

Introductory Remarks

Eric Gans

Department of French, UCLA
Los Angeles CA 90095-1550
gans@humnet.ucla.edu

Generative Anthropology and *Anthropoetics* owe so much to **René Girard** that a special issue on his thought seemed only the least we could do. I am therefore very happy to be able to include **Markus Müller**'s exclusive interview with Girard in this issue. I am also most grateful to **James Williams**, Executive Secretary of the COV&R, for his participation. And I am always proud to present the work of **Tom Bertonneau** and **Matt Schneider**, two of the original GA Seminar participants, whose writing illustrates the fertilizing power of these ideas on first-rate minds.

I had originally thought of commenting on these articles in detail, but it seemed more in the spirit of this issue to clarify very briefly how I conceive the relationship of Girard's thought to the mode of thinking I call *generative anthropology*. If the latter is taken not as a euphemism for my own work but as an exploration of humanity as a generative phenomenon—which allows us to leave out of consideration as ultimately meaningless whether the generation is accomplished by humanity itself or by an agency that transcends it—it then becomes clear that Girard is himself a generative anthropologist and that the difference between his thought and mine lies in the nature of the articulation we make between *mimesis*, Girard's central conceptual legacy, and human generativity, that is, our incessant reappropriation of the traces of our origin.

The Girardian element in GA is well known. But few have remarked on the Derridean element, which may perhaps be better appreciated now that the fashion of deconstruction has been subsumed into Foucault's social nihilism. GA brings together "mimetic theory" and deconstruction, *mimesis* and *différance*, in its characterization of the human by *the deferral of violence through representation*.

Societies of higher animals possess means of differentiating the portions of their members. But at some point in primate evolution, these means prove insufficient to restrain the power of *mimesis* to break down distinctions; *mimesis* leads to violence through *indifferentiation*. In the Girardian scenario of "hominization," the violence of

mimetic rivalry is controlled anew by the murder of a scapegoat or emissary victim which (Girard would say, *who*) by becoming the first “signifier” institutes a new means of founding intracultural differences. The victim “signifies” by his transcendent power to focus violence, and thereby to end it. As he is perceived as the destroyer of the differences on which the self-reproductive activities of life depend, the communal energy normally devoted to these activities becomes absorbed in his killing. As a consequence, with his death, the victim is perceived as bestowing on us these differences and the activities that depend on them, henceforth understood as dependent on his good will. The human order, as opposed to the animal order that preceded it, is made dependent on the sacred as defined by its own violence; we are the only species to which mimetic violence poses a greater threat than the extraspecific natural world.

2

But human differences differ from animal differences precisely because they are formulated in *language*. This is the one aspect of mimesis that Derrida understands better than Girard. The advantage of the linguistic sign is expressed in the parable of the loaves and fishes that, like the word of God, may be multiplied indefinitely. If, as Girard claims, the original “signifier” were a corpse, language would be an expensive affair indeed. The corpse of the victim becomes the foundation of human culture not as the first sign, but as the *referent* of the first sign.

This was the thesis of *The Origin of Language*. Since then, I have situated the murder or *sparagmos* of the central being in a different stage of the originary scene. But the heart of the originary hypothesis is its motivation of the originary sign as an *aborted gesture of appropriation* that becomes a *representation*, that is, an “imitation” not of one’s fellow potential appropriators, but of the central being itself. The discovery of the sign is the discovery that our capacity for mimesis, the basis for our rivalrous sharing of desire, can also become the basis for the peaceful sharing of significance: we can imitate each other’s gesture as the sign of what is differentiated from us as the sacred.

It is undecidable, and therefore ultimately immaterial, whether the sign sacralizes the object or the sacred object compels the sign. But it is the world of signs that is the source of our understanding of the world of transcendence. This insight is not, as James Williams fears, incompatible with a religious perspective. I have insisted on the subsistence of the sign as a signified or Idea as the model for our understanding of the immortal and the transcendent. But one may just as well claim that the existence of human language, incommensurable with animal signal-systems and inexplicable by positive science, as its efforts to reduce it to an “instinct” or a product of unconscious evolution never fail to demonstrate, is only

possible as a divine gift. That the first human word is the **name-of-God** is a hypothesis that, it seems to me, unites us all.

* * *

Neither Generative Anthropology nor my own career would be what they are without my teacher René Girard. Although our personalities and thinking styles are very different, he has always served me as a model, above all in the grandeur of his intellectual ambition and in his unshakeable confidence in the superiority of real thinking to fashionable thought-play. As the one true anthropologist, Girard is living proof that the cultural self-reflection of the Humanities offers a better model for thinking the human than the positivism of the social sciences. No one could serve as a better mimetic model for us all.

June 2, 1996