

René Girard without the Cross? Religion and the Mimetic Theory

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Eric Gans' work in developing a generative anthropology is appealing to me, for two reasons. First, it is a stimulating hypothesis about how culture—and specifically language—begins. The emergence of the sign by which the victim is represented carries with it the dawning awareness of the position of those gathered around and against the victim, and this sharing of the sign enables those involved to substitute it for the victim and defer violence. My fundamental question about this originary scene, to be developed in part 4 of the essay, is whether it is necessary to posit a crisis issuing in the actual lynching of a human victim in order to imagine not only the necessary, but also the sufficient condition for the emergence of language and culture (so Girard); or whether sign-sharing and substitution could be accomplished without actual violence. Or is it the case that the emergence of language through the deferral of violence is what defines human being, whether or not the central object for the hypothetical hominids is real or imaginary? And if the central object is real, does it matter whether it is animal, human, or some other object, the gaining or eating of which must be deferred in order for language and culture to emerge?

Second, Gans takes religion with great seriousness in his version of generative anthropology. He says in *Science and Faith*, “The originary hypothesis is an attempt to understand the birth of the transcendental domain of representation.”[\[1\]](#) The emergence of signs or language is the model for understanding the originary scene, and at the heart of this signifying capacity is a coterminous representation of a central object, deferral of violence through substitution of the sign for the object, and an experience of agreement or consensus which results in collective peace. Language is thus what is distinctively and primordially human, but the event that brings about the human, which is the same as “the transcendental domain of representation,” is revelatory, having the status of sacred reality in the center of things. What we now categorize as “religion” is the ongoing transmission of acts, symbols, and stories associated with that revelation, that opening up of a transcendental domain of representation.

I will return later to Gans' concept of generative anthropology, for there is an important issue at stake in his concept of language as originary supplement which defers violence. At this point I want to turn to an overview of Girard's anthropology and the religious, specifically biblical and Christian roots of Girard's mimetic theory. The upshot of this twofold structure of Girard's work is the mimetic predicament of humanity and the revelation of this predicament, a revelation which is simultaneously transmission of the power of mimesis as love and divine-human community. Or to put it in traditional theological terms, this twofold structure of Girard's work may be understood as original sin and salvation, as viewed from the standpoint of the theological implications of mimetic anthropology. After having reviewed Girard's mimetic anthropology, I will ask whether it is possible to separate the religious and specifically Christian aspects of the mimetic theory from Girard's own thinking and body of work while still remaining anchored in the mimetic theory. This question will involve a review of the role of religion in the work of three of Girard's former students, Paisley Livingston, Tobin Siebers, and, as already mentioned, Eric Gans.

1. Mimesis: the Predicament

Interpreters of various perspectives and with varying commitments would agree that Girard's view of the human condition is radical. That is, if we go to the root of matter along his lines of thinking, we encounter an originary event (or series of events) which marks the transition from pre-homo sapiens, to homo sapiens—the transition he calls “hominization” in *Things Hidden*.^[2] This originary transition is the source of incomprehension or “misrecognition” (*méconnaissance*) and deception, which is built into every form of representation. Whatever the distinctions made between forms of desire, for Girard all desire is properly speaking mimesis or mimetic desire. He has emphasized the acquisitive aspect of desire in identifying cultural and personal crises, and this acquisitive desire (*la mimésis d'appropriation*) is the precipitating dynamic in the founding scenario. Its initial functioning is prior to all representations; but since it is, even in its embryonic stage, evoked by the other who becomes the model, it easily becomes unstable when pressures on the human grouping, or any particular relations within it, accelerate an anxious groping for certainty and order. It is in some such situation that acquisitive desire leads to conflict and rivalry, issuing then in violence.

The damage control achieved by lynching a victim and preserving this unanimity of the lynchers by repeating the event (the origin of ritual), forbidding the alleged crime that precipitated it (the origin of prohibition), and surrounding and remedying the event through narrative (the origin of myth) is, so to say, a disguising of truth.

The truth of ritual and mythical representation, which are the basis of all representation, is mimetic crisis and collective violence. The collective violence in particular may almost be completely disguised—but usually not quite.[\[3\]](#) The moment of sacrifice in ritual and the moment of the “good” violence in myth are both alike the doses of poison that must be taken and properly monitored (enacted, recited, thought) in order to counteract this very poison in its destructive forms of conflict, violence, and social disintegration.[\[4\]](#)

If we turn to Girard’s “interindividual” psychology and focus on the development of the self, we see that he likewise conceives the individual, who is always inherently social or intersubjective (thus “interindividual”), as in a predicament analogous to the predicament of the social-cultural order.[\[5\]](#) The child has no inherent, biogenetic mechanism for distinguishing between good and bad forms of behavior. The behaviors and rules he learns are basically imitations of what adults do and say, although what other children say and do, both older children and peers, undoubtedly has considerable influence. The child has no innate way of knowing that you can go too far with imitation: if it gets too acquisitive it begins to interfere with the model and the repercussions are not pleasant. But one of the most important functions of culture and religion is to furnish differences—roles, rules, institutions, etc.—which will alleviate this potential harm to relationships. In modern Western, as contrasted to archaic societies, these functions have become increasingly weakened, so the child has no sure way of knowing that the imitative behavior applauded on one occasion may be discouraged or even rejected on another.[\[6\]](#)

