and an oppositional logic of ideas.

1. Friedrich Hölderlin, “Patmos,” in *Poems and Fragments* (London: Anvil Press, 1994), 483.

2. See Ferenc Fehér, “The Pan-Tragic Vision: The Metaphysics of Tragedy,” *New Literary History* 11, no. 2 (1980), doi:10.2307/469010.

3. Donald Phillip Verene, *Metaphysics and the Modern World* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2016), 28.

4. Iwona Lorenc, *Świadomość i obraz. Studia z filozofii przedstawienia* (Warsaw: Wydawnictwo Naukowe Scholar, 2001), 16, my translation.

5. As long ago as in 1963 an interesting work by Charles I. Glicksberg was published, analysing the influence of various cultural factors on the “tragic vision” of the artists. Glicksberg considers the influence of Kierkegaard’s and Nietzsche’s philosophies, the influence of Kafka’s novels, links involving literature and psychoanalysis, and the achievements of contemporary science. See Charles I. Glicksberg, *The Tragic Vision in Twentieth Century Literature* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1963). Evidence of profound interest in the “tragic vision” in the criticism of the 1960s can be found in, for instance, Bernard B. Cohen, “The Tragic Vision in the Sixties,” *Genre*, no. 3 (1970). Today, we no longer focus on the figure of the individual hero, but speak of the fates of entire nations, or great human communities. Contemporary culture has a greater potential for the tragic than in the times of Sophocles or Shakespeare, says Cohen.

6. See Verene, *Metaphysics and the Modern World*, 28.

A characteristic feature of those historical moments in which the consciousness we now call “tragic” appears is the tension between the worldview already leaving the stage with its paradigms on the one hand, and the new one, the project of a “new” world that is not yet known or verified, on the other. In this fracture, a paradoxical space opens up—a place for a specific dialectics pertaining to contested values.<sup>7</sup> This contest, manifested in art or in philosophical thought and referred to also as a “tragic symmetry,”<sup>8</sup> a “two-edged blade,”<sup>9</sup> or a “tragic paradox,”<sup>10</sup> turns out to be the very essence of the structure of what is tragic in respect of its entire history.<sup>11</sup> This profound connection between the range of the tragic and historical turning points (be it Greece in the fifth century BCE, facing numerous threats to its progress on the way to democracy, Elizabethan England emerging into empire, post-Kantian Europe departing from the crumbling strongholds of metaphysics, tsarist Russia on the verge of crisis, Spain facing the end of its empire after 1898, the nations of the West traumatized by the experience of two world wars, or our own “post-normal”<sup>12</sup> times) allows us to call out the piercing consciousness of the tragic as a product of a world at a crossroads—as typical of a transitional age.

Among the moments listed above, the most significant one for the contemporary perception of the tragic has been the time when replies were being formulated to Kant’s philosophy. The search for a bridge over the precipice opening between freedom and necessity, theoretical and practical

7. Unless, that is, a solution is found in the form of reconciliation *on a higher level*, as is thought possible by Hegel and Kierkegaard.

8. See René Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*, trans. Patrick Gregory (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1972).

9. See Giuseppe Fornari, “Labyrinthine Strategies of Sacrifice: The Cretans by Euripides,” *Contagion: Journal of Violence, Mimesis, and Culture* 4 (1997): 172, doi:10.1353/ctn.1997.0004.

10. The foundational importance of contradiction for the tragic paradigm is also confirmed by relations between the structure of the tragic itself and the legacy of the German mystical tradition. Jakob Boehme used to say that the principle of contradiction present in the Absolute is the essence of the processes of mutual influence involving freedom and necessity, or good and evil. “The work of creation and the work of redemption are effects of the structure of time based on the principle of contradiction.” Michał Heller, *Filozofia przyrody* (Kraków: Znak, 2004), 133, my translation.

11. Peter Szondi, presenting twelve philosophers whose mutually complementary formulations constitute the foundation of the contemporary theory of the tragic, considers paradox the *only* feature immutably common to different forms of what we count as tragic, returning again and again not only in theory, but above all in the matter itself—i.e. in the very element of the tragic. See Peter Szondi, *An Essay on the Tragic* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2002).

12. A term used by Ziauddin Sardar, a writer, literary critic and public intellectual concerned mostly with the future of Islam and the West. See Ziauddin Sardar, “Welcome to Postnormal Times,” *Futures* 42, no. 5 (June 2010), doi:10.1016/j.futures.2009.11.028.

reason, led thinkers into the regions of the tragic. This is a point where the work of Schiller, Simmel, Hegel, Kierkegaard, Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, Jaspers, Scheler, Heidegger, Benjamin, Unamuno and many others meet, and the echoes of their reflections resonate in virtually all contemporary interpretations of the tragic, including currents in psychoanalysis (that are primarily Freudian or Lacanian) and, of course, Girard's mimetic anthropology. The ontologized tragic, emerging from the circle of existential philosophy, is located at the roots of being, growing into the great Tree of our Knowledge; gaining the ability to penetrate into all aspects of existence, it becomes a manner of perceiving things, a tragic vision. "The tragic sense of life itself is, though more or less veiled, the very basis of conscience of civilized individuals and peoples today."<sup>13</sup> In the contemporary context, this conclusion appears to be at least partially justified.

In the past century, however, this vision of existence steps *beyond* the tragic, as is testified to, for example, by Beckett's drama,<sup>14</sup> where communication, teleology and value disappear, despite references to religious symbolism.<sup>15</sup> Girard called this kind of constitution of consciousness "post-tragic"<sup>16</sup>—arising beyond that which is dramatic, remaining in the position of a mute witness in a world in which the motion of values stops. This is because in order to truly ring out, the tragic needs the figure of paradox,<sup>17</sup> mentioned above, in which things "are, and yet are-not, the same," which means the absurdity of existence never reaches its fullness,

13. Miguel de Unamuno, *The Tragic Sense of Life in Men in Nations*, trans. Anthony Kerrigan (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1990), 138. The flagship quote from Unamuno's work reads as follows: "There is something which, for want of a better name, we will call the tragic sense of life, which carries with it the whole conception of the Universe and of life itself, a whole philosophy, more or less formulated, more or less conscious." *Ibid.*, 21.

14. A somewhat different approach is adopted by Larry D. Bouchard, "Tragedy, Contingency and Atonement: 'Waiting for Godot' and 'Jesus of Montreal,'" in *Christian Theology and Tragedy: Theologians, Tragic Literature and Tragic Theory*, ed. Kevin Taylor and Giles Waller (London: Routledge, 2016).

