Book Reviews

Mark R. Anspach. *Vengeance in Reverse. The Tangled Loops in Violence, Myth, and Madness.* East Lansing, MI: Michigan State University Press, 2017.

Hollywood provides an endless source of case studies with regard to our fascination with violence, and in particular with vengeance. One of the most successful recent tokens of this trend, at least in my capacity as viewer, was a series of three blockbusters starring Liam Neeson, *Taken.* In particular, in the end of episode two (spoiler alert)—which interestingly enough in Italian appeared as *Taken—La vendetta*—we see a very fascinating scene between Murad, the villain, and Bryan, Neeson's character. I'll take the *Wikipedia* summary as if it were a sort of modern version of ancient legends and myths: we don't really know, or care, who actually wrote it, we just take it as *common knowledge.*

Confronting Murad, Bryan offers to let him walk if he agrees to return home and cease his desire for revenge. Murad agrees and Bryan drops his gun, but the former goes back on his word and tries to kill Bryan, only to find the gun unloaded. Realizing that Murad will never drop his *vendetta* against him, Bryan kills him by impaling him onto a sharp towel hook.

This scene entered my mind as representative of the inner logic of violence and then I found an analogous one analyzed in a light and agile collection of essays by Mark R. Anspach, *Vengeance in Reverse. The Tangled Loops in Violence, Myth, and Madness* that enriched the Michigan State University Press series, *Studies in Violence, Mimesis & Culture*, in 2017. Anspach soberly drives us through a thorough analysis of the logic of the fundamental phenomenon he has been dealing with for most of his career: good and bad reciprocity.

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As if symmetry and reciprocity had come to structure his own thought, his titles already are quite something in themselves as far as this same issue is concerned: after *A charge de revanche*, here comes *Vengeance in Reverse*.

Now, what is vengeance, in reverse? Or, to put a similar question, how do we reverse vengeance? According to Anspach, "the most common form of vengeance in reverse is the reciprocal self-sacrifice of gift-exchange" (11). Such is the logic of a scene from the *Iliad*, analyzed by Anspach in chapter 3: to avoid killing each-other, Diomedes and Glaukos achieve a sort of miracle, exchanging their armors instead of their spears. In our motion picture ending scene, Bryan is tentatively attempting to perform some sort of self-sacrifice, dropping his gun, and giving up his defense and himself along away. Yet, Murad is no Glaukos and he refuses to play along.

Anspach found in a scene from *Broken April*, a novel by Ismail Kadare (a reference Anspach found in Verdiers' *La vengeance*), a surprisingly clear account of this very inner logic of vengeance. Gjorg, at the beginning of Kadare's novel, kills his brother's killer; the novel ends when he is himself killed. Anspach comments by saying that "he knew [that] by entering into the chain of vengeance he was signing his own death warrant—he might as well have been killing himself" (11).

In our movie, Murad entered into the cycle of violence because Bryan killed his son, in episode 1 of the trilogy. Yet, Bryan killed his son because he had previously abducted his daughter. Now, in episode 2, Murad cannot let his desire for vengeance go and actually ends up acting in a way that will lead to his own death. He takes Bryan's gun and tries to shoot him. Yet, Bryan had played his part wisely, unloading his gun. Thus, with Murad having shown his will to keep the cycle going, Bryan pitilessly kills him with his bare hands.

As if following Anspach's line of reasoning, this scene throws us in the midst of the fundamental issue: time, and our relation to it, seems to be what paves the ways of vengeance. Bryan's daughter is alive and this lets him point his focus to the future. Murad's only son is dead and thus his future is hauntingly, melancholily empty: it is as if his own possibility to look forward has been somehow blinded. He can't figure out what is ahead. To do so, he should be able to self-transcend his own *temporal default*, his very ontological inability to be about his future if not in a formal, empty, way.