The master-disciple relationship is analogous to the parent-child relationship and is always influenced by the latter to some extent. Girard points out that the master may be delighted that the disciple is taking him as a model, but “if the imitation is too perfect, and the imitator threatens to surpass the model, the master will completely change his attitude and begin to display jealousy, mistrust and hostility.” He will try to “discredit and discourage his disciple.” But the “disciple can only be blamed for being the best of all disciples.” Precisely because of the mimetic relationship with his master, who is the source of norms and the obstacle he cannot surpass, he is unable to gain critical distance and perspective on the relationship. The disciple’s situation is worsened by the model’s tendency to reinforce his follower’s blindness and “to hide the real reasons for his hostility.”[\[7\]](#)

If I understand Girard correctly, then the potential for conflict in the master-disciple relation is basically a variation on what the child experiences in his relations with models and mediators. That is to say, mimesis is not simply one very important phenomenon and relation alongside others, but the constitutive basis and dynamic of all relations. It is not that it cannot turn persons toward freedom, love, and non-

violence, for it is also what constitutes the possibility of salvation or liberation (more on this below). But in whichever direction one's life turns, it always proceeds in and through mimesis. Learning what to desire from someone else is not a dynamic confined only to the "sick," to "those who push the mimetic process too far to be able to function normally; it is also, as Freud acknowledged, a feature of the people we call normal."^[8]

In the New Testament Gospels this universal human predicament is associated with the work of demons, and particularly with the work of the arch-demon, the prince of this world, the arche or principle of the world constituted by mimesis and the scapegoat mechanism. According to the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke, Jesus was tempted by Satan or the Devil for forty days in the wilderness. Satan in the Hebrew Bible, *shatan* or *satan*, means accuser or adversary. The Greek *diabolos* means much the same thing, accuser or slanderer. The classical Greek *diabole* would thus mean (false) accusation or slander. Its use in Socrates' long defense in the *Apology* gives us, perhaps, a deeper sense of its connotation. Socrates says, "Now let us take up from the beginning the question, what the *kategoria* is from which the *diabole* against me has arisen...." (19 AB). Here the *kategoria*, from which our word category, is the formal accusation, while the *diabole* is what supports and exacerbates the accusation. The Loeb translation renders it "false prejudice." Since the indictment alleged Socrates' corruption of the youth by calling into question traditional belief in the gods, the ostensible issue was disruption of civic order and tradition, but anxiety—perhaps also envy?—about his influence on a great number of young men informed the charge against him. If we translate this into the mimetic terms of this discussion, then *diabole* is identified with mimetic rivalry both as its cause and its result.

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So Satan, as Girard says, "is the mimetic model and obstacle par excellence."^[9] We can see this particularly clearly in the Gospel of Matthew, where Jesus has spoken of his suffering, death, and resurrection, and Peter rebukes him for saying he will suffer and die. Jesus in turn rebukes Peter: "Get behind me, Satan! You are a *skandalon* to me...." (Matt 16:23)—you are a scandal, an obstacle, a hindrance to me. Girard observes that Satan is "deconstructed" here in being equated with the mimetic principle, whereas in other texts he is depicted in a personified supernatural role.^[10] In this chapter of *Things Hidden*, entitled "Beyond Scandal," Girard goes on to argue that the concept of scandal is rooted in the Old Testament and the struggle against idolatry, and that the Cross is the supreme scandal that reveals and exposes scandal and its operation through the scapegoat mechanism.

So it does not matter whether one believes in a supernatural person, Satan, or

views Satan as the principle of order working through mimesis and an unconscious scapegoating process which clicks in when the cultural system, through any of its tributaries in society, government, or economy, is threatened or thrown off balance. From this standpoint, the only thing worse than believing in Satan is not believing in Satan. I don't know whether Girard has ever said exactly that in published writings, but I know from personal conversations that he agrees with it. And this means that all human beings in all circumstances are always either subject to, or close to the edge of, scandal and the relationship of doubles. Those trapped in the relationship of doubles are truly "possessed"; for them, short of a marvelous deliverance, the violence of desire tends toward death, either the death of the model-obstacle through murder or the death of the possessed person through suicide. When Girard speaks of desire tending toward death or says, as at the beginning of the last chapter in *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel*, that the "ultimate meaning of desire is death...,"^[11] he is not talking about all desire or desire in all its manifestations. He means rather desire as it so fixes itself on the mediator's supposed desire, and more fundamentally on the mediator himself, that it takes on an independent metaphysical reality for the desiring subject. What he is pointing to is not the necessity of desire resulting in scandal and the relationship of doubles, but the inevitability of this development, i.e., there is no absolute necessity that this occur, but the human condition is such that it is practically impossible to avoid. The human achievement on a universal scale has been to overcome disorder by means of limited disorder; or, if you will, to counteract the poison of violence by injecting only a small amount, enough to enable human life to tolerate it but not so much that the sociocultural system becomes fatally ill. The operation of some sort of generative scapegoat mechanism allows most cultures to work most of the time. Put in terms of Satan, Satan the principle of order (the "prince of this world") casts out Satan the principle of disorder, that great "spirit of self-destruction and nonexistence," as Dostoevsky's Grand Inquisitor calls him. So in the sense of the power of Satan as just indicated, we exist either under the sway of the fascinating rival or, in Kafka's striking image, as those who try to walk along a rope stretched just above the ground. "It seems more designed to cause stumbling than to be walked upon."^[12] This is ordinary human existence, or existence "according to the flesh." But there is the possibility of becoming "the adherents of non-violent imitation."^[13] To that we now turn.

