

Historian in Disguise

On Derrida, Durkheim and the Intellectual Ambition of René Girard

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ABSTRACT This paper rereads René Girard's intellectual biography as a process first of apparent dissociation, and then of not so very much apparent, though quite solid, recovery of historical thinking. A trained historian-archivist, the young Girard began to massively rearrange his intellectual outlook by adopting methods and perspectives drawn from both very modern thinkers such as Jacques Derrida, and classical thinkers such as Émile Durkheim. In developing his signature theory of the scapegoat mechanism, however, Girard's intellectual biography eventually came full circle. Reluctantly, and sometimes probably even unconsciously, he began to work intellectually like a good historian. Historical methodology and mimetic theory have, therefore, very much in common. This usually overlooked close relationship would seem to offer a promising new perspective when it comes to further developing mimetic theory methodologically.

KEYWORDS cultural anthropology; deconstruction; historical methodology; mimetic theory; Girard, René

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When leaving his native France in September 1947, René Girard not only left behind a war-ridden country and a continent with a then very uncertain future in exchange for the exciting possibilities which the United States of America offered a young, aspiring scholar. He also intended to cut himself off from his academic roots, i.e. his roots in history. Following his father's footsteps, he had attended the *École des Chartes* in Paris, one of the so-called *grands établissements* for the education of France's future intellectual elite. However, the idea of becoming a historian and spending his life, say, reconstructing the private life of the fifteenth century bourgeoisie of the city of Avignon¹ very soon lost its appeal for him. In retrospect, he stated that he had developed "a downright allergy towards the *École des Chartes*,"² because he was deeply "dissatisfied with the dry positivism of the school."³ For rather pragmatic reasons (he needed an American degree and could get his hands on a neatly prepared set of the necessary documents), he would allow himself to do history once more—this time contemporary history. He wrote a dissertation on *The American Opinion of France in the Years 1940–1943*, and graduated from Indiana University in 1950.⁴ But that was the end of this for him. He decided that from then on, he would no longer waste his time, energy and creativity on what he himself, as a former *chartiste*, had come to perceive as the "dry positivism" of history, with its obvious intellectual insignificance. His ambition was to become a real intellectual, and he was sure that for the sake of this he would have to radically redefine his academic aspirations—that he would have to cease being a historian and find a new intellectual home.

1. FLIRTING WITH DECONSTRUCTION

Almost twenty years later, he seemed to have found it. He had chosen to become a self-taught literary critic and was steadily working his way up through the twists and turns of life as an academic. His new field of expertise had been an obvious choice, because, at the time, those who wanted to do serious intellectual thinking almost exclusively dealt with literature, language or speech, and preferably all of these. His 1961 book, *Mensonge romantique et vérité romanesque*, on the dynamics of desire in European novels

1. This was the topic of his graduation thesis at the *École des Chartes*.

2. Michael Jakob, "Gespräch mit René Girard," in Michael Jakob, *Aussichten des Denkens* (München: Wilhelm Fink, 1994), 155.

3. Rebecca Adams, "Violence, Difference, Sacrifice: A Conversation with René Girard," *Religion & Literature* (1993): 11.

4. Cf. Wolfgang Palaver, *René Girard's Mimetic Theory*, trans. Gabriel Borrud (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2013), 3–4.

from the sixteenth through to the nineteenth century,⁵ had won him respect among his peers, and by the mid-1960s he had become chair of the Romance Languages Department of the prestigious Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore. Then, finally, in October 1966, he found himself exactly where he had always longed to be: among the *crème de la crème* of the intellectual discourse of his time. As co-organizer of the symposium “The Languages of Criticism and the Sciences of Man,” he brought pre-eminent thinkers such as Jacques Lacan, Roland Barthes and Lucien Goldman to Baltimore. The symposium would later become famous, though, because it witnessed the rising star of one Jacques Derrida, who gave a paper which effectively marked the beginning of a new phase of critical thinking: deconstruction.⁶

This really was a turn of the intellectual tide. The heyday of structuralism and its master thinker Claude Lévi-Strauss was officially over and, in Derrida’s wake, the proponents of post-structuralism were about to take the lead. For Girard, though, this was more than a momentous development in the intellectual discourse on a global scale. It coincided with what can only be described as some sort of intellectual awakening of his own. In retrospect, he would call what began to dawn on him in the late 1960s “the most exciting intellectual experience I ever had.”⁷ He was in the middle of working on the book that would really make his name. In this comprehensive study from 1972, *La violence et le sacré*, he proposed a radically new approach to the old problem of ritual sacrifice.⁸ He argued that behind the very variable forms that ritual sacrifice could take on in pre-modern cultures all over the world, there was a single, and to date undetected, anthropological process which he himself had succeeded in uncovering. This was a huge claim, and at the same time a massive criticism of Lévi-Strauss who, trying to end a decade-long discussion in cultural anthropology, had decreed only quite recently that ritual sacrifices were beyond rational explanation.⁹ Criticizing Lévi-Strauss was, of course, quite *à la mode* among

5. English translation: René Girard, *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel. Self and Other in Literary Structure*, trans. Yvonne Freccero (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1966).

