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RENÉ GIRARD

EVOLUTION AND CONVERSION

DIALOGUES ON THE ORIGINS OF CULTURE

With PIERPAOLO ANTONELLO and JOÃO CEZAR DE CASTRO ROCHA

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Contents

Acknowledgements vi
Foreword *Michael Kirwan* vii

Introduction: 'One Long Argument from the Beginning to the End' *Pierpaolo Antonello and João Cezar de Castro Rocha* 1

1 The Life of the Mind 13

2 'A Theory by Which to Work': The Mimetic Mechanism 41

3 The Symbolic Species 69

4 Dialogues and Criticism: From Frazer to Lévi-Strauss 97

5 Method, Evidence and Truth 113

6 The Scandal of Christianity 141

7 Modernity, Postmodernity and Beyond 167

Chronology of Girard's Life 191
List of Girard's Publications 194
Index 196

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FOREWORD

The publication in 2008 of *Evolution and Conversion* came during a momentous phase in René Girard's career. Three years earlier he had been declared 'immortal', that is, an elected member of the Académie Francaise, a marvellous personal accolade, and a potent recognition of Professor Girard's intellectual achievement; gratifying no doubt, given the unevenness with which his 'mimetic theory' had been critically received, both in France and elsewhere.

With René Girard's death ten years later, in November 2015, another marker has been reached, at which we acknowledge the loss of a man of 'immense intellectual holiness' and undertake the task of assessing his theory in the round. Girard himself cheerfully agrees that there is an obsessional, 'hedgehog' quality to his investigations: *mimetic desire* and *scapegoats,* as the Introduction to *Evolution and Conversion* makes clear, are the two 'big things' which concern him.

What does the hedgehog tell us? Girard draws attention to the imitative or *mimetic* nature of human desire, by which we are at once attracted to and repelled from one another, as if caught in a gravitational field. Our longing for what the other *has* and what the other *is* binds us to that person by a chain of fascinated loathing. We know this from the master voices of the modern age: Shakespeare, Hegel, Dostoevsky, Proust, as well as countless examples from our everyday lives. Whatever the Romantics would have us believe about the innocence of our desire, there is within us an enormous potential for rivalry and outright aggression, simply because we desire in the way that we do.

Girard came to an awareness of this disturbing home-truth when writing his first book in 1961, a study of five key European novelists (*Desire, Deceit and the Novel*). However it was *La Violence et le sacré* (*Violence and the Sacred*) which attracted widespread attention: a famous review from *Le Monde* declared that 'the year 1972 should be marked with an asterisk in the annals of the humanities'. *La Violence et le sacré* draws on anthropology, Greek tragedy and mythology to explore further the notion of 'mimetic desire': whereas the previous work on the European novel had drawn attention to the destabilizing and destructive effects of desire, the latest

research enquired into how social groups manage to contain and counteract this destabilization. How do communities hold together and resist the forces which can cause them to disintegrate?

The disturbing answer offered by Girard is that a society achieves equilibrium, if only in the short term, by transferring its aggression upon a figure or group of figures who are part of the society but marginal to it. The victims are either expelled or destroyed, and the community comes now to be at peace with itself. This process of identifying and marginalizing a victim is what Girard calls the 'scapegoat mechanism'. *La Violence et le sacré* goes even further in relating this process of exclusion to religious beliefs and practices. Put simply, Professor Girard asserts that the function of religion, at least in pre-state societies where a justice system does not exist, is precisely to contain and control the violence which would otherwise engulf and destroy a community. Beneath the practice of 'sacrifice', which involves the deliberate killing of a human or animal victim, lies the community's fear of its own violence, and the necessity of doing something to assuage it. The argument of the book can be summed up in one quotation from *La Violence et le sacré*: 'violence is the heart and secret soul of the sacred'.

We have, therefore, a general, multidisciplinary theory which seeks to explore the relationships between religion, cultural origins and violence. Over 50 years Girard has been asking three big questions: What draws societies together? What causes them to disintegrate? And he asks, along with so many other contemporary theorists: What is the contribution of religion to all this?

It is hard to think of a body of research which has so wholeheartedly engaged with the principal concerns of our time. *La Violence et le sacré* was greeted with widespread interest, though Girard's achievements were for the most part overshadowed by those of more prominent postmodern theorists. In 1978 he published what remains the most extended exposition of his theory, *Des Choses cachées depuis la foundation du monde* (*Things Hidden since the Foundation of the World*). Essentially a record of conversations between Girard and two psychologists, the book has a threefold structure: cultural anthropology, biblical reflection and 'interdividual psychology'. One may surmise that the middle third of the book, stressing the superiority of the Christian revelation ('the logos of John') over philosophy ('the logos of Heraclitus'), was a paradox too far for those who had gone along with Girard's apparent unmasking of religion in *La Violence et le sacré*. The increasingly 'evangelistic' tone of much of his subsequent writing reinforced this unease, and Girard's ideas receded from the mainstream.

It is now widely accepted that theories of secularisation which once seemed to be all-explanatory are now in crisis: in the first place, because of religion's persistence, and in the second place because of the virtual impossibility of policing the *cordon sanitaire* between 'religion' and 'the secular' which Enlightenment modernity has tried to establish. Hent de Vries acknowledges 'the "living-on" of religion beyond its prematurely announced and celebrated deaths': to track this afterlife, 'new methodological tools and sensibilities are needed'.[1] In an axiom that could have come straight from the pen of Girard, he further declares: *no religion without (at least some) violence, no violence without (at least some) religion*.

It is precisely these tools and sensibilities which both the modernist grand narratives and the postmodernist refusal of those grand narratives have been unable to deliver. One reason for this failure has been an overemphasis on *difference* and *otherness*. These are either seen as threatening, or as qualities to be affirmed and celebrated for their own sake. Girard begins at the other end, alerting us to the problem of *sameness* or *undifferentiation*. It is when differences are eroded or effaced that problems arise. The invocation of Charles Darwin at the beginning of each chapter of *Evolution and Conversion* indicates the scale and ambition of Girard's thinking. If there is a 'brutalization' of data in his approach (as has been alleged), it is because he is in agreement with the literary critic Terry Eagleton, who takes issue with postmodernism's 'holophobia'. 'At just the point that we have begun to think small, history has begun to act big',[2] and we need to think ambitiously in order to deal with the grand narratives in which we are entangled. There is a place for hedgehogs once again.