2. Mimesis: the Release or Redemption

I get these terms, release and redemption, from two Gospel texts. In Mark, followed by Matthew, Jesus tells his disciples, "For the Son of Man also came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many" (10:45). "Ransom" is a translation of the Greek word *lutron*, whose root meaning is a "freeing" or release.

Ransom, with the connotation of a sacrificial ransom, is probably an accurate rendering. In the Septuagint or Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible it translates typically sacrificial words such as *geulah*, redemption, and *kofer*, ransom. However, in the context of Mark it is practically synonymous with the Son of Man's humbling of himself to become the servant, a model the disciples are to follow. The pronouncement about the Son of Man as a ransom is in response to the disciples' anger at James and John for asking to become Jesus's chief lieutenants when he comes into his glory. It addresses mimetic rivalry, in other words. The same quarrel had erupted earlier when the disciples disputed among themselves who was the greatest. There also we find the saying, "If anyone would be first, he must be last of all and servant of all." Then Jesus took a child and placing him in their midst, said, "Whoever receives one such child in my name receives me; and whoever receives me, receives not me but him who sent me" (Mark 9:33-37). In Matthew the saying includes not only receiving but also being like the child: "Truly I say to you, unless you turn and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven" (Matt 18:3).

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So freeing or release from mimetic rivalry has much to do with the freedom of being able to imitate like the child. The freedom, that is, to imitate the Son of Man or to imitate anyone who imitates God the father.

Luke includes the dispute among the disciples, but places it at a different point in the gospel story. Jesus and the apostles are at table for the last supper. After Jesus and the apostles share the wine and bread, a dispute arises as to who among them should be regarded as the greatest. Here also Jesus instructs them that the greatest, the leader, is the one who serves, but he says nothing at all about giving his life as a *lutron* for many. It is likely that the author of Luke dropped that term from his account, for in general he avoids any obvious indication of sacrificial atonement.

Another important passage for this subject is Luke's account of the two disciples walking to Emmaus after the crucifixion of Jesus. A "visitor" or "stranger" falls in with them and begins talking to them. It turns out to be Jesus, but they do not recognize him until the end of the journey when he sits down at table and breaks bread with them (Lk 24:13-35). Along the way they tell the stranger that Jesus "was a prophet mighty in deed and word before God and all the people," and that they had hoped "he was the one to redeem Israel" (24:19, 21). The verb translated "to redeem" is *lutrousthai*, rare in the New Testament, but a form of it is used frequently in the Septuagint with a clearly sacrificial meaning. But it should be noticed that although the two disciples use this word, Jesus does not. He interprets

the Scriptures to them (24:27), he becomes “known to them in the breaking of bread” (24:35), and before his ascension he “opened their minds to understand the Scriptures,” teaching them again of his suffering and resurrection and that “repentance and forgiveness of sins should be preached in his name to all nations” (24:45-47).[\[14\]](#) The sacrificial word is avoided in this sequence of the story of salvation. The same point could be underscored time and again in Luke and Acts. There is basically nothing about sacrifice and redemption in the classical biblical or universal religious meanings revolving around catharsis and atonement gained through the spilling of a victim’s blood.

So we find in the Gospels not only that Jesus exposed mimetic rivalry, but that he himself is its antidote, the means of release or liberation from this predicament. If Matthew and Mark maintain a language of strong sacrificial connotations, Luke moves away from this kind of language, evidently deliberately, in order to underscore the imitation of Christ, the servant of all, through whose name—the power of the Christ-representation in the apostles—a conversion could occur which begins with repentance and forgiveness of sins . “And there is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven among men by which we must be saved” (Acts 4:12).

This conversion cannot take place on the basis of a religious or moral choice which is taken by considering rational alternatives. “[N]o purely intellectual process and no experience of a purely intellectual nature can secure the individual the slightest victory over mimetic desire and its victimage delusions. Intellection can achieve only displacement and substitution, though these may give individuals the sense of having achieved a victory. For there to be even the slightest degree of progress, the victimage delusion (*méconnaissance victimaire*) must be vanquished on the most intimate level of experience....”[\[15\]](#) This *méconnaissance*, translated “delusion” in the English text, is the unconscious or preconscious refusal of the knowledge of the scapegoat mechanism and one’s own complicity in it. The defeat of this misrecognition must cause to collapse, or at least shake, all interindividual oppositions—“everything that we can call our ego,” our personality,’ our temperament,’ and so on.”[\[16\]](#)

The key to significant human change is therefore a conversionary imitation. The Gospels “recommend imitating the sole model who never runs the danger—if we really imitate in the way that children imitate—of being turned into a fascinating rival.”[\[17\]](#) To follow Christ entails a kind of renunciation, a relinquishing of that mimetic desire which seeks and searches on a path whose outcome is only the dead end of the obstacle, the wager that is always lost, the tomb that contains only the dead.[\[18\]](#)