15. Aysegül Yüksel searches for parallels between Shakespeare and Beckett, again looking at their vision through the lens of a paradox concerning man's existence in the finitude of the world. See Aysegül Yüksel, "Man's Post-Tragic Position in Beckettian Drama," in *One Day, Samuel Beckett*, ed. Burçin Erol, Irish Writers Series (Ankara: Hacettepe University, 2014).

16. Author's conversation with Girard, Stanford, August 1999. There are, however, also other ways of understanding the term: post-tragic perception emerges when a subject transcends the tragic nature of being and enters into the light of accepting that which is. Such an interpretation is associated mostly with religious conceptions developed within Christianity in the context of contemporary American criticism.

17. This understanding is presented by, amongst others, one of the most important poets for Girard: Hölderlin. "The significance of tragedies can be understood most easily by way of paradox. Since all potential is divided justly and equally, everything that is original appears not

in that it always has the possibility of falling back upon a certain internal sense.<sup>18</sup> As a consequence of this perception of a tragic dispute, the tragic is most generally characterized according to the following principle: “The destructive powers directed toward a being arise from the deepest strata of this very being, and, with its destruction, a fate takes place that is moored in the being itself and ... is the logical development of the very structure with which the being constructed its own positivity.”<sup>19</sup>

Trusting this positivity on a much deeper plane constitutes a crucial element of the relation between the tragic and theological thought: precisely the relation that also defines the function and place of what is tragic in the vision spread before our eyes in the Girardian oeuvre.

## 2. THE TRAGIC AND THEOLOGICAL THOUGHT

Christianity reveals its power  
by interpreting the world in all its ambiguity.<sup>20</sup>

On the whole, in criticism that has been written on the subject, the tragic is traditionally separated off from the Christian worldview, which latter is seen as transcending that which is tragic and introducing both individual and community into the stream of redemptive hope and love.<sup>21</sup> This, however, requires a radicalisation of notions and attitudes, which loses some of the complexity of both, condemning them to the disharmonies and separateness of the orders of thinking and feeling. The tragic, according to the supporters of this approach, should not be “contaminated” by hope,<sup>22</sup> and

in its original strength, but rather, properly, in its weakness.” “Hölderlin” in Szondi, *An Essay on the Tragic*, 11.

18. The logic of paradox is rooted in the simultaneity and biconditionality of opposites, assuming that each condition and “becomes” the being of the other. This has been widely accepted in the Japanese philosophical tradition, producing—in aesthetics—notions and intuitions parallel to the Western idea of the tragic, such as, among others, *mono no aware*. See Nishida Kitaro, *Last Writings. Nothingness and the Religious Worldview* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1987).

19. Szondi, *An Essay on the Tragic*, 44.

20. René Girard and Michel Treguer, *When These Things Begin: Conversations with Michel Treguer*, trans. Trevor Cribben Merrill (East Lansing, MI: Michigan University Press, 2014), 120.

21. In the 1950s, such a view was openly expressed by Richard Sewall in his *The Vision of Tragedy* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1959).

22. Tragedy is sometimes also understood exclusively as “absolute tragedy.” See George Steiner, “‘Tragedy’ Reconsidered,” in *Rethinking Tragedy*, ed. Rita Felski (Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 2008); George Steiner, *The Death of Tragedy* (London: Faber and Faber, 1961), xi.

this places it in open conflict with Christianity, situating Christianity itself in a monochrome light and leaving that which is tragic cut off from it in an abyss of darkness. However, investigating the history of how the tragic has been conceptualized, as well as the reality of emotions and the works of the intellect forming the Christian perspective, one feels justified in posing another question: is it possible in modern Western culture to articulate the tragic outside of the context of Christianity, and could the ontologized tragic, along with its philosophy, which since Schelling “runs through the Idealist and post-Idealist periods, always assuming a new form,”<sup>23</sup> ever have obtained its present form without the proximity of Christianity? So, consequent to this we might also ask whether we can justify placing the adjective “tragic” before the noun “theology.”

Answering these questions is certainly beyond the scope of the present article, but even mentioning the problem allows us to point to significant connections between René Girard’s mimetic theory<sup>24</sup> and those theological conceptions that suggest that the tragic orientation inscribed into theological thought furnishes a “wisdom”<sup>25</sup> capable of responding to the challenges of the contemporary world.<sup>26</sup> Despite diverse points of departure, the common space here is constituted by opening up to the voice of knowledge about “things hidden since the foundation of the world”—knowledge also made available by embracing tragic consciousness as a path to a “free and open place.” One could invoke an understanding of this “place” as broad as the reality waiting outside Plato’s cave, freedom in “the Open” in Heidegger, freedom in truth,<sup>27</sup> or—if we reach out towards Judeo-Christian traditions—“the broad open land” promised in the Exodus.<sup>28</sup>

23. Szondi, *An Essay on the Tragic*, 1.

24. Although Girard’s point of departure is the interpretation of cultural texts, including the Bible, and not pure theological thought, the final shape of mimetic anthropology reflects, albeit with the emphases placed somewhat differently, precisely those intuitions of theology considered tragic.

25. In the last two decades, amidst the multiplicity of discourses engaged with the well-being of humanity, we encounter the word “wisdom” more frequently than we do “knowledge,” which appears just an instrument of wisdom. See Nicholas Maxwell, “How Wisdom Can Help Solve Global Problems,” in *Applying Wisdom to Contemporary World Problems*, ed. Robert J. Sternberg, Howard Nusbaum, and Judith Gluck (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019).

26. David E. Ford, “Conclusion: Tragedy, Theology, and the Discernment of Cries,” in *Christian Theology and Tragedy: Theologians, Tragic Literature and Tragic Theory*, ed. Kevin Taylor and Giles Waller (London: Routledge, 2016), 238.

27. See also Hanna Buczyńska-Garewicz, *Prawda i złudzenie. Esej o myśleniu* (Cracow: Universitas, 2008), 195.

28. “I came down to lift them out of Egypt’s hand, to carry them to a broad open land” (Ex, 3:8). Agata Bielik-Robson quotes this line stressing that “this great image [...] of lifting, releasing,

It might be desirable to briefly outline the converging paths of the tragic pertaining to theology and mimetic theory, especially as two key motifs appear in both, they being contradictory but nevertheless interpenetrating: these are the inevitability of human self-inflicted failure and the necessity of the idea of hope, entwined with human fate, as always possible.