Evolution and Conversion is intended as a reassessment of *Things Hidden since the Foundation of the World,* 30 years on, with attention to unresolved problems, and an opportunity to respond to critics. This is exactly right, and it is highly appropriate that the same format should be used: René Girard in a three-way conversation with sympathetic interlocutors. There is much to re-examine: the question of the disappearance or decline of religion, for example, now looks very different than it did in 1978. Most importantly, in *Things Hidden* Girard dismissed 'sacrifice' as a pagan notion which should have no place in Christian life or thought. As a result, he suggested that the Letter to the Hebrews, because of its dependence on a sacrificial understanding of Christianity (according to which Jesus is portrayed as the archetypal High Priest), really should have no place in the New Testament. Girard has since modified this view considerably, repenting of his rash 'scapegoating', both of 'sacrifice' and of Hebrews.

This is the most obvious 'revision' of the 1978 text: what *Evolution and Conversion* makes clear are the other ways in which, over 30 years, mimetic theory has matured, and its fruitfulness become more apparent, even since the initial excitement of Girard's groundbreaking works in the 1970s. We can mention, for example, the interest Girard has shown of late in the Indian *vedas,* specifically the *brahmanas,* as illustrative of the sacrificial mechanism. Another area where mimetic theory seems suddenly to be relevant is in its congruence with current developments in the behavioural and neurosciences (specifically: Meltzoff and Moore on infant 'intersubjective' development; Rizzolati *et al.* on 'mirror neurons'). We may note in passing the interest Girard shows in Richard Dawkins' work on mimetics: is it possible that a conversation between this unlikely pair of thinkers might be a way beyond the 'culture wars' of scientific secularity versus religion, in which Dawkins is such a prominent combatant?

Perhaps most significant of all: this is (I think) the first time Girard's theory is formally compared to Charles Darwin's theory of natural selection, an analogy which is underlined with a quotation from Darwin at the head of each chapter. In both thinkers we are dealing with a 'hedgehog' intuition which is decidedly suspect because it races ahead of the available evidence. Rowan Williams acknowledges their similarity in the Foreword to a more extended investigation of the Darwinian analogy.[3] Each scheme contains 'a powerful element of heuristic myth, tested not by "discoveries", but by the resourcefulness of the narrative in making sense of where we are'. And it is this quality, no doubt, which gives Girardian theory its ability 'to inspire and exasperate in almost equal measure'!

Evolution and Conversion was not Girard's last work. This was to be *Achever Clausewitz* (translated into English as *Battling to the End*), an unsettling, eccentric book in which Girard confirms his analysis of mimetic desire through the thought and experience of two prominent nineteenth-century Germans: the military theorist Carl von Clausewitz, and the Romantic poet Friedrich Hölderlin. Their message is not an optimistic one. According to Girard, global mimetic pressure and violence have brought our planet to a tipping-point. Our situation is best described, firstly, in Clausewitz's notion of the 'escalation' or 'paroxysm' to extremes, and secondly, in the apocalyptic passages of the Bible. The dark tone of *Achever Clausewitz*, no doubt betraying post-9/11 anxieties, has led Girardian commentators to discuss whether this is an 'apocalyptic' turn in his work, or merely an underlining of themes that were always present.

Without wanting to ignore or sideline *Achever Clausewitz*, I think there is good reason, nevertheless, for regarding *Evolution and Conversion* as Girard's 'final' work. There is a sense of rounding-off, of consciously presenting mimetic theory in its broadly finished shape - even as its immense fecundity in all kinds of areas becomes evident. It is as if mimetic theory is settling into final shape, with its 'inspiring' strengths and its 'exasperating' limitations now laid out once and for all. The title itself, balancing as it were the biological and the spiritual, matches the structure of Girard's own convictions.

This is why the notion of 'conversion' is crucial to Girard's scheme, and not just a dramatic figure of speech. In Girard's first book, he charts the intense experience of intellectual and moral transformation which comes about in the life and work of his chosen novelists (Cervantes, Stendhal, Flaubert, Proust, Dostoevsky) as they 'discover' mimetic desire – an experience which, for some, though not for all, had religious implications. While preparing this work, in 1959, Girard himself experienced a conversion parallel to that which he detected in the novelists, and this led him to return to the Catholic Church after a long absence. As the Introduction (p. 8) puts it, 'conversion is not simply an existential event, but an *epistemic* one'. It comprises an explicit critique of the autonomous subject, a rejection of methodological individualism in the social sciences and of a false dichotomy of subject and object. For mimetic theory, the personal experience of the knower is implicated in any investigation. This leads us to characterize mimetic theory as a 'spiral', viewing human history as an oscillation between *evolution* and *conversion,* between permanence and progression (p. 9).

The inseparability of the intellectual and religious aspects of 'conversion' is decisive here: it also why the 'immense intellectual holiness' for which Girard was commended by a liberation theologian in 1990 is such an apt one. The term encapsulates something of his warm generosity of spirit, as well as the courageous integrity with which he has expounded an unfashionable and (to many minds) eccentric theory. It is gratifying that so many of the obituaries of Girard acknowledged this quality in him.

However, the phrase 'intellectual holiness' also tells us something about the content of this theory, and not just the style and character of its proponent. The intensely personal nature of conversion is one of the reasons why *Evolution and Conversion* is an important part of the Girardian 'canon'. It takes seriously the role of intellectual autobiography in Girard's method. Just as in his readings of Shakespeare, Dostoevsky and Camus, the work

and the life are allowed to 'read' one another, so Girard's theory must be appreciated in terms of a specific intellectual journey (what the Introduction calls 'one long argument from the beginning to the end'). This journey is also one of the most dramatic attempts in modern times to align the intellectual struggle for truth, and the adventure which is gospel faith. As one critic describes it, though with some degree of irony: with René Girard 'the Kingdom of God has become scientific'.