Of course, Girard can obviously not speak of a healthy, nonviolent imitation and yet hold that it is necessary to give up mimetic desire in all its forms, which is absolutely essential to his anthropology. As he clarifies in an interview with Rebecca Adams, he does not mean “the renunciation of mimetic desire itself, because what Jesus advocates is mimetic desire. Imitate me, and imitate the father through me, he says, so it’s twice mimetic...So the idea that mimetic desire itself is bad makes no sense.” Girard’s use of “mimetic desire” in the negative sense means only the type “that generates mimetic rivalry and, in turn, is generated by it.”[\[19\]](#)

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All victims of mimetic desire encounter the obstacle of the model-rival, and short of the gift of release from this bondage the outcome is death. “Every obstacle is a kind of tomb.”[\[20\]](#) For the stone to be rolled back and the tomb to be found devoid of a dead body, a conversion is necessary—an overcoming of the victimage delusion on the most intimate level of experience.

3. The Mimetic Theory without Religion

My argument in part 3 of this essay is that to the extent one draws upon Girard’s work but rejects the evident twofold structure of Girard’s thought, the dialectic of mimetic predicament and the conversionary imitation of divine love, it is necessary to modify one’s own thinking in the direction of the principal features of the Enlightenment heritage. In using the term “Enlightenment heritage” I have in mind especially the apprehension about religion or religious transcendence that first emerged forcefully in the 18th century and that had become thoroughly secularized by the 20th century, to the point that religion, particularly Christianity, is dismissed or ignored in intellectual settings and in discussions of public policy in which the claims of “enlightened” reason and morality are upheld. It follows that the Enlightenment heritage results in a certain rationalism, usually of a pragmatic or utilitarian sort. This utilitarian rationalism typically tilts in favor of viewing the individual person as autonomous and as possessing “certain inalienable rights,” to quote a well-known document, but it usually has a corresponding social-political tendency to favor government programs that protect and enhance individual rights.[\[21\]](#) The possibility that this modern notion of the autonomous self has been influenced by the biblical understanding of God as the absolute subject,[\[22\]](#) or that the tradition of individual rights is rooted in biblical anthropology, is ignored or dismissed.

Here I will consider the approach of two critics influenced by Girard, both former students of his: Paisley Livingston and Tobin Siebers. Both, at least in their work as thinkers and scholars, reject the Cross in Girard’s thought. In *Models of Desire*

Livingston proposes to begin the project of gaining a better grasp of desire as it is related to and rooted in human agents, attitudes, and social and historical contexts. Girard, he avers, has engaged in inconsistent discourse about mimetic desire. He tends to conflate all sorts of desire as “mimetic,” although in certain instances he has distinguished a precultural form of desire, *la mimésis d'appropriation*, but this is not properly speaking mimetic desire. He quotes Girard’s statement, “We might well decide to use the word ‘desire’ only in circumstances where the misunderstood mechanism of mimetic rivalry has imbued what was previously just an appetite or need with this metaphysical dimension.”[\[23\]](#) Livingston’s concern in analyzing and refining the notion of desire is of a piece with his insistence that a psychology of mimesis should include taking into account a subject as moral agent who is not completely subsumed by mimetic attractions which are not conscious and rational, but who has meaningful attitudes and dispositions.[\[24\]](#)

Livingston’s delineation of a moral agent whose reflective input is an important part of life changes that can accurately be described as “decisions” or “choices” is an expression the two fundamental criticisms of Girard’s psychology of mimesis that he proposes: (1) The mimetic system operative in all human societies and cultures is not as closed as Girard thinks. (2) The part of Girard’s model that includes revelation and eschatology is not needed for an adequate psychology of mimesis. “...I do not need Girard’s hypothesis that the scientific project is a byproduct’ of the subterranean’ Revelation being wrought by the Holy Scriptures.”[\[25\]](#) Concerning the first point, Livingston says that it “certainly has not been established that [the error of *méconnaissance* of scapegoating] was a universal feature of human cognition until the advent of Jesus Christ.”[\[26\]](#) As for the second point, the biblical tradition and specifically the Christian revelation have not brought about the transformation of our mimetic inheritance to the extent that Girard contends. He observes that there are many examples of this very *méconnaissance* in the contemporary social world, beginning with the economic institutions that are supposed to be a by-product of the Christian revelation.[\[27\]](#)

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I have my doubts as to whether Livingston is right about blindness to delusion and deception operative in economic institutions. I don’t doubt that they are operative, but I don’t think they go unrecognized. Not only Girard himself, but Jean-Pierre Dupuy, Paul Dumouchel, Eric Gans, Cesareo Bandera, and others have taken cognizance of the banished object, money as the excluded commodity, and the parallel displacement of desire to other goods, services, and human agents. In other words, we are more or less “onto” the scapegoat mechanism, but this knowledge has spread and informed public life less slowly than, say, the rights of the victim.