Part Two of *Vengeance in Reverse* is very aptly titled *Self-transcendence*. In this section, Anspach deals with the figure of self-transcendence in two different domains: the sacred and madness.

In the first essay, his leading question is *How do you make a god?* Anspach is a former student of René Girard's and Jean-Pierre Dupuy's and to them

much is owed in his reasoning. God is a higher-order entity *formed* by all the players of the group of worshippers: God is not preceding the group that recognizes it as god; instead it is the very same group self-transcending itself into a higher-order entity. If every individual recognizes "the superiority of the higher-order entity formed by all of them together" (46), no one will have to recognize the superiority of one individual over another, and no one will have to forgive or forget, or self-sacrifice. It seems to be harder to stop vengeance when only two individuals are concerned. For, if the quarrel lights up between two, it is almost impossible to determine who "showed himself hostile first" (51), and the chances that both the concerned litigants are as wise as Glaukos and Diomedes are low. When a group is entrenched in its cycle, the contributions of all the individuals can make it easier. Unanimity is easier to achieve when the many blame the few, because the few will as soon as possible join the many just to avoid being left alone. Unanimity will emerge, overcoming divisions and creating communion: thus the (meta)god is born.

Should we try and look at such event from the perspective of the excluded one on whose unanimity is found, we might find ourselves following the work of French psychiatrist Henri Grivois, whom Anspach devotes the following essay to. According to Grivois, all the psychotic breaks seem to follow experiences that share three common features. Individuals on the brink of going psychotic all reported of feeling as if they were at the center of something like a totality of *unanimous* others, in a condition of *absolute singularity*, helplessly wondering *why*. "Grivois understands psychotic delusion in the same way that Girard understands religious delusions: not as pure products of a fevered imagination, but as erroneous interpretations of a real event" (60). The psychotic break seems to be the consequence of a relational rupture in which the single individual is convinced of being radically alone, "facing the rest of the human race as one big undifferentiated crowd" (66). In such a situation, *the crowd is real*: just think of our basic physical condition, we have two eyes, close to each-other, that project everything else in front of us, as if the human race, and everything else with it—for lack of rear vision—were right in front of us. In order to escape such a condition, a hard process of self-construction is needed; and *mimesis*, by giving us a series of englobing categorial communalities can allieviate this.

Yet, when such process fails, or self-deconstructs, a madman is on the way. "The madman's belief that the crowd is polarized against him is what ultimately produces such a polarization of the crowd. This time the 'self' in the 'self-exteriorization' is the madman" (69). Grivois thought that joining the patient and breaking the perceived unanimity, which is always

unanimity-minus-one, thus making out of it a unanimity-minus-two, might make the difference.

Last essay *No exit? Madness and the Divided Self* is a further attempt to apply the logic of the endogenous fixed point, or *self-transcendence*, to provide a more workable interpretation of Freud's *Platonism*, i.e. the risky use of serviceable ontological terms and metaphors to describe functions. According to Anspach, we might find it interesting to interpret the metaphor of the *censor*, or *Super-ego*, not as an *exogenous point*, which is to say as an already existing *being*, a transcendent figure that should coordinate the *id* and the *ego*, but as an endogenous fixed point, which is to say as an internally generated operator, an emerging equilibrium of the "economy of competing motives" of which the mind seems to be composed.

Such hypothesis opens the way to a better understanding of many of the paradoxes of bad faith and in general of mental illness. "Understanding the tangled loops of violence, myth, and madness is the first step to breaking free of them." In particular, if unanimity is the enemy of truth and progress, a formidable enemy for sure, it also is a fragile one, "for the tiniest minority is capable of breaching it" (99).

Mark R. Anspach has often offered to the Girardian and mimetic community thorough works of analysis with which he can walk us through his fascination with the paradoxes of mimesis, madness and violence; thanks to his ability to produce rigorous and informative arguments he also always brings us back to the solid ground of reality. This brilliant collection is no surprise then.

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