Michael Kirwan

Notes

1. Hent de Vries and Laurence E. Sullivan (eds), *Political Theologies: Public Religions in a Post-secular World* (Fordham, NY: Fordham University Press, 2006), p. 7. See also Hent de Vries, *Religion and Violence: Philosophical Perspectives from Kant to Derrida* (Johns Hopkins University Press, MD, 2002).
2. Terry Eagleton, *After Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), pp. 72–3.
3. Rowan Williams, 'Foreword' to Pierpaolo Antonello and Paul Gifford (eds), *Can We Survive our Origins?* (East Lansing, MI: Michigan State University Press, 2015), pp. xi–xii. This collection of essays, and its companion volume, *How We Became Human*, are the outcome of a series of conferences in Cambridge, UK and Stanford which sought to align the two 'heuristic myths' of Girard and Darwin.

INTRODUCTION: 'ONE LONG ARGUMENT FROM THE BEGINNING TO THE END'

Pierpaolo Antonello and João Cezar de Castro Rocha

> Some of my critics have said, 'Oh, he is a good observer, but he has no power of reasoning!' I do not think that this can be true, for the *Origin of Species* is one long argument from the beginning to the end, and it has convinced not a few able men.
>
> (Charles Darwin, *Autobiography*)[1]

Roberto Calasso, in *La Rovina di Kasch* (*The Ruin of Kasch*), says that René Girard

> is one of the last hedgehogs alive today, in the sense of the metaphor which Isaiah Berlin derived from Archilocus' verse: 'The fox knows many things, but the hedgehog knows only one big thing.' The 'one big thing' that Girard knows has a name: the scapegoat.[2]

Calasso's observation is correct but partial, since Girard knows another big thing, and its name is 'mimetic desire'. Over a period of almost 50 years of theoretical exercise, on these two hypotheses, Girard has built a whole intellectual ground of work, 'one long argument' beginning with the origins of culture, and – moving from archaic myths and rituals to Greek Tragedy, from the Judaeo-Christian scriptures to medieval texts of persecutions, from Shakespeare's plays to modern novels – ending on the brink of the apocalyptic feeling emerging in our postmodern and globalized society. This volume attempts to reconstruct, through systematic dialogues, this long argumentative discourse that Girard has woven through the years, starting from his first intellectual steps in France, where he was born in 1923, up to his most recent theorizations on anthropology, philosophy, literary criticism and Christianity. Our aim is to propose a synthesis of his enquiry, trying to spark new theoretical suggestions, new critical challenges and interpretative

directions, always under the explanatory umbrella of those two things that Girard knows better than others: the mimetic nature of desire and the scapegoat mechanism.

Stanford, May 1995

The idea for this book, and our collaboration in it, was born on a precise occasion in Girard's intellectual biography: the conclusion of his long career in teaching at Stanford, in 1995, where we met for the first time. We sensed it was a propitious opportunity to try to recount the life and the intellectual journey of one of the most original, challenging and interesting of European thinkers, especially when interest in his work seemed to be rekindling after the wide discussion stirred in the 1970s by the publication of *Violence and the Sacred* (1972) and *Things Hidden since the Foundation of the World* (1978), and a subsequent decline in later years. In a period in which the postmodern thinking has gradually exhausted its initial impact and theoretical reach, Girard's theory was still proposing its challenge, as the last 'great narrative' available 'on the market' – lacking the widespread scepticism of many competing theories in the humanities. And we think that time has proved us right. While theoretical trends, prominent in the last decades, are only able to appeal to academic audiences, Girard's theory is becoming more and more relevant for the understanding of contemporary social issues and historical dynamics, as well as the inextricable link between human nature and victimization, world religions and violence, Christianity and modernity. The return of the 'real', the emerging of a so-called 'post-secular' society (to quote Habermas), the search for forms of ethical universalism in current theoretical trends, are all signs which point in a direction Girard has always followed with resolution throughout his intellectual career.

It has been our purpose to re-evaluate with Girard the main tenets of his theory, starting with a reassessment of the most systematic of his works: *Things Hidden since the Foundation of the World*. We wanted also to reconsider theoretical and methodological problems left unsolved, and to stimulate further analysis on issues only partially explored by Girard in his books.[3] Furthermore, we allowed him to reply to the criticisms made of him over the years, trying to stimulate a discussion which could reproduce, in dialogic form, the persuasiveness of his argumentative style. Also, convinced as we are that any intellectual discourse cannot and should not be separated

from an 'existential' implication (above all if the notion of conversion maintains an essential role, as it does for Girard), we opted to introduce our theoretical discussions with an autobiographical account of Girard's life – and in fact this book could be surely considered, on the part of Girard, as a sort of intellectual autobiography. Of course, we do not believe that the life of a thinker can be read solely by matching it with his or her work or ideas, creating a sort of self-fulfilling prophecy. Events are always highly contingent. However, choosing to recount one's personal history means believing that life itself is intrinsically part of this 'long argument'. Darwin's decision to board the *Beagle* 'as an adventure' is not a sufficient reason for the construction and refinement of his 'long argument', but it is certainly a necessary one.

Rethinking mimesis

'Girard's cathedral', writes Jean-Pierre Dupuy, is a 'pyramid lying on its vertex, i.e. the mimetic hypothesis'.[4] The fascination of Girard's theory, among other things, stems from its immense explanatory power based on a very parsimonious genetic principle: *imitation* (in particular reciprocal imitation of desire among human beings). This concept had a very contradictory reception in the scientific field, possibly owing to the methodological individualism (of idealistic and romantic origins) which has often biased the ideological premises of many in both the hard and the social sciences. Alongside this, there has been the general assumption, within the humanities, which sees *originality* as the central element that defines artistic practice and authorship. However, recent scientific theorization on imitation – such as Richard Dawkins' memetics, but above all Vittorio Gallese and Giacomo Rizzolati's research on the so-called 'mirror neurons' – is now proving how much Girard's hypothesis anticipated what is bound to become a new paradigm in behavioural and neurosciences.[5] It also reveals how he went way beyond these scientific hypotheses in understanding the complexity and the intricacies of the psychological and social ramifications of imitative patterns in the human mind and our societies, and above all in the constitution and development of what is most distinctively human: desire.