### *From Theological Thought to the Tragic*

Tragic consciousness is not unknown in the history of Christianity. As early as Late Antiquity, an understanding of the knowledge contained in the tragic and in tragedies themselves appears in the post-Constantinian texts of Apollinaris the Elder, the Cappadocian Fathers, and John Chrysostom, usually as an attempt to introduce a new interpretation of the tragic element into the Christian worldview.<sup>29</sup> The most influential figure was, however, undoubtedly St. Augustine:

Augustine greatly profited from interpreting Scripture through a tragical lens. A whole other dimension of Augustine's tragic vision appears in his attempt—inspired from his own early experience of staged tragedies in Carthage—to reenter ancient philosophical debates on tragedy and mimesis, and to revamp in Christian terms the tragic emotions, especially tragic pity as Christian mercy.<sup>30</sup>

The Augustinian idea of rewriting or refracting the tragic relative to a Christian perspective seems to be its most effective mode of introduction into the bloodstream of theology, and has also proved useful in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. It is also inspiring to contemplate the mutual interrelatedness of the scientific and the religious, the existential and the theological, in mimetic theory. Both in Girard and in Augustine, humanity struggles with its own desire and the illusion of freedom that goes with it, and does this with no success at the level of the everyday *praxis* of its existence. In the Augustinian vision, the tragic fate of human beings

letting free, is one of the most recurrent figures of Western culture, and especially, Western modernity." Agata Bielik-Robson, "Jewish Ulysses. Post-Secular Meditation on the Loss of Hope," in *Węzi wspólnoty. Literatura, religia, komparatystyka*, ed. Piotr Bogalecki, Alina Mitek-Dziemba, and Tadeusz Sławek (Katowice: Wydawnictwo FA-art: Uniwersytet Śląski, 2013), 21.

29. See Paul M. Blowers, "Augustine's Tragic Vision" in *Journal of Religion and Society: Augustine on Heart and Life. Essays in Memory of William Harmless S.J.*, ed. John J. O'Keefe and Michael Cameron, Supplement 15 (2018).

30. *Ibid.*, 158–9.

“at the existential and experiential level, relentlessly endures as the upshot of disordered desire and will.”<sup>31</sup> In Girard’s theory, the tragic loop of mimetic desire, violence and the sacred that veils the underlying reality marks the inaccessibility of any change that would originate within the system itself, and, consequently, the investigation into the nature of this self-inflicted fate may be conducted in purely “scientific” terms, using the methodology of psychology, anthropology, etc. However, it is the capacity to look beyond the existential plane that opens a door to the other component—the theological thought, or even “onto-theological thought.”<sup>32</sup>

One may thus consider the existence of at least two tragic orders. The former is immersed in the archaic waters of myth, tinted with the Greek pessimism which Nietzsche found so fascinating;<sup>33</sup> however, the heroic paradigm of existence,<sup>34</sup> with all its beauty and sublimity, ultimately—when shattered—leads towards the terror and despair of a vision of the barren machinery of the human finitude. The latter carries with it an undercurrent that might be called “theological”—even though we are in a bondage of self-inflicted pain and loss, sin and death, there is still some Future. This pattern, modelled centuries ago in the Augustinian “tragic vision,” has been recapitulated in a variety of concepts over the course of the history of Western thought.

Given the experiences of the past hundred years or so, starting with “Europe’s suicide” in the form of World War One,<sup>35</sup> through the atrocities of World War Two, the horrors of the Holocaust, the history of totalitarian regimes and then the terrorism of the new millennium, all the way to the plexus involving global ecological catastrophe and the further fate of humanity, acknowledging the tragic becomes one of the ways in which “theology may enter the contemporary world more profoundly.”<sup>36</sup> This creates a possibility of facing up to the demands of the everyday, which traps those human beings who neither experience a complete mystical

31. Ibid., 159.

32. See Saitya Brata, *Political Theology of Schelling* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2016), 212.

33. Girard’s long dispute with Nietzsche as a philosopher and thinker able to sense the significance of Christ’s sacrifice constitutes the other valid thread in the context of the Girardian tragic vision—one that merits being analyzed in a separate essay.

34. Simon Critchley, “Comedy and Finitude: Displacing the Tragic-Heroic Paradigm in Philosophy and Psychoanalysis,” in *Ethics, Politics, Subjectivity: Essays on Derrida, Levinas and Contemporary French Thought* (London: Verso, 2009), 217–8.

35. See Andrzej Chwalba, *Samobójstwo Europy. Wielka Wojna 1914–1918* (Cracow: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 2017).

36. Ford, “Conclusion: Tragedy, Theology,” 238.



dissolution in God nor find full support in a world alien to themselves. Suspended between doubt and hope, between sin and freedom,<sup>37</sup> they remain in a shaky imbalance, as if at the centre of an aporia, a place of powerful tension. It is in this space that existence becomes tragic, playing out its drama “in constant incompleteness, whether because of nothingness waiting to attack us, alienation, freedom of choice, unfulfilled desire for authenticity, broken relation with Others, ‘unknown’ death, or the contradictions of nihilism.”<sup>38</sup> Mutual interconnections between the religious and the secular have become a burning issue in the face of the multi-layered crisis affecting our society, including its crisis of values. Among the wealth of contemporary theological thought conceptions have appeared which, recognising the significance of actual participation in common suffering and unease, end up turning towards the perspective of the tragic: “Deeper into tragedy, deeper into the Bible; that is still an inadequate recipe for the sort of theology that is most needed today.”<sup>39</sup>

In the mid-twentieth century, the figure who decided to inscribe the tragic into theological concepts was Hans Urs von Balthasar (1905-1988), a distinguished Catholic theologian, read and commented on by Girard. His ideas frequently stirred controversy within the Church.<sup>40</sup> His theo-drama discusses God’s cooperation with humanity in the drama of Redemption through the Cross, in which the central figure is—as in Girard—Christ. The drama of the Cross in Balthasar’s approach is a “drama in Jesus Christ.”<sup>41</sup> In Him, as the ultimate protagonist (*Hauptfigur*) in the culmination of all

37. The problematics of sin and freedom at the point of human origins resurfaced throughout the whole correspondence between Girard and Schwager. Original French and German translation: Raymund Schwager and René Girard, *Briefwechsel mit René Girard*, ed. Nikolaus Wandering and Karin Peter, *Gesammelte Schriften* (Freiburg im Breisgau: Herder, 2014); English: René Girard and Raymund Schwager, *René Girard and Raymund Schwager, Correspondence 1974–1991*, ed. Scott Cowdell, Chris Fleming, and Joel Hodge, trans. Chris Fleming and Sheelah Treflé Hidden, *Violence, Desire, and the Sacred* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2016).

38. Jacek Aleksander Prokopski, *Egzystencja i tragizm. Dialektyka ludzkiej skończoności* (Kęty: Wydawnictwo Marek Derewiecki, 2007), 32, my translation.

