ETHNOLOGICAL "LIE" AND MYTHICAL "TRUTH"

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René Girard. *VIOLENCE AND THE SACRED, Trans. Patrick Gregory. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1977.*

> *There have always been some forms of religion in the world and wicked men who opposed them . . . Never before [however] has there been a sacrilegious conspiracy of every human talent against its Creator . . . Men of this age have prostituted genius to irreligion and, according to the admirable phrase of Saint Louis on his deathbed, "They have waged war against God with his own gifts."—De Maistre*

These words, written by De Maistre in 1809, might well have served as the epigraph of René Girard's *Violence and the Sacred,* for in this work Girard continues the attack upon all modernist interpretations of culture and society which he began in *Mensonge romantique et vérité romanesque.*[1] Modernism, for Girard, is very close to what De Maistre excoriated as "impiety" and identified as a "grand conspiracy" against both Christianity and civilization; it is a congeries of falsehoods and error: individualism, democracy, rationalism, naturalism, humanism, progress, enlightenment, and so on, most of which derive from the 18th century. Among other things, Girard wishes to expose the shallowness of these ideas and demonstrate the duplicitousness of those scholars, critics, historians, and social theorists who would sustain them by their "science." That is the negative, or critical side of his work. The positive, or synthetic side consists of the attempt to establish as truth what the Enlightenment undermined, namely, the necessity of religious belief for social health and the inevitability of social chaos without it.

Girard has now moved from literary theory to philosophy of history, which means that he writes in the apprehension of imminent apocalypse. Like De Maistre, he believes that "the death of empires will complete the demonstration begun at their birth." The crisis of Western civilization confirms the truth displayed in the fall of Rome: "As the religious principle has created everything, so has its absence destroyed everything." [De Maistre, "Essay on the Generative Principle of Political Constitutions and other Human Institutions," in Elisha Greifer, ed., *On God and Society* (Chicago: Henry Regnery, 1967), 83ff.] Girard's version of this truth, repeated constantly in *Violence and the Sacred,* is no less straight-

[1] *Paris: Grasset, 1961. Hereafter, while referring to this book as "Mensonge romantique," I shall quote from the English translation: "Deceit, Desire, and the Novel," trans. Yvonne Freccero [Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1965].*

forward: "There is no society without religion because without religion society cannot exist" [p. 221]. This law, however, is not offered as an article of faith or even a Pascalian wager in the face of the failure of "reason" to contain violence in the modern world. It is offered, rather, as a truth demonstrated by a "science" cleansed of the puerile beliefs and fatuous sentimentality of Romantics and Positivists alike: "Whether my theory proves to be true or false, it can, I believe, lay claim to being 'scientific,' if only because it allows for a rigorous definition of such terms as *divinity, ritual, rite,* and *religion*" [p. 315]. Moreover, the theory is to be approached "as one approaches any scientific hypothesis." This means that

> *the reader must ask himself whether it actually takes into account all the items it claims to cover; whether it enables him to assign to primitive institutions an origin, function, and structure that cohere to one another as well as to their overall context; whether it allows him to organize and assess the vast accumulation of ethnological data, and to do so in a truly economical manner, without recourse to "exceptions" and "aberrations." Above all, he must ask himself whether this theory applies not in single, isolated instances but in every conceivable situation.* [p. 316].

In other words, like the great apologists of Reaction who preceded him and in whose shadow he writes, Girard defends religion on "scientific" grounds. Like De Maistre and De Bonald, he recognizes that, in a secular age, religion can only be defended by a theory that is more scientific than that of the scientists.