In Girard's account desire is always generated by the imitation of the desire of others, who then function as models. If the social structure does

not distribute the subjects and their models into different social, symbolic, temporal or spatial domains, the reciprocal imitation of desires tends to become antagonistic, a mimesis of rivalry, with potential conflict between subjects and models, caused by the convergent acquisition of a common coveted object. From this simple hypothesis all the different psychological configurations, connected to identity-definition and inter-individual dynamics, can be deduced – as well as the harmful social repercussions of antagonistic imitation when it becomes a multiplying matrix of conflicts that may develop into a systemic runaway, triggering unanimous reciprocal hatred and violence at the collective level.

While in his previous books Girard essentially underscored the negative consequences of mimetic desire (i.e. its acquisitive and antagonistic dimension), here, in these dialogues, he accesses, more consciously, the emancipative characters of imitation and the phenomenological status of the object as a focal centre of interest for the desiring subjects. The object is a focal point for contest and rivalry, but it can also become a means by which rivalry can be soothed – a moment of 'reality check' during the strenuous conflicts between competitive rivals.[6] Moreover, although Girard has particularly stressed the 'inauthenticity' of radical self-determination, and the mediated nature of our desire, the latter is nonetheless the main instrument human beings have to explore and to make sense of the world, to acquire existential and intellectual knowledge. Desire is 'the first seed of the mind', as we can read in the *Rig-Veda* (10.129.4).

In theoretical terms, what it is important to stress is the *double-bind* nature of mimetic dynamics: imitation is a *semi-instinctual* communication structure which can function as a multiplying vector both of conflicts and of symbolic-cultural transmission. The cognitive and behavioural development of the human mind and our culture is tied to the imitative capabilities for which, however, we pay a high price, for this very mimetic pattern also multiplies conflicting desires, triggering reciprocal rivalries and violence. Actually, this *double-bind* structure pervades Girard's explanatory system, both in reference to individual cognition and to sociohistorical development. In Girard's hypotheses the same principle accounts for the positive as well as the negative traits of a given phenomenon. Imitation breeds conflictual results, but is also the basis of any cultural transmission; the other may act as a pedagogical model but she or he may also become a rival. In Girard's anthropological recount, the sacred is what controls collective violence, but is itself also based on a 'pharmacological' use of violence. This is indeed one of the intellectual challenges of the mimetic theory: it forces us to think,

not in a dialectical sense, as in a system of clear-cut oppositions, but by antinomies, that is, by conciliating polarized elements of phenomena which inevitably appear paradoxical, because they are generated by a single, yet ambivalent, basic cognitive mechanism: imitation.

Evolution and victimization

Since Girard's reception has been primarily gained through its discussion in literary (in the USA) and philosophical (in continental Europe) circles, it is easy to forget that Girard sees mimetic theory as one of the few anthropological hypotheses that tries to explain social and cultural events on a *genetic* and *generative* level. Those anthropologists, historians, sociologists and natural scientists who look for social theories compatible with scientific premises to explain the emergence of culture or religion (which for Girard amount to the same thing), eventually end up winding themselves back to Durkheim's theorizations or are left empty-handed. Twentieth-century theorization has in fact progressively expelled any consideration of the origins and the genesis of culture and institutions, considered as a totally unattainable moment in human history.

Despite its limits of formulation (essentially owing to Girard's formation in the humanities), mimetic theory could surely contribute to this discussion, by posing a genetic principle that explains, quite economically in generative terms, the emergence of human culture. Therefore, in Chapter 3 'The Symbolic Species', we intended to show why it is not totally hazardous to follow Michel Serres' view and consider Girard as the 'Darwin of the human sciences'.[7] Starting from the premises set out in *Violence and the Sacred* (1972) and *Things Hidden since the Foundation of the World* (1978), Girard sketched a hypothesis, based on ethnological and ethological premises, which defines a base mechanism, and a possible ur-scenario of human cultural origins and development. His effort was probably naïve on a methodological level, but courageous and full of potential on a theoretical one. However, the subject has not been further investigated in subsequent books, and it is essentially limited to the first section of *Things Hidden,* titled 'Fundamental anthropology'.

We have thought it worthwhile to take up the issue once again, connecting it with further considerations on human ethological and cognitive-symbolical development, in an effort to further explicate Girard's hypothesis. We are obviously aware that such an all-encompassing theory would need

broader discussion and a wider spectrum of research; nonetheless, this new discussion allows Girard better to underline the realistic and scientific contours of his research, the evolutionary continuity of the natural and the cultural, and to propose a new anthropological paradigm. This paradigm may explain some of the apparently paradoxical features of cultural and technical human development such as the emergence of taboos and prohibitions, the birth of agriculture, domestication of animals and the giving of gifts.