39. Ford, “Conclusion: Tragedy, Theology,” 238.

40. He proposed dividing theology into theological aesthetics, (*Herrlichkeit*), theo-drama (*Theodramatik*) and theo-logic (*Theologik*). These issues are analysed in depth by Marek Pyc in *Chrystus, piękno – dobro – prawda: studium chrystologii Hansa Ursa von Balthasara w jej trylogicznym układzie* (Poznań: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu im. Adama Mickiewicza, 2002); See also Marek Pyc, “Benedixit, fregit, deditque – eucharystyczna egzystencja. Refleksja na kanwie twórczości i życia Hansa Ursa von Balthasara,” *Perspectiva. Legnickie Studia Teologiczno-Historyczne*, no. 1 (2005).

41. Marek Pyc, “Tajemnica krzyża w ujęciu Hansa Ursa von Balthasara,” *Teologia i Człowiek*, no. 17 (2011): 62, doi:10.12775/TiCz.2011.004.

tragic experience,<sup>42</sup> the space of history opens up, and its essence is the redemptive process itself. Christ is considered here to be “the heir of all the tragedy of the world, that of the Greeks, as well as that of the Jews, that of the so-called unbelievers, as well as that of the so-called believers.”<sup>43</sup>

Just like Girard, Balthasar draws not only on theology and Biblical texts, but also on literature (especially drama), philosophy, and, above all, the raw and intense factuality of life running its course. And as with Girard, the motivation for taking such an approach to the contemporary tasks of theology is Balthasar’s “passionate concern to present the engagement of God with his world in a way that refuses to turn aside from the overwhelming, pervasive reality of evil.”<sup>44</sup> And this is not a question of pessimism, but a specific vision of the dramatic nature of human existence: its fall, struggle and redemption. This vision, which is also a vision of Christian life, incorporates the tragic with the utmost serenity and humility.

The other name that should be invoked here is Donald MacKinnon (1913-1994), one of the most influential British Anglican theologians of the twentieth century,<sup>45</sup> who not only read and broadly commented on Balthasar’s works, but shared his belief that Christian theology has not made full use of the potential of Greek antiquity, giving up on the knowledge contained in the works of the great tragic writers in favour of philosophy. What we value today as freedom was, after all, in the Greek worldview a consequence of the freedom to stretch the human cognitive apparatus between the poles of tragedy and philosophy, between knowledge emerging from the intensity of the lived experience of human praxis on the one hand, and our thought as it reached towards ideal levels of being, or as Girard once put it, “metaphysical spaces,” on the other.<sup>46</sup> So perhaps the root of our lack of understanding of Greek antiquity (and, as

42. Kevin Taylor, “Hans Urs von Balthasar and Christ the Tragic Hero,” in *Christian Theology and Tragedy: Theologians, Tragic Literature and Tragic Theory*, ed. Kevin Taylor and Giles Waller (London: Routledge, 2016), 133.

43. Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Explorations in Theology*, vol. 3 (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1993), 400.

44. Donald MacKinnon, “Some Reflections on Hans Urs von Balthasar’s Christology with Special Reference to Theodramatik II/2 and III,” in *The Analogy of Beauty: The Theology of Hans Urs von Balthasar*, ed. John K. Riches (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1986), 173.

45. Donald M. MacKinnon was one of the most influential of contemporary British theologians. His works have been recognized and discussed by, among others, Nicholas Lash, Rowan Williams and John Milbank. MacKinnon made extensive use of attic tragedy in his eclectic publications and lectures. See *Creon and Antigone: Ethical Problems of Nuclear Warfare, The 1981 Boutwood Lectures* (London: The Menard Press, 1981).

46. Girard’s remark at a faculty meeting at Stanford University, August 1999.

a consequence, the source of the disparity between philosophy and the tragic) should be sought precisely in this acceptance of the paradoxical nature of being, so difficult for the modern mind and so natural to the Greeks—their perception of the *agon* of tragedy and philosophy as constituting a special form of harmony. In this context, it is worth recalling that *harmos* should be translated as “joining”—the term used to describe, for instance, the construction of the roof of a temple, but also the hybrid and monstrous body of the Minotaur.<sup>47</sup>

The coexistence of these two forms is in itself a contradiction which defines the higher achievements of the Greek culture. The fact that successive eras undertake attempts to resolve this contradiction is one of the reasons they are separated from the sensitivity present in the Greeks.<sup>48</sup>

The same Greek philosophy, once excluded from any dialogue with great epic poetry and tragic drama, was, in addition, left incomplete and greatly impoverished—something which, according to MacKinnon, also influenced the shape of theology. Awareness of this “omission” today opens the gate to tragic theologies. The reviewers of *Christian Theology and Tragedy* sum this up claiming that Christianity “can never turn its back either on tragedy or the tragic; not if it wants to face the world squarely.”<sup>49</sup> Furthermore, any hope for a final redemption needs to “be reconciled with the tragic vision and its irretrievability of certain kinds of failure.”<sup>50</sup>

47. Fornari, “Labyrinthine Strategies of Sacrifice,” 169.

48. Dennis J. Schmidt, *On Germans & Other Greeks: Tragedy and Ethical Life* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2001), 274.

49. Graham Ward, “Review of *Christian Theology and Tragedy: Theologians, Tragic Literature and Tragic Theory*”, accessed June 7, 2019, <https://www.routledge.com/Christian-Theology-and-Tragedy-Theologians-Tragic-Literature-and-Tragic/Taylor-Waller/p/book/9780754669401>.

50. Kenneth Surin, “Review of *Christian Theology and Tragedy: Theologians, Tragic Literature and Tragic Theory*”, accessed June 7, 2019, <https://www.routledge.com/Christian-Theology-and-Tragedy-Theologians-Tragic-Literature-and-Tragic/Taylor-Waller/p/book/9780754669401>.

3. TRAGIC ANTHROPOLOGY AND THEOLOGICAL ANTHROPOPHANY<sup>51</sup>

So, when we are hoping for rescue, a voice tells us that hope is  
in vain, yet it  
is powerless hope alone that allows us to draw a single breath.<sup>52</sup>

René Girard was a traveller: he had the courage to depart from the known terrain and descend into the abyss, and the acuity of the mind to come back. This simple pattern of a monomyth, the journey of the mythical hero altered by the hubris or fate of the tragic ones, was played out in his case on two closely intertwined paths, in the form of his personal experience and of the development of his theory: as journey and hermeneutic quest, but also experience, and the traps of a labyrinth, too.<sup>53</sup>

In classical labyrinths there are certain constant elements: entry/exit, and alternating directions of movement and centre. Although the way leading to the centre may take different forms, they are always subject to particular principles; meanders, spirals, and serpentine swings to the left or to the right, avoiding the centre—that is, the goal—in a pendulous motion. According to Eliade, the labyrinth existed precisely in order to defend and shield the centre as a point of direct encounter with the sacred and with absolute reality. It was this—the timeless place amidst unfolding time as measured by the traveller—that sustained the motion of the paths swirling around it.