This is the "twist" in Girard's work as a philosopher of history, and it is what separates him from the tradition of Hegel, who grounded his historical thought in metaphysics, on the one side, and from that of Nietzsche, who grounded his in aesthetics, on the other. This "twist" is what also separates him from such French anti-scientistic thinkers as Foucault, Deleuze, and Lévi-Strauss, who otherwise share his bleak perspective on modern civilization and anticipate its imminent demise with varying degrees of delight. Girard seeks to revive a tradition of French thought which is mystical precisely in the degree to which the dominant intellectual mode is rational, and which is practical in the degree to which the alternative mode is theoretical. Whence the stress on ritual at the expense of myth in the consideration of religious phenomena. For representatives of this tradition, from De Maistre, De Bonald, and Comte through Taine, Durkheim, and Bergson, "history" repeatedly demonstrates the incapacity of reason to overcome the inertial force of time-honored social practices. Girard purports to demonstrate this truth yet again, but by the "paradoxical" ploy of openly admitting that religion is based on violence and society on victimage. What rational and skeptical thinkers such as Voltaire took to be the flaw in religion and what Rousseau took to be the sin of society, Girard turns into virtues and identifies as the keys by which to unlock society's mystery and to unravel the secret of history.

I shall assume that other contributors to this discussion of Girard's work will assess its value as a heuristic device for analyzing literary texts. And I will leave it to others to assess his criticisms of Freud and Lévi-Strauss, this being a futile activity inasmuch as it simply juxtaposes one metaphysical system with others equally metaphysical. I will concentrate, instead, on the philosophy of history which Girard sets forth in the course of his argument about the nature of religion, its function in society, and the consequences of modern culture's abandonment of a religious point of view. And I will attempt to assess the ideological implications of Girard's argument, not in order to advance an ideology of my own (for this would be to engage in that "violence" of the critical act which Girard is at such pains to expose), but rather to identify the "mythic" elements in Girard's conception of his own "scientific" method. For beneath the rhetoric of Girard's demystification of the myths of modern social thought, beneath his professions of objectivity and scientific rigor, there is another myth. This myth is not that of the origin of society in religion or even that of the necessity of religion for the containment of violence in the

modern world, but rather that of a "scientific method" for analyzing social thought and capable of mediating between the "true" and the "mythic" in a purely "objective" way.

Girard's theory rests on two principal hypotheses, one having to do with the relation between religion and society, the other with the place of sacrifice in the religious system. Both hypotheses derive from an enabling distinction which is more assumed than argued for: that between force or power, on the one side, and violence, on the other. Girard construes "nature" as a field of force or power. Violence separates out of this field with the appearance of man who, alone among the creatures, is able to bring force to bear upon a *particular* object, to *repeat* this act of particularization programmatically, and thereby to give to force a *direction*. This directionality, in turn, is the origin of both society and the sacred. Society is formed by the decision of a group to direct its power against something other than its own members. The sacred takes shape when this other is perceived as "forces whose dominance over man increases or seems to increase in proportion to man's effort to master them" [p. 31]. Finally, religion takes shape when the object to be mastered is apprehended as man's own violence. The function of religion, then, is "to subdue violence, to keep it from running wild" [p. 20]. It does this by transforming violence into "vengeance" directed against an arbitrarily chosen victim whose sacrifice deflects violence outward from the group.

This purely practical function of religion must, however, remain obscured to religion itself and to religion's devotees if its purgative function is to be effective [p. 5]. Whence the difficulty of analyzing the data of religion: myths and rituals. Sacrifice is presented overtly as service to the gods or participation in a cosmic process, but its true function is to promote and sustain group integration, on the one side, and to maintain distinctions within the group, on the other.

Whence the crisis of modern society. Lacking any belief in the sacred, it lacks any basis for sacrificial rites. Lacking any basis for sacrificial rites, it lacks any principle by which to deflect violence outside the group. And lacking this last principle, it also lacks any ordering principle whatsoever.

> *"The sacrificial crisis," that is, the disappearance of the sacrificial rites, coincides with the disappearance of the difference between impure violence and purifying violence. When this difference has been effaced, purification is no longer possible and impure, contagious, reciprocal violence spreads throughout the community . . . When the religious framework of a society starts to totter, it is not exclusively or immediately the physical security of the society that is threatened; rather, the whole cultural foundation of the society is put in jeopardy. The institutions lose their vitality; the protective facade of the society gives way; social values are rapidly eroded, and the whole cultural structure seems on the verge of collapse.* [p. 49]

The crisis of modern society, then, is a crisis of "sacrificiality."