6. As regards the course that this symposium took, as seen from Girard’s point of view, see Cynthia L. Haven, *Evolution of Desire. A Life of René Girard* (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2018), 121–37.

7. “Interview with René Girard,” *Diacritics. A Review of Contemporary Criticism: Special Issue on the Work of René Girard* (1978): 31.

8. English translation: René Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*, trans. Patrick Gregory (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1977).

9. See Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Mythologique 4: The Naked Man*, trans. John and Doreen Weightman (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1990), 680. Cf. also Claude Lévi-Strauss, *The Savage Mind* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1966), 228.

deconstructionists. Nevertheless, there was more to Girard's (temporary) belief that *La violence et le sacré* was, in effect, a deconstructionist book and that in deconstruction he had finally found an epistemological approach which, after having lost faith in the relevance of historical thinking, would help him to be the intellectual he had always wanted to be.

Firstly, in *La violence et le sacré* he was, on a technical level, doing exactly what was expected of every good deconstructionist. He distrusted the accepted codes of cultural signification in a given society—in his specific case, in societies with ritual sacrifices as their most important cultural institutions—and deconstructed them by showing that they were, in fact, determined by other subcutaneous dynamics. Secondly, however, and even more importantly, Girard came to believe that not only on a technical level, but also in terms of content, he belonged firmly in the deconstructionist camp. In *La violence et le sacré*, he decoded the logic of ritual sacrifice by uncovering a very specific process at the base of the sacrificial societies in question. He argued that ritual sacrifices, and thus sacrificial societies as such, were founded on a victimary mechanism, or, more precisely, on the exclusion of collectively despised, but actually innocent, victims. This meant that these societies were, according to Girard, structurally characterized by what they psychologically abhorred the most: their own scapegoats.

Girard came to see this line of reasoning as substantially deconstructionist when he learned that Derrida had apparently described the very same victimary mechanism, albeit in another, specifically linguistic, context. In a later interview, Girard stated that after reading Derrida's *Plato's Pharmacy* from 1968 right before the publication of *La violence et le sacré* in 1972, he was "absolutely sure that Derrida and I were travelling on the same road."¹⁰ Derrida had argued in this book-length essay that Platonic thinking and, consequently, occidental philosophy in general, had committed itself to the belief that philosophy was essentially a *logos*-centred, and therefore speech-centred, activity. This positive belief, however, had a flipside in the corresponding negative belief that the semi-dead technique of writing had epistemologically contaminated the living *logos*. Therefore, since Plato (or, probably, since Socrates), philosophers had wanted to get rid of writing epistemologically, but at the same time needed it technically. Put differently, Derrida had deconstructed *logos*-centred philosophy as a thought system intrinsically based upon a victimary mechanism in its epistemological (but, paradoxically, not technical) exclusion of writing as a proper way of

10. Adams, "Violence, Difference, Sacrifice," 17–8.

doing philosophy. Structurally speaking, Derrida concluded, writing is the scapegoat of philosophy.¹¹

From Girard's viewpoint, naturally, all of this sounded very familiar. Andrew McKenna, an expert both on Girard and on Derrida, even came to label their respective ways of thinking as "parallel deconstructions."¹² At the end of *La violence et le sacré*, Girard himself had concluded that his theory was ultimately a deconstructionist thesis: i.e. a thesis concerned with deconstructing cultural hermeneutics.¹³ Soon somewhat dissatisfied with the "'essayistic' nature of *La Violence et le sacré*," which failed to convey his theory about ritual sacrifice "as systematically and successfully as, I am sure, it can be conveyed,"¹⁴ he stated even as late as 1988 that he should have argued in terms that were "a little more deconstructionist, which would have perhaps prevented certain misunderstandings."¹⁵ Such an assessment implied that the book needed to be re-written—and, in a way, that is precisely what Girard would then do for the remainder of his intellectual career, thus making *La violence et le sacré* the key to his thinking. Granted, apart from several (not always unproblematic) emendations in later editions and translations, he did not actually rewrite *La violence et le sacré*. Even so, his subsequent books were all, in effect, new versions of the hypothesis he had developed there. Or, to put it in his own words: "I am one of those authors who write the same book over and over again."¹⁶ That is what he would do in books like *Des choses cachées depuis la fondation*

11. See Jacques Derrida, "Plato's Pharmacy," in Jacques Derrida, *Dissemination*, trans. Barbara Johnson (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), 149: "According to a pattern that will dominate all of Western philosophy, good writing (natural, living, knowledgeable, intelligible, internal, speaking) is opposed to bad writing (a moribund, ignorant, external, mute artifice for the senses). And the good one can be designated only through the metaphor of the bad one. Metaphoricity is the logic of contamination and the contamination of logic."

12. Andrew McKenna, *Violence and Difference. Girard, Derrida, and Deconstruction* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1992), 190.