What I am most concerned with in Livingston's approach to the psychology of mimesis is his claim to be able to appropriate the main analytic thrust of Girard's mimetic anthropology without taking seriously his interpretation of the relation of the Gospels to mythology. In fact, religion has no place at all in Livingston's proposal except as a limited social-psychological factor. The result is twofold. (1) He cannot view the existence of societies and individuals as caught up in a mimetic predicament. The individual, when all is said and done, is in principle a rational agent, at least to the extent that a "descriptive and explanatory program of meaningful attitudes" is possible.[\[28\]](#) And human cultures and cultural expressions retain, in principle, a kind of openness which does not necessarily reproduce a victimary mechanism. There is no original sin. (2) Nor is there a need for revelation or transformation from some source outside the human self or the human social order. He evinces a basic trust in our capacity to critique and "forestall the kind of sacrificial error that the [mimetic] theory identifies."[\[29\]](#)

There is no (original) sin and no need for salvation in any traditional religious sense. That much seems evident from Livingston's Enlightenment program of thought. Our human situation is somewhere in the middle, operating between problem/irrationality and solution/rationality. The possibility of this solution is immanent within the human species as it evolves and develops. This all seems clear. But so what? That is, isn't this the way it should be, especially for thinkers and researchers who have honed their particular talents to analyze the human condition and offer reasoned proposals for the good of their fellow human beings? Yes, affirms Livingston, it is the way it should be. Girard's original insights are logically separate from his theological claims[\[30\]](#) —which is to say, one can have a sort of Girard without the Cross.

The upshot of this is not only to challenge Girard's version of his mimetic model by saying, in effect, "Our situation is not as bad as you say," but also to counter that "We can do something about our problems through the analytic and synthetic functions of reason."

But what does this position actually offer in the face of cycles of desire and revenge? I am not familiar with Livingston's textual example in *Models of Desire*, *Brennu-Njalls Saga*. However, the positive element of moral action that he draws from it has little to offer: Gunnarr refuses to seek compensation, putting a temporary halt to the cycle of vengeance, and Njall voluntarily offers compensation so that his friend would not be dishonored by lack of parity. This is indeed "a cooperative form of mimesis," but that is the way sacrificial and retributive systems have always worked when individuals act nobly within them. Noble and morally sensitive individuals use the system either to keep its retributive or scapegoating machinery from clicking into motion or to minimize the damage done. But I don't

see a thing in the saga as he describes it that really calls the system into question; there is a certain fatalism about it. And, as Livingston himself notes, the halt in the rivalry, doubling, and revenge is but temporary. There is, in short, a lack of anthropological depth in Livingston's analysis and a lack of any sense of what would inspire a moral agent to break away from a system, or what would move an individual in a lynch mob not only to drop the stone he is about to throw but to proclaim to others that so-called "good" violence is not the right remedy for "bad" violence.

Tobin Siebers is an interdisciplinary literary critic whose particular forte is to locate himself in the "and" of literature and anthropology, literature and ethics, literature and politics. His thinking is not driven by Enlightenment rationalism in the same measure that Livingston's is, but he definitely casts a suspicious eye on the specific, and avowed, religious concerns and themes in Girard's proposals. To be sure, he thinks it is a major mistake for critics to deny the importance of religion and refuse to think about it. To expel religion would be to fail to recognize the "dynamic relation between acts of expulsion and the evolution of the sacred." He observes that it "is no accident that the metaphysicians of presence, who quest to eradicate the last survivals' of the sacred in language, place all language under the aegis of *écriture*, the word for Scripture."[\[31\]](#) In fact, Siebers goes so far as to affirm that "Literary criticism should uphold a reverence for our inner lives."[\[32\]](#)

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However, it is precisely the affirmation just quoted that indicates a shift from religion to literature for Siebers—or a shift from the Judeo-Christian tradition to literature approached with a certain secular vestige of religious devotion. He holds that Girard contradicts himself. Girard points out that Nietzsche's madman in *The Gay Science* says humans have murdered God themselves, thus human beings, in this context, have both created and murdered gods. However, in his conclusion to *The Scapegoat* he holds that the "murderers...believe that their sacrifices are virtuous. They do not what what they do, and we must forgive them."[\[33\]](#) The contradiction, for Siebers, evidently lies in the affirmation of the possibility of forgiveness, which has a transcendent source and inspiration, while adhering to the anthropological knowledge of human ignorance and guilt. The two cannot really coexist. And for Siebers this means that the religious dimension of Girard's work is an obstacle which should be bracketed. "Girard's personal beliefs should not blind us to the enormous power of his intuitions, especially within a community of scholars who advocate free thinking and pluralism."[\[34\]](#) The general, contextual antidote to Girard, in other words, is a community of "free thinking and pluralism." And essential to this context, if not the most important factor, is the role of literature and narrative, which Siebers describes religiously. Literary criticism

should uphold a reverence for our inner lives. Literature “stirs astonishment, thoughtfulness, and memory,” all traditionally associated with myth and ritual. In the sense of connection to life-experience, there “is no story that is not true.”[\[35\]](#) Literature for Siebers takes over the very definition of Adam/Anthropos, which is rooted in the wellsprings of Western religion and philosophy. “To be human,” says Siebers, “is to tell stories about ourselves and other human beings....The finally human is literature.”[\[36\]](#)