This is what is original in Girard's thesis. Ours is not a crisis of belief, of doctrine, but rather of ritual, of practice. Indeed, the crisis of belief, the rejection of transcendence and of religion, is a function of the disappearance of the sacrificial system, rather than the reverse. This is confirmed by the fact that the sacrificial system is to be found everywhere in primitive societies, regardless of the system of beliefs with which it is surrounded or the myths that are spun out to justify it. The very diversity of the mythic systems studied by ethnologists testifies to the primacy of ritual over myth, while the concealment of the arbitrary choice of the victim in rituals of purgation in all of these myths testifies to the fact that "victimage" is the secret meaning of all sacrificial rites. This theory of victimage, considered as the clue to both religion and the development of society, Girard offers as a universal explanation of history. Thus, he writes:

> *The surrogate victim theory presents, as a theory, a distinct superiority over the theory of evolution. The inaccessible character of the generative event is*

not merely an obstacle unrelated to the theory, an aspect that contributes nothing of positive value; rather, it is an essential part of that theory, something we cannot do without. In order to retain its structuring influence the generative violence must remain hidden; misapprehension is indispensible to all religious or postreligious structuring. And the hidden nature of the event corresponds to the researchers' inability to attribute a satisfactory function to religious practices. My theory is the first to offer an explanation of the primordial role that religion plays in primitive societies, as well as of man's ignorance of this role. [p. 310]

In short, the obscurity of the data is essential to its status as evidence.

But how has Girard been able to penetrate this obscurity? Here we raise an important question of method. At the basis of Girard's approach to the data of cultural history there lies a theory of the relationship between myth and art. This relationship can be expressed in the following formula: art makes manifest the truth concealed in myth. This means that while we must read mythical texts metaphorically, we must read literary texts literally. This move reverses the premise of most modern cultural criticism, which is to read literature in a figurative manner and mythic texts literally. Thus, Girard criticizes those critics who expend much time and energy "exposing" the sexuality supposedly embedded in Greek tragedies when that sexuality appears on the very surface of the text, as its manifest content. And he is equally short with analysts of mythical texts who triumphantly reveal the cosmological theories, the incestuous, patricidal, and social themes, which are their manifest contents. All the great literary texts, Girard insists, say precisely what they mean. They need no interpretation. They not only interpret themselves, they do so openly. Moreover, they provide the interpretive principles which we should use to unlock the secrets of mythical texts, the meanings which lie concealed beneath their manifestly sexual, natural, and social thematic contents. Religious discourse can never speak directly about its true object, for its power resides in its concealment of the social function of religion itself. Literary discourse, by contrast, can only speak directly about its true object; for the purpose of all "truly great" art is to reveal the truth of religion.

This latter position was what Girard argued for in his earlier book, *Mensonge romantique et vérité romanesque,* his study of the modern novel. The manifest content of all novels, Girard maintained, was desire, but desire alienated, deflected from its true object, which is God. This means, he informs us, that desire is always mediated, displaced or cathected onto some worldly object. The choice of this object is not, however, arbitrary; it depends upon the operation of a model for the desiring subject. Thus, for example, Don Quixote desires to be the perfect knight on the example of Amadis of Gaul, pursues this end or seeks this goal because Amadis pursued it, because a model human being pursued it. And so too for all the heroes of "truly great novels," such as Julian Sorel, Madame Bovary, Marcel, and Dostoyevski's protagonists. But in the course of these quests, the heroes are progressively disabused of the ideality of any merely worldly object and turn, in the end, to the realization that what they had originally pursued was only a false simulacrum of a transcendental object. The worldly Beatrice gives way to a heavenly Beatrice which in turn gives way to the Godhead beyond her. Which is why all the "truly great novels," from *Don Quixote* to *The Past Recaptured* end "romantically," that is to say, in the "banality" of a Christian revelation, or "the conversion in death" of the hero.