In particular, for this purpose, Girard resorted to the second of his great insights: the scapegoat or victimary mechanism. In their slow evolutionary ascent, proto-humans 'found' in this mechanism a 'tool' for controlling the mimetic escalations of interspecific violence, when imitation (stronger in humans than in animals) diffuses dynamics of reciprocal contention and revenge in a given social group. Channelling collective violence and thrusting it upon a single individual, deeming him or her responsible for any crisis the social group is undergoing (caused by scarcities, epidemics, infighting, etc.) allows the community to keep systemic violence at bay, and to reconcile its members after the collective, unanimous expulsion of this random victim, who is perceived as the cause of the crisis, but who is actually a *scapegoat,* sacrificed to re-establish social equilibrium. This 'pharmacological' preconscious mechanism is so precious for the community itself that very often the victim, and his or her killing, become sacralized. Out of the 'ritualization' of this proto-event (because imitation is also, but not exclusively, *repetition*), according to Girard, *all the processes of social structuring* emerge: taboos, norms, institutions, as well as the *mythical* recount of this 'original' event. This interpretation of sacrificial processes as the principal force in the development of human culture is nowhere mechanistic, but it suggests a systemic event that is contingent but necessary (as Monod would have put it).[8] It was contingent, because it was 'accidentally found' by primitive communities, and used as the most efficient form of channelling and controlling interspecific violence. And it was necessary, because it provided the *highest fitness* to the primitive communities, enabling the development of complex symbolic forms (foremost among them rites, myths and language) and the institutions that protected them from the growing complexities and dimensions of social groups, and offering new cognitive and technical instruments for human evolution.[9] This may sound too reductionistic an approach, or a highly conjectural one, although we might bear in mind that every new explanatory paradigm profits from a

preliminary 'brutalization' of data, especially if it intends to provide such a vast historical analysis, with all the concomitant theoretical and disciplinary implications.

Clues and *figurae*. Girard's 'evidential paradigm'

The abovementioned evolutionary process, and the method of hypothesis and validation explicitly used by Girard in his writings, further stimulated a broader analysis of the epistemological basis of his work. What has emerged is an anti-Popperian epistemology, (i.e. non-falsifiable, as is the case in evolutionism), based on a comparative analysis of anthropological and ethnological data, including myths and rites, interpreted by Girard as real symbolic 'fossils' of man's cultural evolution. It was exactly this kind of methodology, and the particular use of textual sources 'as evidence', which represented one of the major obstacles in the reception of Girard's theory. In fact, Girard uses myths, rites and *literature itself* as if they were 'remnants', *unexpected evidence* of those things which had remained 'hidden since the foundation of the world'. In a period in which the dominant episteme tends to obliterate the relevance of any actual referent in textual analysis, Girard has always tried to move in the opposite direction, pointing at the elements of referentiality in texts as diverse as myth and religious scriptures. The fact that behind the allegedly imaginary world of myths, religious texts and literature there looms a *truth* (that we all desire mimetically, and that society and culture were founded on the ritualization of the killing of scapegoats) might sound a 'fantastic' formulation. However, for Girard, the 'murder' was far from being perfect: the 'culprit' returned too frequently on the scene of the crime, leaving too many clues, mimicking his original act too many times, and retelling the same old story in myths, legends, folk-tales and religious texts worldwide. What Girard is then proposing is a revamped form of comparative anthropology and history of religions and culture, as these are the most important cultural sources we have with which to understand the early phase of our cultural and religious formation. As a matter of fact, this form of comparativism is actually intrinsic to the historical exegesis of the Bible itself, which has been constantly read through the notion of *figura Christi,* seen as the repetitive pattern of unjust persecutions to be found in the Old Testament, and which prepared its broader understanding of the Gospels.

Epistemology and conversion

After the publication of his groundbreaking work, *Things Hidden,* Girard shifted his theoretical scrutiny to the Judaeo-Christian scriptures, considered as the main source of our knowledge of the mimetically violent origins of civilization. For Girard, it is the most important historical cultural event which has helped humankind to become aware of, and slowly to try to move away from, sacrificial practices used for inter-individual and social stability. Some critics have seen in the Christian apologetic which has come to light in Girard's later works, the 'weak' link in his theoretical 'cathedral': an aspect that should be 'anaesthetized' or expunged from a theory which might otherwise make a positive contribution to the social sciences – one more compatible with our modern religious scepticism.[10]

As a matter of fact, Girard's argument here is much more complex and, in the end, more interesting. Among the various conceptual 'short circuits' he proposed, the idea of 'conversion' – seen not simply as an existential, but as an *epistemic* event – is one of the most provocative. For a long time banned from philosophical enquiry, this concept is epistemologically crucial from the point of view of mimetic theory. As it was suggested in *Deceit, Desire and the Novel* (1961), 'conversion' stands, foremost, as an explicit 'critique of the subject', in particular, a critique of the supposed autonomy of the modern individual from his/her sociocultural context, i.e. the plethora of models with which she or he inevitably interacts. In spite of having been deconstructed by a century of critical and philosophical discussions (structuralism, post-structuralism, hermeneutics), this belief in the autonomy of the self – mainly derived from the idealistic-romantic tradition – remains still deeply grounded in our understanding of the modern mind: we always tend to represent ourselves as autonomous in respect to our choices, desires and convictions. Moreover, there is always a blind-spot in our perception of reciprocal hostility, competition and rivalry. We are ready to deconstruct anything except the idea that we are self-directed and that the persecutors are *always* the others.

The methodological individualism typical of many social sciences is a clear example of how this conviction remains an ontological a priori of different scientific disciplines. These also showcase a mode of rationalizing the position of the subject, in respect to his or her social determinations, of which mimetic theory is thoroughly critical. Furthermore, the concept of conversion rejects any form of positivistic and analytical simplification,

questioning the false dichotomy of subject and object (in tune with much of twentieth-century epistemology). To speak of mimetic theory entails a series of requirements which will inevitably have existential implications for the subjects who discuss them, and also involves one's personal experience in the factual exploration of the plausibility of the hypothesis proposed in Girard's work.