13. Cf. René Girard, *La Violence et le sacré* (Paris: Éditions Bernard Grasset, 1972), 439: "[L]a théorie de la victime émissaire prétend découvrir l'événement qui constitue l'objet direct ou indirect de toute herméneutique rituelle et culturelle. Cette théorie prétend expliquer de part en part, 'deconstruire' toutes ces herméneutiques." Interestingly, this part was omitted in the 1977 English translation.

14. "An Interview with René Girard", in René Girard, *"To Double Business Bound": Essays on Literature, Mimesis, and Anthropology* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978), 199.

15. From Girard's letter to Raymund Schwager dated 6th January 1988. In: René Girard and Raymund Schwager. *Correspondence 1974–1991*, trans. Chris Fleming and Sheela Treflé Hidden, ed. Scott Cowdell et al. (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2018), 167.

16. Jakob, "Gespräch mit René Girard," 175 [my translation from the German original].

du monde (1978),¹⁷ *Le bouc émissaire* (1982),¹⁸ *A Theater of Envy: William Shakespeare* (1991),¹⁹ or *Je vois Satan tomber comme l'éclair* (1999).²⁰ Accordingly, his future intellectual work would not only consist in "reading books from the viewpoint of sacrifice,"²¹ but also in writing books from this very viewpoint which he had worked out systematically for himself in *La violence et le sacré*.

Nevertheless, despite his initial self-assessment as a deconstructionist, he would not write his future books in the spirit of deconstruction. His deconstructionist honeymoon soon came to be over when he recognized that his intellectual agenda was, after all, rather different from the one represented by Derrida and his fellow deconstructionists and poststructuralists. But if Girard's signature way of thinking, which he had developed in *La violence et le sacré*, did not in fact belong to the deconstructionist movement, what actually was the character of his intellectual approach?

2. NOT A DECONSTRUCTIONIST AFTER ALL

In order to understand what kind of intellectual outlook really characterized Girard's thinking, it can be helpful, as a first step, to inspect the reason he had for thinking he had embraced the deconstructionist intellectual enterprise rather prematurely. To begin with, it is important to point out that this reason was not, strictly speaking, a methodological one. Methodologically, Girard would remain impressed and even influenced by Derrida's acumen in deconstructing hermeneutic and structural discourses, which allowed him to look beyond the pretences of allegedly self-evident epistemologies both in society and in academia. Girard's problem with deconstruction went deeper than that. What troubled him was not the commendably critical method of the deconstructionists as such, but the fact that the deconstructionists thought that in intellectual terms method was all there was. The problem, to his mind, was their lack of intellectual ambition.

17. English translation: René Girard, *Things Hidden since the Foundation of the World*, trans. Stephen Bann and Michael Metteer (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1987).

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

19. René Girard, *A Theater of Envy: William Shakespeare* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991). This is Girard's only book originally written in English. Paradoxically, the French translation was published one year earlier, in 1990.

20. English translation: René Girard, *I See Satan Fall like Lightning*, trans. James G. Williams (Maryknoll, NY; Ottawa, and Leonminster: Orbis/Novalis/Gracewing, 2001).

21. René Girard, *Evolution and Conversion. Dialogues on the Origins of Culture with Pierpaolo Antonello and João Cezar de Castro Rocha* (London/New York: Bloomsbury Academics, 2007), 27.

Ironically, this was exactly the same problem Girard had already had with historical thinking. He had given up on it because he had come to understand it as an intellectually unambitious way of thinking which reduced itself to a positivist method of evaluating documents from the past and comparing them to other documents from the past.

Deconstruction, Girard came to believe, was easily just as intellectually unambitious, because it also reduced itself to a method—though, naturally, not in a historical but rather a linguistic context. Just as positivist history narrowed its scope to critically assessing documents from the past, deconstruction limited itself to critically assessing discourses in the context of human communication. Being an intellectual, in deconstructionist terms, was about skilfully handling certain techniques to create a situation in which “any question ... always comes as a question in retour”:²² i.e. to reduce any intellectual enterprise to an endless circle of—potentially deconstructible—discourses. Consequently, the deconstructionists’ dogma that one “does not ‘know’ the ‘secret’ that sits in the middle and smiles at our ignorance”²³ was not meant as a challenge for intellectuals to find new and as yet untrodden ways to uncover the “secret” of reality beyond the circle of discourses. This dogma was intended as a fundamental intellectual claim to the effect that reality as such was absolutely beyond our intellectual grasp, and that therefore one could only play the methodological game of evaluating and deconstructing linguistic discourses, without ever being able epistemologically to look beyond them.²⁴

This way of thinking was not for Girard. His uneasiness with this reduction of the intellectual enterprise to a method eventually culminated in his critical assessment that deconstruction “leads to the most complete nihilism”²⁵ and, even more, that it “is a weapon turned against the idea of truth.”²⁶ As an intellectual, he did not want to content himself with being able to deconstruct discourses in a purely methodologically motivated manner—no matter how creatively or wittily—by breaking them down into other

22. John D. Caputo, “Commentary: Deconstruction in a Nutshell,” in *Deconstruction in a Nutshell. A Conversation with Jacques Derrida*, ed. John D. Caputo (New York: Fordham University Press, 2005), 53.