This extended metaphor conveys the dynamics of Girard's conception well, as these were always developed with reference to a centre—one which, since the winter of 1958/9, the winter of his conversion, had been Christianity, understood in three ways: as theological reflection, as personal belief and conviction, and as a religion “that could reveal and respond to civilizations born in repeated, imitative violence, in a world driven forward by envy, competition and strife.”<sup>54</sup>

The shape of Girard's scholarly biography was determined—as most sources agree today—by four issues, which directed his reflection onto a new track: (1) the conception of mimetic desire, fundamental to his entire theory,

51. Term used by Michael Kirwan. See *Girard and Theology* (New York: T&T Clark, 2009).

52. Theodor Adorno, *Minima Moralia. Reflections on a Damaged Life*, trans. E.F.N. Jephcott (New York: Verso, 2005). Quoted also by Bielik-Robson in reference to the ontologized category of hope and the vision of “hopelessness.” Bielik-Robson, “Jewish Ulysses,” 24.

53. Giuseppe Fornari comments on the labyrinthine nature of sacrifice and, consequent to this, the parallel nature of the tragic. Fornari, “Labyrinthine Strategies of Sacrifice,” 172.

54. Cynthia Haven, *Evolution of Desire, A Life of René Girard* (East Lansing, MI: Michigan State University Press, 2018), 115.

largely inspired by the achievements of Hegel, Freud and Sartre's existentialism, and confirmed by extensive research into great works of literature, mostly belonging to Western culture; (2) the analysis of the mechanism of the scapegoat, which can be traced back to the tradition of Émile Durkheim and the conception of Henry Hubert and Marcel Mauss, supported to a certain extent by the conceptions of James Frazer, or Tarde, and which, because of its relation to the notion of evolutionary pressure on the development of cultures, may also be linked to the ideas of Darwinism; (3) the controversial confronting of the above conceptions with the message conveyed by the texts of the Gospel and the Old Testament, and consequently many years of discussion with Raymund Schwager pertaining to the notions of sacrifice and sacrificial victim; and (4) the apocalyptic phase, which found its expression in *Battling to the End*. It is precisely from the perspective of this last phase that one may search for a tragic vision in Girard's anthropology.

In this context, it is worth remembering that the multidimensional development of mimetic theory did not unfold along a straight line established once and for all. Indeed, Girard does not construct a system detached from reality, but ceaselessly confronts his conceptions with broad contexts, beginning with almost all types of cultural text and working through a dialogue with scholarly discourses—meaning not only the humanities, including philosophy and theology—to repeatedly verify those involved in the clash of both grand and marginal phenomena of history and of contemporary times.

In his case, this was not simply work on a scholarly conception, but—in practice—work on one's own self. "Girard always maintained that the story of the novel was the story of the author as well. We could say the same about Girard and his oeuvre."<sup>55</sup> After waves of optimism and a faith in reason of almost Enlightenment proportions, there come moments of transition, of retracing one's own footsteps and approaching certain question again, modifying or rejecting earlier theses. Constant interaction with what is happening, in the case of the oeuvre of the author of *Battling to the End*, influences not just his personal life, but also the shape of his further work. It is no accident that the works that mattered to him were written in dialogic form—as more of a discussion than an interview. Conversing with a specific person allows one to have both currents intertwined: personal opinion and academic discourse. As a result, the more the reality of the turn of millennia surrounding Girard finds its place in his works, the more often moments of helplessness in the face of the weakness of the word arise when facing the

55. Ibid., 8.

world. As he had continued to repeat in interviews and books since, more or less, the memorable September of 2001: “There is no choice but to keep shuttling back and forth between alpha and omega. This constant movement, back and forth, imposes a form of composition resembling a snail, or a volute, or a spiral.”<sup>56</sup> Such oscillations mark a chiasmic rhythm in which fundamental relations of suffering-remedy-hope or violence-recognition-new world seem to form a repeatable pattern. If the reconciliation was final it might break the Kantian tragic paradigm bridging the abyss between the moral freedom of a subject and the objective necessity of nature—not at the plane of aesthetics but within the light of cognition. But the pendulum of history swings down again, reversing the order, passing the centre and reaching again the stage of suffering, violence and necessity: “Violence is a terrible adversary, especially since it always wins.”<sup>57</sup>

Girard finds the period after the Twin Towers attack especially trying. He is genuinely shaken, afflicted by pessimism and fear and deserted by hope. The only formula capable of grasping this is the tragic aporia, the logic of paradox, invoked more and more often: “The paradox is that by always getting closer to Alpha, we are going towards Omega; that by better understanding the origin, we can see every day a little better that the origin is coming closer.”<sup>58</sup>

Let us, then, look briefly at the three key issues responsible for those turns in the labyrinthine paths of mimetic theory that ultimately lead to a vision such as might be called—to use Michael Kirwan’s term—a “tragic anthropophany,” as manifested in the paradoxical assumption of contradictions that is involved in a sense of failure and hope combined.

### *Conversion*

The pivotal moment in Girard’s life and work was a profound experience of intellectual, and then spiritual, conversion. Despite this, when comparing the road trodden by the conceptions of tragic theology mentioned above with the development of Girard’s own thought, one may say that the latter heads towards the tragic perspective as if it were approaching it from the other, entirely human, side. This fundamental assumption remains in force with reference to his entire oeuvre. As Bouchard notes,

56. René Girard, *The One by Whom Scandal Comes*, trans. Malcolm B. DeBevoise (East Lansing, MI: Michigan State University, 2014), 50.

57. René Girard, *Battling to the End: Conversation with Benoît Chantre* (East Lansing, MI: Michigan State University Press, 2010), xvii.

58. *Ibid.*, xi.