Christianity and postmodernity

As an extra corollary, we could also add that the oscillation between *evolution* and *conversion* is the movement which best represents Girard's idea of history, which proceeds not in a linear progressive fashion, but, as has recently been argued, as a *spiral.*[11] Human evolution can be seen both as a counterpoint of permanence – because culture is based on a neurocognitive mechanism of repetition (i.e. imitation), reinforcement and conservation – and of progression, because the revelation has given us grounds to explore new forms of social interaction and organization, as well as new modalities for personal and cultural creativity. This becomes clear if we look at the apparently paradoxical dimension that emerges from Girard's observations on Christianity and its impact on Western cultural history. This could be regarded as another big 'scandal' in Girardian theory, especially in the light of the 'allergy' towards religion expressed by some of the natural and social sciences, as exemplified particularly vocally in recent books by Richard Dawkins and Daniel Dennett.[12]

Rephrasing Simone Weil's statement that 'before presenting a "theory of God", a *theology,* the Gospels presents a "theory of man", an *anthropology*',[13] Girard maintains that Christianity is essentially *the cultural and moral acknowledgement of the sacrificial origins of our culture and our society.* The Gospels become the hermeneutical key that allows us to rethink both mythology and ancient texts as the progressive coming-to-terms of humanity with the violent matrix of the cultural order. Christ's sacrifice is the moment of complete disclosure of the arbitrariness of the victimary mechanism on which the sacred and symbolic order of archaic societies was built and kept stable. In this sense, Girard goes against common assumptions, and takes on board the Judaeo-Christian tradition as having prime responsibility for the *de-mythification* and *de-sacralization* of the world. Secularization in the Western world has been accomplished by the

slow erosion of mythical and sacred structures triggered by the Christian revelation – and this very assumption would simply defy the kind of reductionist vision of religion as expressed by Dennett or Dawkins. The end of religion, and even scientific atheism itself, has been produced by a religion: Christianity.

Thus, according to Girard, Christianity could be then seen, in relation to human history, as analogous to what culture stood for in the process of natural selection: the moment in which man is no longer a victim of the blind process of Darwinian selection, but starts, by means of culture, to free himself from it. By the same token, Christianity represents the moment in which man is freed from the need to use the logic of the sacred, i.e. to scapegoat and to sacrifice in order to bring conflicts and crises to an end. Instead, it acknowledges the innocence of all victims that have been persecuted for such a purpose and the injustice of their victimization. This rupture of the sacrificial order triggers an unexpected historical development, which is still in motion in modern days. In fact, if the sacrificial structure cannot work any longer, because its injustice and arbitrary nature have been unmasked, then, from an evolutionary viewpoint, modern society is facing a new *experimental* phase, while history becomes a laboratory in which humanity tries to find new processes and structures of equilibrium and stability. However, Girard seldom discussed these issues – except perhaps in *Deceit, Desire and the Novel,* where he sketches a history of desire in modernity. That is why we took up the suggestion of Gianni Vattimo, who questioned the fact that Girard has been reluctant to develop a theory of modernity and postmodernity based on his theoretical premises, and so we devoted the last chapter of this book to a partial filling of this gap.

The expansion of the Christian paradigm, which has imposed the rejection of the sacred and triggered the secularization of the world, in fact signifies a phase in which man is no longer protected by the false transcendence of the sacred, by the rigid processes of the systemic use of violence (either actual or symbolic). The gradual erosion of every *dharma,* of every rigid social hierarchy and division based on sacral norms, has plunged the modern individual into mimetic social flux, deep into ever more extreme oscillations of desire and resentment mobilized by the increasing democratization of societies. What has been needed therefore are structures of 'containment', as it were, 'katechontic instruments' (from the Greek *katéchon,* something which 'holds back'), based on forms of secularized transcendence (democratic ideology and institutions, technology, mass media, market society, the objectification of individual relationships, etc.), which contribute

to the postponement, the holding-back, of the apocalyptic event, the real, ambivalent, potential *terminus* of the dissolving of the religious/sacred order of the world (either the revelation of violence, or the dissolution through violence). On the future paths of humanity, however, Girard never suggests rigid interpretations, or overarching predictions; on the contrary, he guards us against any theory not interested in the continuous oscillations and paradoxes of human sociohistorical development. Girard maintains that human victimization is always lurking in the shadows, and that the danger of plunging back into mechanisms dominated by a sacrificial logic is always present (and 9/11 proved that). Of course, there is also a possibility of redemption – whatever be the name under which contemporary discourse masks this potential development (*Homo reciprocus,* defence of the victims, non-violence, or in Girard's case, the *imitatio Christi*) – which can turn the potential danger of reciprocal imitation into a productive and peaceful one. And this is what contemporary ethical concern is all about.

Girard also brings to light the extraordinary paradox of Western culture, which reveals, in the very moment at which it seems to be freed from religious and confessional constraints by means of a 'rationalist expulsion of the religious', its deeply Judaeo-Christian roots. The entire ideological perspective of contemporary culture is, in fact, built on a victimological principle, i.e. on the centrality of victims in all our ethical concerns: the victims of the Shoah, the victims of capitalism, the victims of social injustice, of war, of political persecution, of ecological disasters, of racial, sexual, religious discrimination. And no matter how controversial it may sound, Girard claims that it has been Christianity that has been the foremost proponent of putting the innocent victim at the centre of our ethical and imaginative concern. Therefore, the ultimate unattainable goal of Nietzsche's intellectual project, namely, the desire to free the West from its obsession with victims is, according to Girard, one of the proofs of the ineluctability of Christian ethics in Western culture. For this, as we all know, is based on inclusion rather than on exclusion, on universalism rather than on local and partisan allegiances, on forgiveness rather than on retribution.

Notes

1. Charles Darwin, *The Autobiography of Charles Darwin and Selected Letters,* ed. Francis Darwin (New York: Dover, 1958).
2. Roberto Calasso, *La Rovina di Kasch* (Milan: Adelphi, 1983), p. 205.