The "sophistication" of the modern critic keeps him from crediting these endings, Girard argues; and as a result, the critic reads them "figuratively," as metaphors of the creative act of the writer himself, as metaphors of writing. Girard insists that these endings must be understood literally. They are literal renderings of the single truth which Christianity presents in a parabolic figure: "If the seed does not die after it has been sown, it will remain alone, but if it dies it will bear much fruit" [John, 12:24]. This verse, Girard tells us, "could serve as an epigraph of all novelistic conclusions." And this because:

Aztec drawing, 16th century

> *Repudiation of a human mediator and renunciation of deviated transcendency inevitably call for symbols of vertical transcendency whether the author is Christian or not. All the great novelists respond to this fundamental appeal but sometimes they manage to hide from themselves the meaning of their response.* [Deceit, Desire, p. 312]

In other words, the image of "conversion in death" is not to be read figuratively, as a metaphor of hope or as an emblem of authorial self-celebration; it is to be read literally, as a banality refurbished with the truth of its conventional appearance.

Thus Girard remarks of Proust that he "masks the true face of novelistic experience with romantic commonplaces but he gives the stale symbols a profound and secret brilliance." The usual pattern of reading is denied; the truth is on the surface, the superficies are relegated to the depths where they belong. In Proust's work "symbols of immortality and resurrection appear in a purely aesthetic context and only surreptitiously do they transcend the banal meaning to which romanticism reduces them. They are not operetta princes; they are true princes disguised as operetta princes" [*Ibid.*, p. 312]. We may, therefore, figuratively specify Girard's conception of the task of the critic of "truly great novels"; it is to pierce through the *apparently* princely disguises of true princes in order to reveal the royalty which these disguises signify on their surfaces. This "royalty" in turn is nothing other than

the religious vision of a "reconciliation between the individual and the world, between man and the sacred" [*Ibid.*, p. 308]. All this is missed by critics who remain victims of the false distinction between the aesthetic and the religious experiences. If we put aside this prejudice, Girard concludes, "we would at last realize that Christian symbolism is universal for it alone is able to give form to the experience of the novel" [*Ibid.*, p. 310].

Thus Girard reveals the "novelistic truth" obscured by "romantic lies." This truth, it can be seen, is nothing but the reverse of that "pride" which Romanticism displays in its misreading of all "truly great novels" and which it projects onto these novels in perceptions either of the figurative nature of their conclusions or the failures of these conclusions by their authors. This "pride" is Girard's own object of attack in *Mensonge romantique et vérité romanesque*. "The novelists themselves," he writes, "confirm what we have been asserting all the way through this book: the sickness [of their heroes] is rooted in pride and the universe of the novel is a universe of people possessed." And he adds: "The conclusion of novels is also the conclusion of our present investigation" [*Ibid.*, p. 307]. His own truth is the truth he has found in the novels; or rather it is the one truth that both art and religion attest, that the escape from pride and its killing effects is by way of that "conversion in death" which holds promise of a new life on the morrow.

I have dwelt on *Mensonge romantique et vérité romanesque* in order to highlight the *modus operandi* of *Violence and the Sacred*. Girard's truths are always the antitheses of those "lies" which an "enlightened" humanity propagates out of pride in its own achievement. In order to find the truth, it is necessary only to identify a lie, turn it inside out, and assert the truth of this reversed image. This tactic is especially effective for the criticism of those theorists, literary and social, who aspire to the same kind of monistic cosmologies to which Girard himself aspires. It is no accident that mirroring, doubling, repetition, and displacement are crucial concepts in Girard's critical economy. His enemies are mirror images of himself.