There is no question that literature is important for understanding what human beings are, and the human propensity for telling stories and living in and out of them is especially significant. But literature cannot bear the weight that Siebers places on it. He holds to an ethics of literary criticism which supports a reverence for the life of the individual self within a more or less democratic, pluralistic society. He believes not only that we are story-telling beings, but that “memory and judgment” require us to keep on telling certain stories, such as those coming out of the Holocaust.[\[37\]](#) But Siebers does not offer his own anthropology beyond our linguistic, narrative existence which can so easily break out into mimetic rivalry and violence. He eschews a religious perspective on human beginnings and endings, so he leaves unanswered the question of whether we humans are caught in a predicament or not. He seems to believe not, because he does not propose that we do anything except to tell important stories and examine them critically and ethically for the challenges and possibilities they offer. It is a narrowly circumscribed position. Although he comes across as appreciating the importance of the fact of religion, historically and psychologically, he must finally take a position similar to Livingston’s: there is no human predicament, rather a series of problems, above all the problem of violence; and there is no salvation or liberation, rather a criticism of language and literature that might shed some light and bring us closer together. This amounts of course to a severe dilution of Girard’s mimetic anthropology, which is thoroughly radical in the sense that we humans are mimetic beings who are inevitably and characteristically trapped in mimetic rivalry, but who may be saved through mimesis, the mimesis of conversionary imitation of Christ, or of any model-mediator who reveals and enacts the love of God. There is no way that memory, judgment, and reason can rise above the *méconnaissance* of their own representations, except if their stories, precedents, and principles are converted to the standpoint of the innocent victim. When Saul/Paul the persecutor of Christians was traveling on the road to Damascus, the voice he heard was not his memory telling him examine and appreciate Christian stories; it was not his judgment asking him to reconsider the cases of those whom he viewed as heretical or blasphemous or “wanna be” Jews; it was not his reason challenging him to become a better critic of his and others’ moral actions. No, it was the voice of Jesus saying to him, “Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?” (Acts 9:4). In Paul’s own account of his conversion, he says that the gospel he preached was not one he

received from a human source, nor was he taught it, “but it came through a revelation of Jesus Christ” (Galatians 1:12).

So where is the human source to turn us from our violence? Who will teach a new being, a renewed humankind, and what will this teaching be? Could it be a rationalist psychology of mimesis, or a narrative ethics of criticism? Girard’s mimetic theory is radical, which means it must be religious. And this means that to get at its implications, to consider any alternatives which shed light on the human condition and human freedom, it is necessary to go through the Cross. One cannot go around it, over it, or under it; it is necessary to go through it.

8

4. The Mimetic Theory with Transcendental Revelation

Eric Gans takes religion seriously and does not formally dismiss or bracket it. However, whether it amounts to anything other than part of the formal structure of his theory of “generative anthropology” is an open question for me. Although he emphasizes the importance of the “material referent,” the victim,[\[38\]](#) and has referred in his *Anthropoetics* columns to the diasparagmos or dismembering and dividing up of the victim, I am not sure that this is necessary to his theory.

The scene Gans describes in *Science and Faith* is that of a group of pre-humans whose appetites are excited by the animal that has just been felled by their blows. They each notice the appropriative movements that all the others are making and so each one aborts his gesture lest a battle among themselves erupt. This abortive gesture is the ostensive designation of the desired object. The ostensive gesture is imprinted in their memories and is the beginning of representation through language. This initial pointing to or showing of the designated object simultaneously contains the seed of the distinction between “it” or “that” and “us,” and so is the first stage of human community properly understood. It implies the two further structural forms of language which would evolve. The designated object implies the imperative, the grammatical form of command, saying in effect that you must cooperate and you must not fight over the object. But for human being as *homo sapiens* to emerge it was necessary to reach a third structural form, the declarative, the grammatical form of statement, saying in effect that there is something other than the designated object-gods, community, prestige, property, power, ritual, story, etc.—everything associated with representation, that is, with language and culture, by which human beings protect themselves from the originary danger and attempt to find meaning.

This is an interesting and meaningful originary hypothesis, and its structure is the same as Girard's model.[\[39\]](#) Of course, Gans would certainly not want to restrict the originary scene to a hunting situation. But a reasonable inference from what he says in *Science and Faith* and many of his *Anthropoetics* columns is that the designated object could be anything. He has lately mentioned that he will return to focus on the dividing up of the victim, but the material consequences of this for the formal argument of his theory are not apparent. On the other hand, for Girard the originary scene must center on the human victim as designated object. Only this hypothesis would account for the power of the cultural system based on supplements or substitutions. The universal taboos revolve around murder, particularly parricide and incest, the two most threatening dangers to the order and peace of human community. It is simply more hypothetically reasonable and elegant to hold that in sacrifice, for example, an animal could be substituted for a human victim, or that a gift could be devoted in place of animal or human, but the other way around is difficult to conceive. Why would a human community increase the danger to itself by substituting one of its members for a non-human victim or object?