23. *Ibid.*, 52.

24. Cf. Achim Geisenhanslüke, *Einführung in die Literaturtheorie*, 2nd ed. (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 2004), 98.

25. From Girard’s letter to Raymund Schwager dated 25th February 1987. In: Girard and Schwager, *Correspondence*, 162.

26. René Girard, “Theory and Its Terrors,” in René Girard, *Mimesis and Theory. Essays on Literature and Criticism 1953–2005*, ed. Robert Doran (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2008), 200.

discourses without this process ever coming to an end: i.e. without reaching a reality beyond discourse. He *did* want to find some sort of truth beyond discourse. This was the core of his scholarly ethos, which would guide him through his entire intellectual life. When, many years later, he was asked what the subject of research in his thinking really was, he answered quite emphatically: “Nothing but the truth. Period. Nothing else matters.”²⁷

3. ENIGMA, NOT MYSTERY—OR: MORE DURKHEIM THAN DERRIDA

In a nutshell, *La violence et le sacré* was, above everything else, a book which represented Girard’s relentless intellectual ambition to uncover a truth beyond linguistic or literary discourses. This intellectual ambition, however, was not only unusual in the context of the contemporary triumph of deconstruction and other varieties of post-structuralism. It was also something rather new in Girard’s own intellectual biography. In his earlier books, and especially in his 1961 study *Mensonge romantique et vérité romanesque*, Girard had committed—or limited—himself to a close reading of important novels from the European literary tradition. From this close reading had emerged his theory of mimetic desire, where he discovered that the major novelists from Cervantes to Dostoevsky had all designed their narratives in such a way as to show how their protagonists were trapped in destructive mechanisms of desiring to be like others. If they were lucky, they experienced liberating acts of conversion; if not, these mechanisms destroyed them—and not only them but, thanks to the contagious dynamics of uncontrolled rivalry, the very fabric of social life. Originally, then, Girard’s mimetic theory had been hardly more than a literary theory intended to shed light upon the fantastical world of great books. In the course of the late 1960s, this changed profoundly. The reason for this was, according to Girard’s later self-assessment, “a growing recognition of the broader cultural implications of the mimetic interferences” on his part.²⁸ Quite to his own surprise, he came to discover that the dynamics of mimetic desire which he had uncovered in novels like *Don Quixote*, *Madame Bovary* or *The Brothers Karamazov* were, in fact, also the key to understanding human relationships and actions in real life. Consequently, the scope of mimetic theory changed dramatically. It was, Girard determined, not only a theory about literature, but also one relevant to anthropology.

27. Quotation from a 2003 talk, documented in: William A. Johnsen, “The Girard Effect,” in *For René Girard. Essays in Friendship and in Truth*, ed. Sandor Goodhart et al. (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2009), 117.

28. René Girard, “*To Double Business Bound*”, xii.

The reason for this major extension of the scope of his theory of mimetic desire from the “literary treatment of mimetic phenomena” to the “phenomena themselves”²⁹ was, ironically, Girard’s extensive reading, which was not limited to the world of fictional literature. Very soon, this brought him to the classics of cultural anthropology. After being fired up by reading James George Frazer’s book on archaic religion and mythology, *The Golden Bough*, he began to “read all the most important English monographs on single cultures,” including “Tyler, Robertson-Smith, Radcliffe-Brown, Bronislaw Malinowski, among many others.”³⁰ In these books of cultural anthropology, he found a world easily as fascinating as that of literary fiction. What fascinated him most was that, despite the often very diverse social, religious and institutional characteristics, all these authors unanimously highlighted the pervasiveness and importance of the mythological idea of the sacred where the self-understanding of archaic cultures in general was concerned. The sacred, in these cultures, determined everything. It was believed to be a quality penetrating all essential features of social life in rituals, institutions and myths, by linking them to a dimension beyond human calculability to which everyone had to succumb. As fascinating as this was, Girard was frustrated that not one of the many scholars of cultural anthropology he had read could provide a satisfactory explanation of the actual anthropological origins and relevance of this mythological idea of the sacred, as it related to the maintenance of social life in these communities. He soon realized that he was not the first to be frustrated by this. For decades, scholars had been busy trying to establish, in scientific terms, what the archaic mindset and its preoccupation with the sacred was about. The annoyingly unfathomable difficulty associated with this task was the strange ambivalence of the concept itself: the sacred was both something to be worshipped and, at the same time, something to be abhorred. Gods were sacred beings in that they were both the givers of all blessings and the dispensers of all evil. Rituals were sacred, because they were necessary to uphold the order of the cosmos, but they included acts of horrific absurdity such as incest, which were normally believed to be the embodiment of disorder. In the end, the cultural anthropologists had given up. Evidently, they had concluded, the mythological mind-set of archaic societies, with its obviously self-contradictory fascination with the sacred, could only be described, not explained. According to the thesis of Rudolf Otto in his 1917 book *Das Heilige*, which is certainly representative in this regard, the

29. “An Interview with René Girard,” 199.