But this tactic presupposes the same monism that it attacks; one can enter into a Manichaean combat confidently only if one assumes that one's own position is grounded in an absolute truth. In such combats, the theist and idealist have a distinct advantage over the atheist and materialist. And this because, for the former, every dialectic is always only an apparent one; the two sides of any question always testify to a single truth transcendent to them both. For the latter, by contrast, every dialectic is real, but always remains alienated from the truth of being that it is supposed to disclose. And this is as true of Marx as it is of Lévi-Strauss or Freud. For Girard, the dialectic of culture is a sustained testimony, on the negative as well as the positive side, to the pre-existence of the sacred with respect to the social. By identifying the sacred with violence, he not only cuts the ground from under all those critics of the sacred who identify it with a false promise of peace, love, and compassion; he locates the origin of the dialectic in the sacred itself.

This makes Girard's claim to scientific objectivity all the more problematical. He does not seem to know that "rigorous definition" is a necessary but by no means sufficient criterion of scientificity. Nor does he seem to know that the very fact that his theory "takes into account all the items it claims to cover," assigns "to primitive institutions an origin, function, and structure," and "applies not in single, isolated instances but in every conceivable situation," marks it less as science than as metaphysics. The fact that his principal competitors, Freud and Lévi-Strauss, are guilty of such comprehensiveness in no way justifies his own holistic aspirations. Like Freud and Lévi-Strauss, Girard explains too much. What is lacking, in his work as in theirs, are any criteria of falsifiability, any specification of the kind of data one would have to produce in order to disprove his contentions about the nature of religion, society, sacrifice, myths, and so forth. There is nothing about culture and society that Girard's theories can*not* predict. In this respect, they are exactly like any religious system or any metaphysical one. This does not make them useless, but it is fatal to the claim of scientificity.

So too with respect to Girard's claim to have accounted for the data of religion

presented by ethnologists whose interpretations he brings under question, from Frazer to Lévi-Strauss. He does not seem to recognize that "data" have no status as evidence apart from the conceptual frameworks which have constituted them as such. The fact that he is using ethnological, rather than literary texts does not mean that his claims about the nature of religion, culture, and society are more scientific than if he had based them on novels or lyric poetry. His are interpretations of "data" already passed through another interpretative grid. As such, Girard's theories tell us more about the "literature of ethnology" than they do about that "culture" which is the ethnologist's supposed object of study. Above all, they tell us that general theories of culture and society, especially those raised on the foundation of a binary opposition of concepts, can be interpreted in a sense precisely opposite to that given in their original formulation. What appears as error or falsehood in one can appear as truth and fact in another. Thus, for example, Girard makes a convincing case for an interpretation of Freud's Oedipus complex as an example of triangular desire and argues convincingly that Lévi-Strauss's incest rules may derive from prohibitions as well as the reverse. But such reversals are striking only if one has already accepted the theories under attack as authoritative interpretations of the data they control.

So too with Girard's theories of culture. "All religious rituals spring from the surrogate victim," he writes; "and all the great institutions of mankind, both secular and religious, spring from ritual. Such is the case, as we have seen, with political power, legal institutions, medicine, the theater, philosophy and anthropology itself" [p. 306]. But suppose we turn this assertion upside down or reverse it? Would anything be lost by the assertion that the surrogate victim springs from ritual, or that political power requires it, or that Girard's own critical method requires such a victim and that this victim is nothing other than the theories he is attacking? The answer must be that we would lose nothing at all. The "data" would still be there, in all their concreteness and determinateness, consciousness would still enjoy the effect of having explained them all, and with the requisite economy and elimination of all isolated cases. When it is a matter of applying holistic theories of culture or society based on the interplay of binary oppositions, it does not matter which end of the interpretive stick we pick up first. The error lies in the assumption that we are engaged in something more than a mental experiment, a manipulation of data to see how many *different* interpretations they can bear. The utility of such experiments is purely pragmatic; their truth value resides in the degree to which they confirm or disconfirm ideological positions held before the experiments themselves are undertaken. Their utility runs out at the point where we are forced to admit as truths those judgments which on moral or aesthetic grounds, we wish to deny.