It is significant that Gans predicates two and only two fundamental revelations: "that of the event at the origin of man and that of the burning bush, which gave birth to the conception of the one God that is shared by all Western religions and their secular derivatives."[\[40\]](#) The revelation at the burning bush (Exodus 3) presupposes the ostensive dimension of language and includes the imperative and declarative. The revelatory advance it achieves is "the separability of the exchange of representations from the exchange of things."[\[41\]](#) The "big man" had always been necessary in human culture. As the given community's representation of the designated object as well as the source of imperatives and expressions of sacred truth, he had been the one who, in principle, divided up the goods. He was, of course, both divider and divided, ruler and scapegoat whose power and authority lay in a delayed sentence of execution, as Girard has noted. He was the sacred center of presence and absence, of actualization and deferral. In the burning bush episode a new revelation enters human history: the "big man," God, or God through Moses, is no longer needed to divide up the goods. My own way of putting this is that the revelation of *ehyeh asher ehyeh* to Moses ("I am who I am" or "I will be what/who I will be" or "I will become what/whom I will become") as the one who commissions him to lead the Hebrews out of Egypt is a negative witness against the *méconnaissance* of the basis of culture. The signs and symbols of Israel would henceforth register a "No!" to all systems of the visible sacred in order to affirm a vision of human liberation and human community based on covenant and law.

There is a Talmudic story about the role of the sages in relation to revelation and supernatural intervention. As the rabbis were arguing over a topic, some appealed to miraculous intervention. Rabbi Eliezer went all the way and called upon "heaven" (God) to prove he was right, and a heavenly voice said "The Halakah [the oral-Mishnaic law] is always with him." Rabbi Jeremiah, unfazed, said, "The Law was given us from Sinai. We pay no attention to a heavenly voice. For already from Sinai the Law said, By a majority you are to decide."^[42] Rabbi Jeremiah's dictum was a homiletical "stretch," as we say, based on Exodus 33:2, but its logic is implicit in the burning bush revelation as interpreted by Gans. The separability of the exchange of words from the exchange of things means that there should no longer be a "big man," the god or hero/scapegoat, charged with sacral power and interfering in human responsibilities. Human responsibilities for Israel are grounded and circumscribed by the Torah.

Thus the Christian revelation centered in Christ and the New Testament Gospels is simply a further working out of what had already been fully revealed. Christ is a reminder of the victim in the originary scene, and through Christianity the disclosure of human equality, understood as mutual access to language, is spread throughout the world. But I am uneasy about revelation in Gans' theory: it remains at the level of the transcendental. That is, the elegance of "minimality" is based on the a priori of language which is not internally and necessarily connected with what is real. Or to qualify the last statement, the emergence of language is real but it is not tied to human victimization or to any specific object; any object of desire will do, so it seems. The scenario of its emergence simply follows the necessity of reason to supply reasons or principles from language itself. To put it formulaically:

(1) Something means (2) Something is meant (3) Something = (1) Signifier (2) Signified (3) Referent.

Another way to put it: **(1) Object (2) Mediation through sign (3) Uttering of sign = (1) Victim (2) Sign as sound-image (3) Utterance which defers desire for object-victim.**

The revelation is only in the most formal sense tied to a real event or series of events stemming from a predicament. The revelation of the originary scene reveals the predicament and overcomes it at the same time. The deferral of violence through language already contains the revelation of the detachment of words from things and universal access of all to language; but what is contained in the twofold sense of content, initially implicit, and being kept within limits, is released in the founding revelations of Judaism and Christianity. The problem of mimesis becomes much less significant, although it does help to explain the hold of Christ on Christians, whereas the Jews have had the revelation through Moses and the Torah

to enable them to sort out and control mimesis.

In my conclusion concerning the work of Livingston and Siebers I asked whether the perspective and implications of Girard's own development of the mimetic model could be properly understood and appreciated apart from a real engagement with its religious foundation. It is a radical theory, i.e., religious. Although Gans is a critic of religion who has very constructive things to say about the history, texts, symbols, and ideas of Judaism and Christianity (e.g., the doctrine of the Trinity), I wonder whether his generative anthropology has lost the really powerful roots of Girard's mimetic theory by transcendentalizing, in effect, the originary scene. The dialectical poles of Girard's thinking are mimetic predicament and mimetic liberation. Has Gans supplemented them with the signified as imagined object of desire and the signifier as word-concept which points to absence and defers desire and violence? For him too is there no salvation because there is no predicament, but simply a series of problems to be solved against the backdrop of language?

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REFERENCE NOTES

1. Gans, *Science and Faith: The Anthropology of Revelation* (Savage, MD: Rowman and Littlefield , 1990), 14.[\(back\)](#)
2. Girard, *Things Hidden Since the Foundation of the World*. Research undertaken in collaboration with Jean-Michel Oughourlian and Guy Lefort, trs. S. Bann and M. Metteer (Stanford: Stanford University, 1987), 84-104.[\(back\)](#)
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3. An exemplary scapegoat myth which is only thinly disguised are the versions of a Venda myth about Python and his two wives, analyzed by Girard in "A Venda Myth Analyzed," in Richard J. Golsan, *René Girard and Myth* (NY: Garland, 1993), 151-79. A myth in which collective violence is somewhat less obvious is that of the supernatural, anthropomorphic beings who are the ancestors of the Ojibwa clans. It is reproduced in Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Totemism Today* and discussed by Girard in *Things Hidden*, 105-12 and in "Generative Scapegoating" in R. Hamerton Kelly, ed., *Violent Origins* (Stanford: Stanford University, 1987), 95-103.[\(back\)](#)
4. See James G. Williams, "On Job and Writing: Derrida, Girard, and the Remedy-