3. The first part of this dialogue was held in the autumn of 1995 (P. Antonello and J.C. de Castro Rocha, 'L'Ultimo dei porcospini. Intervista biografico-teorica a René Girard', *Iride,* 19 [1996]: 9–56). The rest of the discussion then took place during spring and summer 1999, which resulted in the volume *Um Longo Argumento do Princípio ao Fim. Dialogos com João Cezar de Castro Rocha e Pierpaolo Antonello* (Rio de Janeiro: Topbooks, 2000). It was finally further developed in 2003 for its Italian and French edition: *Les Origines de la culture. Dialogues avec Pierpaolo Antonello et João Cezar de Castro Rocha* (Paris: Desclée de Brouwer, 2004).
4. J.-P. Dupuy, 'Mimésis et morphogénèse', in M. Deguy and J.-P. Dupuy (eds), *René Girard et le problème du mal* (Paris: Grasset, 1982), p. 225.
5. For a recent discussion of this issue, see S.R. Garrels, 'Imitation, mirror neurons, and mimetic desire. Convergence between the mimetic theory of René Girard and empirical research on imitation', *Contagion,* 12–13 (2006): 47–86.
6. Etymologically speaking, 'thing' is what is disputed. It has origins in the Old High German *Ding,* 'public assembly for judgement and business, lawsuit'. The same applies for neo-Latin languages: the French *chose,* and the Italian and Spanish *cosa,* derive from the Latin *causa*: 'judicial process, lawsuit, case'.
7. Michel Serres, *Atlas* (Paris: Julliard, 1994), pp. 219–20.
8. See Jacques Monod, *Chance and Necessity: An Essay on the Natural Philosophy of Modern Biology* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1971).
9. Following this observation, Girard's hypothesis allows for a reconsideration of the concept of *group selection,* which, after years of radical censure, has been recently resurrected by evolutionary theorists, in an effort to explain the emergence of 'altruistic' behaviour in animals, as well as to justify the persistence of religious 'superstitions' in human societies.
10. As Paisley Livingston put it:

    > I do not need Girard's hypothesis that scientific endeavour is a by-product of the 'subterranean' Revelation signified by the Sacred Texts. My position on the subject is that many of the original intuitions of Girard on human interactions and motivations are logically separated from this type of theological propositions (P. Livingston, *Models of Desire* [Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992] p. xviii.)

11. See M.S. Barberi (ed.), *La Spirale mimétique: dix-huit leçons sur René Girard* (Paris: Desclée de Brouwer, 2001).
12. See D. Dennett, *Breaking the Spell: Religion as a Natural Phenomenon* (London and New York: Viking, 2006) and R. Dawkins, *The God Delusion* (London: Bantam, 2006).
13. R. Girard, *I See Satan Fall Like Lightning* (Maryknoll, MD: Orbis, 2001), p. 40.

CHAPTER 1
THE LIFE OF THE MIND

> A German editor having written to me for an account of the development of my mind and character with some sketch of my autobiography, I have thought that the attempt would amuse me, and might possibly interest my children or their children.
>
> (Charles Darwin, *Autobiography*)

1 'One long argument from the beginning...'

Professor René Girard, we would like to begin by talking about your personal and intellectual history. First of all, could you tell us more about your childhood?

I was born on the evening of 25 December 1923, in the city of Avignon, France. I was named René Nöel Theophile Girard. I grew up as a happy child, raised in a serene and comfortable environment, in a very normal family in the south of France. I had four brothers and sisters, and I was the second oldest. My father was curator both of the library and the Museum of Avignon, and also of the Castle of the Popes, the biggest medieval fortress in France. He was an archivist and he did a lot of research about the archaeology of the city. My mother was kind of an intellectual too. She was interested in music and art. I think she was one of the first women to have gained the *baccalauréat* in her region. My father was partly from Avignon, partly from central France. My mother was from the northern part of Provence. The provençal language is no longer spoken in Avignon and I only know a few words.

My father was a typical Frenchman in the sense that, from a religious viewpoint, he was anticlerical: a good representative of radical socialism, very much in the tradition of the old leftist party of the 1900s and the Third French Republic. My mother was Roman Catholic, and she came from a family which was socially higher than my father's but more conservative. It was typical in France to have a Catholic mother and an anticlerical father.

Even though my mother was from a family in which there were even *Action française*[1] royalists, my parents were Gaullistes from an early stage.

So, you didn't have a formal Catholic education?
My mother was a good Catholic, orthodox but quite liberal: a free spirit. I stopped going to church at about the age of 12 or 13. And then I didn't go any more until I was 38 years old. But it would be wrong to say that there are no Catholic elements in my background. As he was educated at the local Jesuit school of Avignon, my father sent all his children to the lycée, the secular French state high school, but I attended the optional catechism classes. My mother was a French Catholic, but an intellectual. She loved François Mauriac, for instance.[2] She also learned a bit of Italian, and used to read us Alessandro Manzoni's novel *The Betrothed.* We used to ask her to reread the episode of the plague, which simply fascinated us. And for a long time we called that book 'The Plague of Milan'.

What about your school education?
I finished my *baccalauréat* in 1940. In 1941 I wanted to take the entrance exam for the Ecole Normale Supérieure, the best school for the humanities in Paris. To prepare for the admission exam I went to Lyon, where my brother was doing his medical studies. I found it difficult there because, even in still theoretically 'non-occupied France', the living conditions were harsh. So I went back home, and my father suggested that I could take the entrance examination of the school for medieval research where he himself had studied, and which he was very fond of. My only concern at that time was to postpone my exit from the familiar 'nest', so I accepted and spent one more year at home. Then I found myself in Paris at the Ecole des Chartes. I had a pretty hard time in the capital: it was ten times worse than Lyon! I would have gone back to Avignon, but it was simply impossible. Due to the German partition of France (which was maintained even after the Vichy zone was occupied), students from the south couldn't go back home, except for summer vacations. Thus it was thanks to the Germans that I stayed in Paris and finished my degree of archivist–palaeographer!

I wasn't happy at my school, though. It was very positivistic in its method. We were supposed to conduct research in archives, editing manuscripts, and so forth. And the living conditions were really bad for someone without his own family and without connections to the countryside. In short, I had a pretty hard time, especially during the last two years of the war. At the same time, I couldn't 'find myself' because I wasn't really aware that I disliked the

Ecole des Chartes, since I couldn't compare it with any other experience. Most of the courses were extremely factual and dry.