[T]he irreducibility of evil may be discovered from the side either of *Âtē* or of *hubris*, of exteriority or interiority. And tragedy for René Girard, is relevant precisely in its exposure of the irrelevance of a tragic theology of malevolent transcendence.... the roots of *hubris* are internal, in the heart of humanity.<sup>59</sup>

Until 1959, the conviction as to humanity's agency was accompanied by a secular, almost anticlerical perspective where Girard's worldview was concerned. In his first period, characterized by his interest in great novels and their hidden message concerning the mimetic nature of human forms of behavior and motivation, his methodology grew out of an approach to texts that was "cynical, destructive, very much in the spirit of the atheistic intellectuals."<sup>60</sup> However, it was during the laborious process of unmasking—with some airiness—the hidden motives of literary protagonists and their authors and the machinery of *le désir triangulaire* that Girard changed his optics. Conversion, as he himself admitted, was a "form of intelligence, of understanding."<sup>61</sup> This sudden awareness of much deeper knowledge buried in the pages of great novelists affected the final shape of the book that he had been working on, *Desire, Deceit and the Novel*.<sup>62</sup>

Conversion makes for a first step towards quite different intellectual horizons, closely related to the role of Christian Revelation in deciphering the mystery of cultures, starting with rituals and myths. However, at this time it does not affect the interdisciplinary but still scientific methodology of Girard's next works, and is not made explicit in his texts.<sup>63</sup> He is interested above all in the newly discovered truth of the practice of human existence,

59. Larry D. Bouchard, *Tragic Method and Tragic Theology: Evil in Contemporary Drama and Religious Thought* (University Park: Penn State University Press, 1989), 42.

60. Girard and Treguer, *When These Things Begin*, 120.

61. René Girard, Pierpaolo Antonello, and João Cezar de Castro Rocha, *Evolution and Conversion. Dialogues on the Origins of Culture* (London: Continuum, 2007), 29.

62. Girard decided to rework the ending of the book, to depart from the form of criticism based on a cynical "debunking" of the illusion of individual desire in the great novels that he had originally planned to deploy, and to add depth to the significance of the personal epistemological conversion of the author: "In autumn 1958, I was working on my book about the novel, on the twelfth and last chapter that's entitled 'Conclusion.' I was thinking about the analogies between religious experience and the experience of a novelist who discovers that he's been consistently lying, lying for the benefit of his Ego, which in fact is made up of nothing but a thousand lies that have accumulated over a long period, sometimes built up over an entire lifetime. I ended up understanding that I was going through an experience of the kind that I was describing." Girard and Treguer, *When These Things Begin*, 129.

63. In later discussions and interviews Girard remarks that his approach in fact nullifies all distinctions between the knowledge provided by great literary works and religious experience. (Author's conversation with Girard, Stanford, August 1999.)

both in its individual and its social dimension—the sacrificial mechanism hidden behind the covers of culture. In his book *Violence and the Sacred*, published in 1972, Girard continues his criticism of modernist visions of culture, exploiting the myths of the European Enlightenment and taking up the lonely struggle to arrive at a different interpretation of history based on the religious factor, whose presence ensures, or at least ensured in the past,<sup>64</sup> the continuity of human institutions: “There is no society without religion, because without religion, society is incapable of existing.”<sup>65</sup> The fundamental relation, the eponymous relation of the sacred and the violent, has been diagnosed, with his work on myth and ritual having achieved the goals he himself had set out. Admittedly, in *Conclusions*, the author warns in a prophetic tone against recurrences of violence, but he also refers to the light of reason that may shield us from it.

The conception presented in *Violence and the Sacred* is complemented in his subsequent books *Things Hidden since the Foundation of the World* and *Scapegoat*,<sup>66</sup> this time openly deriving the ethical message of the Old Testament and the non-sacrificial—as Girard claimed in this period—revelation of the Gospel. The proposals made in these publications were met with two kinds of reaction in academia: either they were embraced wholeheartedly, or they were rejected as overly reductionist, based on critical-literary rather than genuinely factual material, and being marred by unjustified ambitions to explain cultural phenomena *in toto* (and, above all, the Holy Scriptures), with their gnostic traits highlighted.<sup>67</sup> On the other hand, the potential of his theory as an element of the revolt against modernist thought was also noted—something that he himself pursued further in his later work.

For Girard, though, theory was valuable precisely when it was capable of changing our perception of things—and mimetic anthropology did this,

64. In 1978, Girard’s opinion on this issue was radically different. These are the opening remarks of *Things Hidden Since the Foundation of the World*: “There is no enigma, however complex, that cannot finally be solved. For centuries religion has been declining in the West and its disappearance is now a global phenomenon. As religion recedes and allows us to consider it in perspective, what was once an insoluble mystery, guarded by formal taboos, begins to look more and more like a problem to be solved.” René Girard, *Things Hidden Since the Foundation of the World*, trans. Stephen Bann and Michael Metteer (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1987), 3.

65. Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*, 221.

66. René Girard, *The Scapegoat*, trans. Yvonne Freccero (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986).

67. In Poland, *Violence and the Sacred* was published by Brama publishing house in the series “History of Gnosis” vol. 5 and 9.



according to its author, unquestionably. Dubbed the Hegel of Christianity,<sup>68</sup> or the Darwin of cultural studies, Girard fought passionately to establish his own image of the dialectic of history, along with a new reading of the “holy scriptures” of Western culture, all the while having his “eye ... on the world and the future, not on any church agenda”<sup>69</sup>—a future, that is, that would not turn back towards the blindness of the past.

### *Sacrifice*

The institution of sacrifice, from its beginnings up to the apocalyptic consequences of the two-thousand-year erasure of pre-Christian sacrificial mechanisms through the teaching of the Gospel, is one of the central questions in Girardian mimetic theory. In the early period of his work on the texts of Christianity, Girard firmly maintains that the Sacrifice of the Cross is distinguished from all previous sacrifices by one fundamental difference. Thus, he questions the official reading of the Gospel by the historical Christianity of the West, subverting also the interpretation of Christ’s sacrifice presented in the *Epistle to the Hebrews*. What is more, he tries to remove the very notion of sacrifice from the context of the Gospel, applying it exclusively to archaic religions<sup>70</sup> which, as a result, become themselves the scapegoat of his own theory—something noted not just by his critics, but also by Girard himself.

Yet for the author of *The Scapegoat*, it is precisely the non-sacrificial reading of the Gospel text that becomes the basic assumption allowing him to mark out an impassable border separating Christianity from the archaic religions—as using violence to expel violence. This enables the construction of a new world, a reversal of the tragic dialectic of human history: thanks to the non-sacrificial Passion, violence begins to yield. “Thus mankind no longer has to base harmonious relationships on bloody sacrifices, ridiculous fables of a violent deity, and the whole range of mythological cultural formation.”<sup>71</sup>

68. Jean-Marie Domenach, *Enquête sur les idées contemporaines* (Paris: Seuil, 1981).

69. Girard and Schwager, *René Girard and Raymund Schwager, Correspondence 1974–1991*, x.

70. See Wolfgang Palaver, “Sacrificial Cults as ‘the Mysterious Centre of Every Religion’: A Girardian Assessment of Aby Warburg’s Theory of Religion,” in *Sacrifice and Modern Thought*, ed. Julia Meszaros and Johannes Zachhuber (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 87.