30. Girard, *Evolution and Conversion*, 32.

mythological mental state “is perfectly *sui generis* and irreducible to any other; and therefore, like every absolutely primary and elementary datum, while it admits of being discussed, it cannot be strictly defined.”³¹ Scholars of mythology as different as Mircea Eliade (*The Sacred and the Profane*) and Claude Lévi-Strauss (*Totemism*) agreed that the mythological mind was, in its very essence, a mystery to any rationally functioning mind—though they drew highly divergent conclusions from this.

For Girard, this kowtowing of cultural anthropologists before the mystery of the sacred was as unacceptable as the intellectual self-limitation of deconstruction. Only after having finished *La violence et le sacré* did he come across a book that would help him see that cultural anthropology was, intellectually speaking, the right way to go after all.³² In *Les formes élémentaires de la vie religieuse* (1912), Émile Durkheim, the father of cultural anthropology, had formulated the intellectual creed of the latter with inimitable brevity: in the study of human cultures, he wrote, there are no “primary and unanalysable facts.”³³ Behind all such presumably unanalysable facts in a given society, only social or anthropological processes waited to be uncovered. This was more to Girard’s taste, and he came to regard Durkheim as an intellectual kindred spirit. Later, he would call his own thinking with regard to the deconstruction of the idea of the sacred “a radicalized Durkheimianism.”³⁴ Moreover, like Durkheim, he was confident that it would be possible to uncover the social reality behind cultural structures. However, neither Durkheim nor his successors had been able to carry through this intellectual programme when it came to uncovering the quintessence of all cultural pretences: the sacred or ritual sacrifice. It was, therefore, Girard argued, necessary “to move beyond the Durkheimians without rejecting it”³⁵—i.e. without giving up on Durkheim’s intellectual ambition as regards the uncovering of some sort of social dynamics concealed behind the mystery of the sacred. To put it another way, until then, something had been missing that was needed in

31. Rudolf Otto, *The Idea of the Holy*, trans. John W. Harvey (New York: Oxford University Press, 1923), 7. Cf. Mathias Moosbrugger, *Die Rehabilitierung des Opfers. Zum Dialog zwischen René Girard und Raymund Schwager um die Angemessenheit der Rede vom Opfer im christlichen Kontext* (Innsbruck: Tyrolia, 2014), 94–108.

32. Girard, *Evolution and Conversion*, 140.

33. Émile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*, trans. Joseph Ward Swain (London: George Allen & Unwin LTD, 1915), 19.

34. René Girard, *Sacrifice*, trans. Matthew Pattillo and David Dawson (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2011), 39.

35. Girard, *Evolution and Conversion*, 34.

order to achieve what “a true science of man” had always been seeking to accomplish: “what had been an age-old, dark and formidable mystery is transformed into an enigma.”³⁶ *La violence et le sacré*, along with all of Girard’s subsequent works, was, technically speaking, very much a book concerned with this transformation.

But how could a self-taught literary critic like Girard realize Durkheim’s ambitious intellectual programme when generations of cultural anthropologists, including Durkheim, had failed to do so? The reason for this, Girard readily admitted, was not so much his historically unique intellect, but his historically unique cultural context.³⁷ He wrote on the final page of *La violence et le sacré* about post-war Western culture that “we have managed to extricate ourselves from the sacred somewhat more successfully than other societies have done.”³⁸ With this, he was referring to the loss of the aura of unquestionable self-evidence surrounding social and political institutions whose role was to organize social life. This loss had one major effect: it became possible to see that social life was itself built on structural violence directed against innocent victims—and this troubling insight could not be hidden any more by resorting to explanations that appealed to the idea of some greater good’s being preserved by such social structures. The result was, on a cultural level, a historically unprecedented, systemic form of empathy for the victims of collective violence.³⁹ For the very first time, a culture collectively tried to refrain from what, until recently, all cultures had collectively always been doing: understanding their own collective violence against innocent victims as unquestionably just.

In Girard’s eyes, this had serious intellectual repercussions for the study of cultural anthropology. It made it possible to finally fulfil Durkheim’s scientific creed and turn the mystery of the sacred into a seemingly enigmatic, yet intellectually soluble, puzzle. Girard wrote that, no longer obscured by the sacred mindset, the “essential violence returns to us in a spectacular manner—not only in the form of a violent history *but also in*

36. Girard, *Things Hidden*, 3.

37. See Girard, *I See Satan*, 159: “This insight regarding scapegoats and scapegoating is a real superiority of our society over all previous societies.”

38. Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*, 318. In several subsequent publications, he would refer to the Dreyfus affair (1894–1906) as an early instance for a society in the process of becoming sensitive to dynamics of victimization.

39. Richard Evans writes about the “primacy of victimhood in the formation of contemporary American culture and identity.” See: Richard Evans, *Rituals of Retribution: Capital Punishment in Germany, 1600–1987* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), xiv.