Take, for example, the case of Nazi Germany. Here surely is a society which meets Girard's criteria of healthiness. It was surely transcendent in its aspirations, distinguished in its own way between force and violence, possessed the scapegoat mechanism, and orchestrated social action in terms of a hierarchical system of differentiation based on ritual sacrifice. Is Nazi Germany then to be taken as a model solution for the problems of "modernity"? It certainly envisioned itself as such a solution.

Girard would no doubt respond that Nazi Germany was not truly transcendent in its aspirations or had not sufficiently displaced its sacrificial rites onto non-human surrogate victims or had not sufficiently distinguished between force, violence, and vengeance. All of which would be to condemn Nazism for its lapse of good taste or want of tact in placing its myth before its rituals. Actually, of course, as we can deduce from Girard's remarks about Christianity in *Mensonge romantique,* he would probably have recourse to a distinction between truly creative sacrificial systems, such as Christianity, and failed or flawed systems, such as Nazism. But this would be to crack the unitary shell of his own general theory of the relation between sacrificial rites and social order, weaken his argument that all cultures are the same at base and that all derive their integrity from the choice of *some* surrogate victim in preference to none at all.

Girard does not deal with Christianity in *Violence and the Sacred,* although he

promises to do so in a future book. It is not difficult to predict the general lines of his handling of it. It will be accorded a special status by virtue of its unique sublimation of the sacrificial system in the sacrament of the Eucharist. Once this special status is granted, it will become necessary to stipulate the criteria by which it can be justified. These criteria can only reside in the Christian myth of a redemption of life after death in which heavenly rewards are based on the same system of hierarchical relationships which it is religion's function to establish here on earth. And we shall be close to that embrace of medievalism which has been the first refuge of every believer in order at the expense of innovation since the Enlightenment.

Such are the ideological implications that I draw from my reading of Girard's text. This is to say nothing about the value of Girard's theories in suggesting new and illuminating readings of literary texts. His reactionary perspective permits him to perceive elements and structures of literary works which must remain hidden to any "progressivist" reader, and as such it is a healthy corrective to the prejudices of "enlightened" readings. But it must be pointed out that it is one thing to interpret literary texts and quite another to purport to construct a comprehensive philosophy of history and theory of society, laying claim to the authority of science, in the way that Girard has done. This is not because literature inhabits a realm of fantasy and history is comprised of facts, or because art is one thing and society another. It is because our interpretations of history and society can claim no more authority than our interpretations of literature can claim.

Girard shares with old-fashioned historians and some Marxists the conviction that while literary texts require interpretation, the historical contexts in which they originally appeared are unproblematical as objects of study, or are problematical only insofar as historians have not looked at them with sufficient care. What this view obscures is the extent to which history and society are not present to us as putative objects of perception, even in the way that a text is, but are always known only mediatively, by way of other texts in the form of memoires, documents, monuments, and historical accounts themselves, which themselves come bearing their own interpretations. It is mistaken, then, to refer to the context in order to illuminate the text, as if the former were of an extra-textual, more concrete and easily discernible order than the latter. And neither the one nor the other presents itself to us in the way that natural entities do. Natural objects do not come attended by their own interpretations of themselves, in the way that every cultural object in the semiotic series does. This is why there can be no science of history or society of the sort that we can have of nature. Or at least, there can be no such science until we have a science of texts themselves, the prospect of which seems unlikely inasmuch as every interpretation of a cultural object seems to carry us further away from, rather than closer to, any determination of its "nature."

This is the best argument for an aestheticist approach to cultural and social texts. In that way lies our only hope of transcending ideology. We shall surely not transcend it through science. But while there is much play in Girard's style, there is nothing playful about his enterprise. He would no doubt have the same contempt for an aestheticist approach to the interpretation of culture or society that he has for Nietzsche's methods. He is not interested in health, but redemption. And he is willing to sacrifice everything in "modern" culture to achieve it. There are no halfway measures for this philosopher of "mediated desire" and "surrogate victims." This son of Provence is a worthy late descendant of the victors over the devotees of *eros* whom they displaced.

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