71. Girard and Treguer, *When These Things Begin*, 183.

Coming back to the triads “suffering-remedy-hope” and “violence-recognition-new world”<sup>72</sup> outlined above as being typical for Girard’s theory, we may wish to recall here that it is precisely the middle element of the triad—remedy, recognition and revelation—that invariably emanates from Girard’s “centre,” which is the Gospels’ message: it is there that the transformation of culture takes place. If this is the place of the next sacrificial victim, close in its function and nature to all the previous ones and so likewise only giving further life to the community through the sacrificial mechanism itself, then the theological anthropophany—as Kirwan calls the work of Girard—loses its foundation and becomes dangerously close to the mythical model.

This is one of the reasons for the initial interpretation of the Christ sacrifice as a non-sacrificial one, allowing for the introduction of a caesura into the ways of people. Moreover, the new knowledge, and eventually a new world, could not be granted by exactly the same means as the long line of sacrifices performed and forgotten since the beginnings of humanity.

However, this simple solution does not stand up to the test of criticism. After many years of work on an interpretation of the Sacrifice of the Cross, after successive changes and moderations, Girard decided to take the path suggested by his friend and theologian from Innsbruck, one of the founders of dramatic theology, Raymund Schwager.

His final version, which we might date more or less to the second half of the 1990s, is a certain compromise, splitting the notion of sacrifice into two almost antithetical understandings. The Sacrifice of the Cross, despite being a sacrifice like any other, is at the same time different. It is the sign of a paradox, the highest possible form of sacrifice of oneself, made in the name of the love of people, while the sacrifices performed in the religions Girard referred to as “archaic” are more or less ritualized forms of murder. The difference is thus Christ himself—He is the Message of the Gospel. To the witnesses, to later generations, it is a question of accepting that love, and continuing with the long-term process of transforming the world.

72. This triadic model is reminiscent of a similar system with tragic potential, presented by Søren Kierkegaard, in *Repetition*, trans. Walter Lowrie (New York: Harper and Row, 1964). The notion of “repetition” is the centre of a system oscillating between “recollection,” or a sense of loss and sadness, and the optimism of “hope.” What brings the observations of Kierkegaard even closer to the intuitions of Girard is the fact that the central element, the repetition, may be experienced on an aesthetic and a spiritual level. In the former shape, hope, as setting the whole system in motion, turns out to be merely one of the aspects of tragic knowledge. In the latter, where the experience is spiritual and religious, the system arrives at forms of truth and justification that are no longer merely aesthetic.

As a result of this interpretation, the world becomes a unity again. The Sacrifice and the Resurrection of Christ are described by Girard as forming “a certain unity with all forms of religion coming before them.”<sup>73</sup> The final confirmation of the interpenetration of both of these ways of communicating with the divine and fulfilling the vision of the religious is the claim, surprising in the light of Girard’s earlier publications, that “there is something Christian in all myths.”<sup>74</sup> However, tragic oscillation is a double-edged sword: if there is no strict borderline between the two, the archaic may find its way into the Christian. For Girard, this once again reverses the seemingly secure path to the future, casting a shadow over our hope for a possible Exodus from the world of violence into light.

### *Apocalypse*

The image of the Apocalypse seems to prevail in Girard’s last works and interviews. The events of 9/11 opened a chasm in our world, a rupture in time, letting archaic mimetic violence back into our blind and deaf societies.<sup>75</sup> Girard compares himself to Hölderlin, “looking into the abyss that separated him from the French Revolution.”<sup>76</sup> He recalls Pascal’s vision of the war between violence and truth, attempting to choose at this “crucial” point the only relevant path, “that of a profession of faith, more than a strategic treatise,” but where these two are “mysteriously equivalent in this ‘essential war.’”<sup>77</sup> The last chapter of *Battling to the End* closes with these words: “Violence can no longer be checked. From this point of view, we can say that the apocalypse has begun.”<sup>78</sup>

Apocalypse, in its eschatological power as “the logos of the last things,” has been a point of reference for Christianity throughout its history. However, in the first decades of the 21<sup>st</sup> century the growing popularity of apocalyptic rhetoric allows one to ascribe a multiplicity of functions to this notion rooted in the Judeo-Christian religious tradition.<sup>79</sup> Apocalyptic

73. Girard, *Battling to the End*, xv.

74. *Ibid.*, xvi.

75. *Ibid.*

76. *Ibid.*, 212. Girard refers to the same moment in conversation with Haven, describing the return of archaic mimetic violence in both old and new forms of myth, ritual and sacralization. Haven, *Evolution of Desire*, 272–3.

77. Girard, *Battling to the End*, 213.

78. *Ibid.*, 210.

79. The beginnings of a Judeo-Christian apocalyptic vision may be traced back to the Book of Daniel, shaped at the time of the persecution of the Jews during the rule of the Hellenistic

predictions have been transferred to history, psychology, sociology, environmental and cultural studies and, preeminently, politics.<sup>80</sup> This can hardly be regarded as representing a new trend: for example, apocalyptic topics were successfully introduced into politics in Savonarola's Italy and Tudor England. In the twentieth century, they saw a resurgence in the speeches of Woodrow Wilson ("the war that would end all wars"), and in Nazi propaganda proclaiming the final battle for the survival of the German nation; in the Cold War era, the nuclear threat evoked apocalyptic tones in reference to Hiroshima and Nagasaki. We may add to the list the voice of the American President George W. Bush, announcing a "war on terror" after the events of 9/11. Today, the environmental crisis, merging nature and culture, politics and science, and religion and our most archaic fears, accounts for the revival of the apocalyptic. The emotional impact and manipulative power of apocalyptic visions, their capacity to alter not only people's perception of reality but also their actual behavior, have, moreover, now become a matter of scholarly interest—especially as regards how apocalyptic rhetoric is structured, with investigations of its imagery and analyses of how it appeals to a wide spectrum of target audiences.<sup>81</sup>

The apocalyptic tone that casts a shadow over the last "phase" of René Girard's work should, I think, nevertheless be approached from a slightly different angle. As a scholar, Girard attempts to address specific problems from the perspective of, and with the tools established by, the humanities, including interdisciplinary and context-dependent studies. As Kirwan notes, the events of 9/11 have become a "hermeneutical key to understand" the world.<sup>82</sup> Re-reading Clausewitz, Girard does not hesitate to battle through the thicket of history, military theory, political science and group psychology. However, the image revealed in the course of his study conjures up the monstrous imagery of a mythic final battle between the forces of darkness and of truth. In consequence, the original title of the book, *Achever Clausewitz*,<sup>83</sup>

ruler Antiochus IV between 167 and 164 BCE. See Alison McQueen, *Political Realism in Apocalyptic Times* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 29–31.