*the form of subversive knowledge.*⁴⁰ His ambition was to be the one to bring this subversive knowledge, which was lingering in the twilight of the all-embracing cultural transformation of his time, out into the full light of proper theoretical illumination. To adapt a notion coined by James Alison: Girard wanted to transform modern culture's growing *moral concern* for the victim into a full-blown "*intelligence of the victim.*"⁴¹

And indeed, that is precisely what Girard accomplished in *La violence et le sacré*: he showed that what twentieth century Western society was experiencing vis à vis its own social and political structures was also the key to understanding the pre-modern cultures which the cultural anthropologists had been studying for so long. In these cultures, he argued, the sacred was a specific "degree of attention,"⁴² which enabled the creation and unquestioned upholding of stabilizing cultural institutions, especially ritual sacrifices, by veiling how these cultural institutions were built on acts of structural violence against innocent victims. In this way, ritual sacrifice both contained and controlled the dangers of structural violence. The intellectually glorious thing for Girard was that he could show all this by falling back on his own theory of mimetic desire which he had developed years before—but this time not as a literary, but as an anthropological theory. Girard committed himself to showing, in *La violence et le sacré*, how mimesis not only could destroy the social fabric of made-up literary societies, as he had done in 1961 in *Mensonge romantique et vérité romanesque*, but could also be a power for organizing the divergent and potentially violent desires of the mimetic rivals in real-life societies by focussing these desires onto one designated scapegoat, thus overcoming the threat of collective self-destruction through the collective killing of an innocent victim. This primordial act is remembered and represented in sacred terms in ritual sacrifices and, in consequence, the idea of the sacred becomes the foundation of all essential cultural institutions and beliefs: they become sacred, i.e. unquestionably just and self-evident, no matter what horrific acts they may actually include. That is why the sacred, to a mythological mind-set, is intrinsically ambivalent, being demonic and divine at the same time: it is both a descendant of destructive collective violence and the origin of cultural stability.

4. A HISTORIAN AFTER ALL

40. Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*, 318 [my emphasis].

41. James Alison, *The Joy of Being Wrong. Original Sin through Easter Eyes* (New York: Crossroad, 1998), 80 (and passim) [my emphasis].

42. Girard, *Things Hidden*, 99.

Girard was thunderstruck by what he had discovered. The explanatory power of his specific reading of pre-modern cultures and their preoccupation with the sacred, achieved by using the unique cultural awareness of his own time with regard to collective violence against innocent victims, had helped him turn the old mystery of ritual sacrifice into an intellectually soluble puzzle concerning social reality. The instruments of his very own theory of imitative desire had, then, made it possible for him to solve this apparent enigma through extensive anthropological analysis using the tools of his mimetic theory.

Overwhelmed by his findings, he would from then on commit himself to “teasing out a single, extremely dense insight”⁴³—namely, that from *La violence et le sacré* about the cultural productivity of mimetic desire in relation to acts of collective violence against innocent victims. For the rest of his life, he would become some sort of intellectual treasure hunter, eagerly trying to unearth how, throughout history, the very same mechanism he had found in archaic cultures had been decisive in determining the course of social life. He did so through an extraordinary expansion of his already extensive reading. In *La violence et le sacré*, the great Greek tragedians had already been very important to him—so much so that he even stated that this “discovery of the victimary mechanism was really connected with the reading of *Oedipus* and above all with *The Bacchae*.”⁴⁴ Now he began to read the Bible more intensively than ever, in order to show its preoccupation with and unique perspective on the victimary mechanism (most prominently in his 1978 *Des choses cachées depuis la fondation du monde*). Not least, this made him realize that, in principle, it was not just possible to finally realize the scientific ambition of cultural anthropology: it was also possible to realize the methodological concerns of deconstruction without making the deconstructionists’ mistake of intellectually reducing oneself to method. Reading the Bible, he came to find out that the deconstruction of allegedly unquestionable social structures and mechanisms, especially those claiming to be upheld by divine power, was one of the main concerns of both the Old and the New Testaments. For Girard, the biblical authors, especially those of the prophetic tradition, were, in a way, deconstructionists *avant la lettre*—but, luckily, without the nihilistic ennui of their twentieth century descendants. The reason for this was that they all shared in the firm conviction that what they were doing was not just a matter of

43. René Girard, *When These Things Begin. Conversations with Michel Treguer*, trans. Trevor Cribben Merrill (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2014), 129.