Poison," *Scandinavian Journal of the Old Testament* 7 (1993), 34-39 for discussion and critique of Derrida's analysis of the *pharmakon* in Plato.[\(back\)](#)

5. Except that the individual has a potential for liberation from the mimetic predicament which is much greater than societies and traditions, whose unconscious scapegoat mechanisms are precisely what binds them and makes them cohere in a system. This will be taken up below.[\(back\)](#)

6. Girard, *Things Hidden*, 291.[\(back\)](#)

7. *Ibid.*, 290.[\(back\)](#)

8. *Ibid.*, 413.[\(back\)](#)

9. *Ibid.*, 419.[\(back\)](#)

10. *Ibid.* In fact, in many of the psalms of the Hebrew Bible the *shatan* or *satan* is simply the human accuser or adversary, the one(s) persecuting the speaker.[\(back\)](#)

11. *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel. Self and Other in Literary Structure*, tr. Y. Freccero (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1966), 290.[\(back\)](#)

12. Kafka, *Hochzeitvorbereitungen auf dem Lande und andere Prosa aus dem Nachlass*, ed. M. Brod (NY: Schocken, 1970), 42 (#26).[\(back\)](#)

13. *Things Hidden*, 430.[\(back\)](#)

14. The word translated "forgiveness," *aphesis*, is similar to *lutron* in that the root meaning is "release."[\(back\)](#)

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15. *Things Hidden*, 399; emphasis mine.[\(back\)](#)

16. *Ibid.*, 400.[\(back\)](#)

17. *Ibid.*, 430.[\(back\)](#)

18. *Ibid.*, 430-31.[\(back\)](#)

19. "Violence, Difference, Sacrifice: A Conversation with René Girard," *Religion and Literature* 25.2 (1993), 23. See also *Quand ces choses commenceront... Entretiens avec Michel Treguer* (Paris: Arléa, 1994), 70-71, 76.[\(back\)](#)

20. *Things Hidden*, 431.[\(back\)](#)

21. These features of Enlightenment thinking and attitudes are the ones most prominent in 20th century U.S. and western European cultures. However, in the 18th century the “enlightenment” was often associated with rejection of Descartes’ thought and absolute rule, particularly if an absolute sovereign could “reduce the power of the Church, encourage religious toleration, get rid of Jesuits and other monks, abolish torture and the death penalty,” etc. Derek Beales, “The Enlightened Despot,” a review of Kenneth Maxwell, *Pombal: Paradox of the Enlightenment* by Kenneth Maxwell (Cambridge: Cambridge University, nd), *New York Review of Books* 43,7, April 18, 1996, 34.[\(back\)](#)

22. See Girard, *Resurrection from the Underground: Feodor Dostoevsky*, tr. James G. Williams (NY: Crossroad, forthcoming).[\(back\)](#)

23. Girard, *Things Hidden*, 296; Livingston, *Models of Desire. René Girard and the Psychology of Mimesis* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University, 1992), 103.[\(back\)](#)

24. Livingston, *ibid.*, 172-4.[\(back\)](#)

25. *Ibid.*, xviii.[\(back\)](#)

6. *Ibid.*, 134.[\(back\)](#)

27. *Ibid.*[\(back\)](#)

28. *Ibid.*, 174.[\(back\)](#)

29. *Ibid.*[\(back\)](#)

30. *Ibid.*, xviii.[\(back\)](#)

31. Siebers, “Language, Violence, and the Sacred: A Polemical Survey of Critical Theories,” in *To Honor René Girard*, ed. by members of Dept. of French and Italian, Stanford University (Saratoga, CA: ANMA LIBRI, 1986), 217. See also Siebers, *The Ethics of Criticism* (Ithaca: Cornell University, 1988): “The expulsion of religion for its apparent narrowness and intolerance repeats the crime of which modern thought accuses religion” (155).[\(back\)](#)

32. *Cold War Criticism and the Politics of Skepticism* (New York: Oxford University, 1993), 157.[\(back\)](#)

33. Girard, "Dionysus versus the Crucified," *Modern Language Notes* 99 (1984), 828-35, and *The Scapegoat*, tr. Y. Freccero (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1986), 212.[\(back\)](#)

34. *To Honor René Girard*, 217.[\(back\)](#)

35. *Morals and Stories* (New York: Columbia University, 1992), 210.[\(back\)](#)

36. *The Ethics of Criticism*, 240.[\(back\)](#)

37. *Cold War Criticism*, 141.[\(back\)](#)

38. *Science and Faith: The Anthropology of Revelation*, 3-4.[\(back\)](#)

39. *Things Hidden*, 84-138.[\(back\)](#)

40. *Science and Faith*, 73.[\(back\)](#)

41. *Ibid.*, 37; emphasis his.[\(back\)](#)

42. Baba Metsia 59b, quoted in C.G. Montefiore and H. Loewe, eds., *A Rabbinic Anthology* (NY: Schocken, 1974), 340-41.[\(back\)](#)