80. Stephen D. O'Leary, *Arguing the Apocalypse: A Theory of Millennial Rhetoric* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 7.

81. Apocalyptic rhetoric tends to clash with the solutions offered by political realism. However, the options for a realistic approach, as McQueen argues, are limited to two: acting accordingly to a "tragic vision" of politics in the attempt to encourage societies and politicians to react realistically to emerging issues in a "no-hope" situation, or fighting "apocalypse with apocalypse." See McQueen, *Political Realism*.

82. Kirwan, *Girard and Theology*, 103.

83. René Girard, *Achever Clausewitz. Entretiens avec Benoît Chantre* (Paris: Carnets Nord, 2007).

gains deeper meaning when interpreted together with its English version, *Battling to the End*. The vision of the apocalyptic evoked reinforces the message of the text, but also reflects the deep personal convictions of its author. Robert Doran, Michael Kirwan and others talk openly about the apocalyptic phase in Girard's thought. However, it should not be seen as a phase, but rather as a final revelation, a prophetic vision of the "end of the City of Man."<sup>84</sup> Cynthia Haven remarks that "some doubted it was Girard's work because it was so dark." Yet "the dark drift was his own."<sup>85</sup> The question remains whether—in the light of this paper—we may recognize it as tragic.

Stephen D. O'Leary, in his extensive study of the apocalyptic, presents the tragic paradigm as one of two basic types of apocalyptic discourse.<sup>86</sup> He refers to Kenneth Burke's "frames of acceptance"<sup>87</sup> determining the perception and interpretation of a given human experience as tragic or comic in respect of the representation of the problem or category of evil, seen as a source of guilt (*hubris*) or as error. The same mechanisms apply to the apocalyptic vision, in which the "guilt-narrative" leads into the trap of limited time and the indifferent rules of Fate. Redemption is still possible, but only at the highest cost—that of a sacrifice.

The literal meaning of the word Apocalypse is to "uncover" or "reveal," and in Girardian vision it retains its original Christian valence. It is identified with a turning point for humanity: the last moment with a potential for remedy, revelation and redemption, which—if it goes unnoticed or ignored—will open onto the abyss of death darkening beneath it: "In these circumstances I do not see any more urgent task than endless explanations of the true character of Revelation and apocalyptic texts. But even the Catholic Church does not refer to them any longer."<sup>88</sup>

A tragic paradigm for the Girardian Apocalypse is constituted by his perception of Christianity itself: it carries within itself the seed of the tragic: "It is tragic in the most pronounced sense ... when one and the same power allows a thing to realize a high, positive value, (of itself or of another thing) and, in the process of effectuating this, causes the destruction of just this

84. Ibid., 105.

85. Haven, *Evolution of Desire*, 253.

86. See O'Leary, *Arguing the Apocalypse*, 149.

87. Ibid., 68.

88. René Girard, "Apokalipsa już się rozpoczęła: z René Girardem rozmawia Redakcja czasopisma 'Réforme,'" *Znak*, November 2016, <http://www.miesiecznik.znak.com.pl/apokalipsa-juz-sie-rozpoczela/>, my translation; French original: René Girard, "L'apocalypse a commencé: Interview with René Girard," *Reformé*, January 8, 2008.

thing as a value bearer.”<sup>89</sup> The role of Christianity in the history of Western civilization follows Scheler’s definition of the tragic. Revealing the mimetic mechanism of scapegoating has destroyed its power and function, but this new freedom merging with the dreams of modernity has created a blind spot where violence emerges uncontrolled and in all its fruitlessness: “Demystification which is good in absolute, has proven bad in the relative.... Christianity is the only religion that has foreseen its failure. This prescience is known as the apocalypse.”<sup>90</sup> Thus, all paths are possible, including those which lead toward self-annihilation. The rise of the archaic at the very heart of Christian civilization itself, the restoration of sacrificial scapegoating (this time, paradoxically, in the name of victims and directed against their alleged persecutors), the powerful threat of secularized technologies, new mythologies casting their shadow over the political and the social converging with the environmental crisis—all of this accounts for the “madness of man.”<sup>91</sup> Yet, for the author of *Battling to the End*, if the path of science fails, the path of faith still remains open:

‘Do not fear.’ This apocalyptic formulation appears in the Gospel.... The summoning of humanity continues. To think the Apocalypse truly is to think the tragedy of the coming times in the light of Christian thought.... This will not be a complete end but the coming of the Kingdom of God.<sup>92</sup>

Girard does not dwell on his positive vision beyond the tipping point of human history, but interweaves the guilt and the redemption, error and truth, into a tragic knot: one where there is also a place for the thunder of Apocalypse to be heard as a message of hope. The tragic anthropophany, then, unveils itself “under Grace.”<sup>93</sup>

### *Final remarks*

Girard’s approach to the tragic paradigm of existence is never finally determined, even though it does undergo a resurgence in his thought, forming a tension between the theological and anthropological aspects of his theory

89. Szondi, *An Essay on the Tragic*, 47.

90. Girard, *Battling to the End*, x.

91. Girard, “Apokalipsa już się rozpoczęła”, my translation.

92. Ibid.

93. See Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Tragedy under Grace: Reinhold Schneider on the Experience of the West* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1997).

and his perceptions. The main presumptions of mimetic theory, however, constitute an important precondition for a tragic vision, realized in the form of a tragic revelation of human nature, a tragic “anthropophany.” Contemporary humanity, as believers or nonbelievers, stand at a crossroads of eras and meanings, literally between life and death, in the position of a paradoxical being that is internally torn apart, and therefore tragic. If we embrace the message of the Apocalypse, then the last chance for us will be to wait, not in the process of *akolouthia* once described by Gregory of Nyssa as the unfolding of God’s charity in human history, but rather in the state of Balthasar’s Holy Saturday, of “*tragic waiting*, which avoids explaining away the subjective reality of suffering and at the same time maintains the hope of finding its salvific meaning.”<sup>94</sup> Caught between two worlds—one of which is the factual, historical reality of violence, the other the land-on-the-hill, the garden of our hope—we wait. In one of their last conversations, Cynthia Haven asked Girard:

C.H: So given this long apocalypse you say we are going through, what would you advise? ... What do we do?

R.G. Nothing

C.H. We just sit it out?

R.G. We just sit it out. Yes.<sup>95</sup>

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94. Ibid., 116.

95. Haven, *Evolution of Desire*, 261.

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