44. Girard, *Evolution and Conversion*, 137.

deconstructing everything for deconstruction's sake: it was about getting rid of everything that claimed to be divine without actually being divine in human society, and in this way bringing oneself closer to the realm of true divinity. Or, to put it more prosaically, the biblical authors had been able to deconstruct the very anthropological mechanisms Girard was also trying to deconstruct, because they did not believe that these mechanisms were all there was. They were deconstructionists of such social mechanisms, just because they were also "apologists" for the truth lying beyond them. For Girard, this biblically inspired apologist's perspective was the only way of being a deconstructionist that did not entail also deconstructing the intellectual ambition needed for any serious scholarly undertaking. Only this outlook made it possible to uncover the deceitful mechanisms of victimization that had structured human society—without eventually falling prey to nihilism and despair.⁴⁵

Furthermore, Girard noted that not only the biblical authors, but also several other writers throughout history—apart from modern novelists or the Greek tragedians—had been more or less openly hinting, in literary contexts, at the same anthropological truths he had uncovered in theoretical terms. Shakespeare would become a major example of this, because Girard attributed to him an extraordinary competence in uncovering the truth of the mimetic cycle—so much so, he wrote, that to read Shakespeare mimetically was easy because "Shakespeare ... does all the work."⁴⁶ Girard, however, would not limit himself to reading those who, according to his perspective, had been able to uncover the mimetic cycle in their own context and thus stood witness to his cause of showing that what he had found was more than just the fanciful thinking of some idiosyncratic intellectual. He also read texts which, he believed, stood in need of a mimetic reading to unveil for the very first time how they, too, attested to the cultural omnipresence of sacrificial logic. In this vein, he analysed, for instance, the *Edda* by the medieval Icelandic mythographer Snorri Sturluson and mythological stories preserved by the Greek geographer Strabo.⁴⁷ Later, he would turn to Hinduist traditions.⁴⁸ He was certain that by applying his epistemology

45. See Grant Kaplan, *René Girard, Unlikely Apologist. Mimetic Theory and Fundamental Theology* (Notre Dame: Notre Dame University Press, 2016).

46. From Girard's letter to Raymund Schwager dated 10th December 1979. In: Girard and Schwager, *Correspondence*, 83.

47. Girard, *The Scapegoat*, 66–75. For Girard's treatment of Snorri's *Edda*, see Mathias Moosbrugger, "Recovering the Snorra Edda. On Playing Gods, Loki, and the Importance of History," *Contagion – Journal of Violence, Mimesis, and Culture* 17 (2010).

48. Cf. Girard, *Sacrifice*.

all these texts—and many more—would finally become more than just venerated documents from the past: they would begin to speak to us intellectually. They would become proof of the most important anthropological force involved in the creation and development of cultural history.

Surprisingly, this was exactly the point where his intellectual life came full circle. Deliberately adhering to an “anti-Popperian epistemology,”⁴⁹ he was not so much interested in providing criteria for the falsification of hypotheses as eagerly seeking to verify the latter by finding new sources to corroborate them. This was, in fact, very much a historical approach. The famous historian Johannes Fried stated that in historical analysis, “statistics” was the only way of finding out if a specific interpretation of documents from the past was legitimate or not.⁵⁰ Girard agreed. He wanted to bring out the fact that “statistically there must be real victims behind most myths.”⁵¹ For him, digging through mythological (and other) documents from the past was, not least, about ascertaining the “statistical character to our certainty,”⁵² and thus also about showing that his anthropological hypothesis was not merely a creative reading of certain documents but actually true: i.e. that it captured the anthropological reality present in all human history.

When it comes to detecting a specifically historical character in Girard’s way of thinking, then, the decisive point is not that he, at some juncture in his career, began to read historical sources again. The decisive point is that he began to read them like a historian. Essential for this was the conviction that it was possible to pass from literary sources to a reality behind them. Methodologically speaking, this is History 101. Statistics was an important element when it came to realizing this concern and avoiding purely literary exegesis, and yet it was also just one aspect of what was, in fact, a multi-dimensional enterprise of historical analysis. It had to be merged with the trickily non-quantifiable business of hermeneutics. The patron saint of twentieth century historiography, Marc Bloch, pointed out that “knowledge of all human activities in the past” comes from “a knowledge of their tracks,”⁵³ which, in historical records, were often difficult to uncover. Carlo

49. Pierpaolo Antonello and João Cezar, “Introduction: ‘One long argument from the beginning to the end,’” in René Girard, *Evolution and Conversion*, 9.

50. Cf. Johannes Fried, “Wissenschaft und Phantasie. Das Beispiel der Geschichte,” *Historische Zeitschrift* 263 (1996): 314.

51. René Girard, “A Venda Myth Analyzed,” in Richard J. Golsan, *René Girard and Myth. An Introduction* (New York/London: Routledge, 1993), 169.

52. Girard, *The Scapegoat*, 7.

53. Marc Bloch, *The Historian’s Craft*, trans. Peter Putnam (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1992), 45.

Ginzburg, another pioneer of modern historical thinking, even determined that being able to find both consciously and unconsciously hidden “clues” in historical sources was probably the most important quality in a good historian.⁵⁴ For this—to take up a famous notion of Jacob Burckhardt—the historian needs to have a “happy prescience.”⁵⁵ If, therefore, someone wanted to uncover long-term structural patterns of human activity in the past (and Bloch was by no means the only one endorsing such a structural and *longue durée* approach in historical thinking), good historical hermeneutics would have to consist in the often not-too-easy challenge of having the “happy prescience” needed in order to find corresponding clues in as many records as possible. Girard wanted to do exactly that with his own theory—his very own such prescience—about the long-term pattern of the victimary mechanism in cultural history. For this, he even created a catalogue of clues to be considered in historical documents when looking for hidden acts of collective violence against innocent victims.⁵⁶ In this way, he read scores of mythological (and other) accounts, only to demonstrate over and over again that—hidden beneath the veil of sacralisation—the anthropological tell-tale signs (clues) of the victimary mechanism could be found in so many of those texts that there had to be more to them than literary coincidence.

For Girard, this merging of a statistical approach with a hermeneutic one sensitive to hidden clues in mythological records made it possible to reliably extract the truth of the victimary mechanism from otherwise unreliably fantastical documents. On occasion, Girard could not fail to see how very historical this approach to mythological documents was. Unlike the usual mythologist’s perspective on mythological accounts, he was doing a historian’s job, insofar as “the historian does not feel that the unbelievable character of some themes invalidates the entire text as far as extratextual information is concerned.”⁵⁷ When, for example, a historian would read the protocols of a medieval trial against Jews which usually included the blood libels detailing the fantastical powers of wicked Jewish sorcery, he would not “consider all the details of a trial equally fantastic, on the excuse that some of them are tainted by the distortions of the persecutors.”⁵⁸ Instead, he

54. Cf. Carlo Ginzburg, *Clues, Myths and the Historical Method*, trans. John and Anne C. Tedeschi (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989).

55. Jacob Burckhardt, *Reflections on History*, trans. Mary Hottinger. (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1943), 27.

56. Cf. Girard, *The Scapegoat*, 11–23.

57. Girard, “*To Double Business Bound*”, 210–1.

58. Girard, *The Scapegoat*, 10–1.

would be certain that this trial was nothing but the tip of the iceberg of a story of a scapegoat mechanism—of collective violence against innocents—trying to legitimize itself through fantastic accusations. In his reading of mythological and similar documents from the past, then, Girard was doing nothing but propagating such a historical approach:

All I am really suggesting is that this type of interpretation, which, in the case of historical documents, is now quite banal and automatic (...), should be extended to the non-historical texts we call myths.⁵⁹

The reason was both intellectual and moral:⁶⁰

We would be not only naïve but guilty if we tried to deny the reality of these victims under the pretext that all such “stories” are obviously “imaginary,” that in any case the “truth” as such does not exist, etc.⁶¹

Long before his last book, *Achever Clausewitz* (2007), in which he set forth the watchword that “mimetic history needs to be written,”⁶² Girard was, therefore, working intellectually just like a good historian. In effect, he had overcome the dry positivism of history that had bothered him so much in the *École des Chartes* by doing history in the way that the best historians of his time had long demanded it be done. Being a good historian, Norbert Elias wrote, was about uncovering “long-term social processes” and, at the same time, overcoming the “lack of thinking about problems which groups of humans had to face in the past and in the present.”⁶³ This was very much Girard’s agenda, and he tried to achieve it through historical hermeneutics. Even more than that, he was eagerly trying to extend the historical approach into the realm of mythological research, where, despite all claims to the contrary, it was previously unheard of, and where ahistorical literary approaches were pervasively present. Like some of his readers, who

59. Adams, “Violence, Difference, Sacrifice,” 17.

60. Cf. “Mimesis and Science: An Interview with René Girard”, in *Mimesis and Science. Empirical Research on Imitation and the Mimetic Theory of Culture and Religion*, ed. Scott R. Garrels (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2011), 238–9: “I’m afraid if it’s not guided by a moral purpose of some kind, with application to real relationships, science will only produce empty formulas.”

61. Girard, *I See Satan*, 75.

62. René Girard, *Battling to the End. Conversations with Benoît Chantre*, trans. Mary Baker (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2010), 40.

63. Norbert Elias, *Über die Zeit. Arbeiten zur Wissenssoziologie II* (Frankfurt/M: Suhrkamp, 1998), 189 [my translation from the German original].

claimed that his thinking “comes at the price of the impossibility of any historical thought,”⁶⁴ Girard was not always quite aware of this. He stated, for instance, that his approach to mythological texts had “nothing to do with historical investigation” because the “only investigation that makes sense is still a structural one.”⁶⁵ Still, this was hardly more than an attempt to appease his structuralist and poststructuralist critics, who were only prepared to read such texts as the mythological records as literary ones—and probably also himself as someone who had, out of youthful presumption, jettisoned history on account of its alleged intellectual insignificance. In Girard’s case, Paul de Man’s assessment surely stands: namely, that “the intrinsic interpretation of literature claims to be anti- or a-historical, but often presupposes a notion of history of which the critic is not himself aware.”⁶⁶ Throughout all his intellectually adventurous encounters with literary criticism, deconstruction and cultural anthropology, the former *chartiste* René Girard invariably remained a historian in disguise.

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64. Jean-Marie Domenach, “Voyage to the End of Sciences of Man,” in *Violence and Truth. On the Work of René Girard*, ed. Paul Dumouchel (London: Athlone, 1988), 155.

65. Girard, “To Double Business Bound”, 164.

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