Were you already interested in literature at that time?
At the lycée in Avignon I had some friends who were greatly interested in literature, but their taste was typical of the late-surrealist era. Majestically circling above our heads, there was René Char,[3] the famous poet who later invited Heidegger to the 'Séminaires du Le Thor'.[4] At the time, René Char was a colonel in the FTP (Francs-Tireurs et Partisans), the pre-communist wing of the Resistance forces and very nice to his younger friends who idealized him, although I never managed to become interested in his poetry. My first real literary interest was Proust, but my friends disapproved, because the novel in general, and Proust in particular, was regarded as horribly *démodé* and *dépassé*. When I left for the USA – even though initially I was supposed to spend only two years there – René Char was quite critical. He regarded that move as some kind of betrayal, and up to a point he was right. The intellectual and aesthetic atmosphere in which I found myself was alien to me. Without admitting it, without really being aware of it, I wanted to get away from it all.

Were you in contact with other intellectuals or writers besides Char?
René Char was a close friend of Yvonne Zervos, the wife of Christian Zervos,[5] a well-known researcher in the visual arts, both ancient and modern, as well as an important art dealer in Paris. Moreover, he was a good friend of Picasso, Braque and Matisse – the whole Ecole de Paris. Thanks to René Char, Jacques (my best friend at that time) and I were invited by the Zervos to their impressive apartment in rue du Bac, in Paris, which contained some original Cubist paintings by Picasso and Braque, as well as other unique works by famous members of the Ecole de Paris.

My friend and I were hugely impressed, of course. My friend was a young poet (and, of course, a disciple of Char), and his father was a communist politician who, after the liberation, became the second-in-command at the Avignon city council, in charge of 'art and culture'. You remember that my father was the curator of the Castle of the Popes. At the time Zervos was eager to have an exhibition of paintings in that very castle. Thus, he found it useful to enlist our youthful collaboration in the project, and we became the official organizers of the event. This exhibition needed the active support of our fathers and our involvement in it was a good way for Zervos to get them interested in his project.

In order to bring visitors to Avignon, Zervos also had the idea of suggesting to Jean Vilar – already a well-known actor and director – that he launch a theatre festival in Avignon, in that same Castle of the Popes. Everything went just as Zervos intended. The painting exhibition was a success and the Theatre Festival of Jean Vilar an even greater one – it is still one of the most important summer festivals in France.

My friend and I were in a state of continuous mimetic drunkenness at the thought of being involved in such important cultural events. I remember going to Picasso's painting studio in Paris, on the Quai des Grands Augustines, and picking out 12 paintings with my friend and others, which we then took down to Avignon in a little truck. The only thing that really concerned Picasso was that Matisse should give exactly the same number of paintings as he did, and paintings as important as the ones he was lending. I also remember mishandling paintings by Matisse, and the result was a noticeable hole in one of the *Blouses roumaines,* which was quickly repaired.

Picasso came to Avignon during the summer, in his chauffer-driven car. He complained humorously but loudly that there was no advertising for the exhibition along the road between Paris and Avignon. George Braque also came and spent a whole month in Avignon. Fernand Léger came to see the exhibition. One of the main causes of our excitement in those days was the fact that we were hanging around daily with actresses such as Sylvia Monfort and Jeanne Moreau who had just finished acting school and were still largely unknown.

It is possible that the original idea for the exhibition came from Picasso himself, who enjoyed talking about his first visit to Avignon. It was on his way from Spain, when he first came to Paris. He stopped at the Castle of the Popes to see it and, being very poor, he had offered to paint the concierge's portrait for five francs. The offer was rejected. It was Picasso's desire at the end of his life to have his last exhibition in the Castle of the Popes, and that is what happened.

Going back to your formal education, given your training at the Ecole de Chartes, did you consider becoming the curator of the museum and the library as your father had been?

Yes, it could have happened. But the idea of spending my life amid medieval archives didn't really appeal to me. I had to go. My first opportunity to move out was an offer to teach in the USA, and I took it immediately. As a matter of fact, I had two possibilities. Initially, I got a job at the Library of the United Nations. It was certainly more prestigious, but I understood quite quickly that it was mainly the work of a documentarian, in the service

of the UN national delegations, which did not involve any personal research. Moreover, the first person I met there was one of my fellow *chartistes*! That was enough for me to decide to take my second option and go to Indiana University, where I was supposed to teach French and do a PhD in history.

Did you ever think of going back to France?
Yes, of course, but the rigidity of French administration limited the jobs that someone with my type of degree could get. One opportunity came later, and was made possible by Lucien Goldmann. I could have got a job at the Ecole des Hautes Etudes in Paris. Indeed, he was very important to me because he published an incredible article on my first book entitled 'Marx, Lukács, Girard and the sociology of the novel'.[6] The chapter of my book on Proust was also published in *Médiations,* which was his journal.[7]

When was his offer made?
It was still pretty early in my career, right after the publication of my first book, *Deceit, Desire and the Novel,*[8] in 1961. Goldmann's prestige and academic power were soon 'destroyed' by structuralism. He was at the peak of his career and then suddenly he was out of fashion. It was the beginning of the great merry-go-round Americans call 'theory'.[9]

The other offer I almost decided to take was Freiburg. I was interested in Freiburg too, because it is a nice university, not very big, very peaceful, not far from France. But at that moment I was at Johns Hopkins University, and frankly, it was my best job from an academic viewpoint. I had very good students and I was too involved with my own research to waste time on relocation.

How did you define yourself politically during the time you were in France?
I wasn't very politically aware. In Avignon most of my friends were leftists and my parents were very anti-German although they weren't leftist. In America, though, as a young assistant professor, I was inevitably a leftist. I spent a year in North Carolina, which wasn't the worst area in the South, but nevertheless completely segregated and quite conservative. Given the situation in those years, my reaction was inevitable: I was a democrat, of course. Then I changed. In this sense, I can be defined as a sort of outsider. I would say that I'm a centrist, meaning I'm anti-crowd, the 'mobilized crowd' Sartre dreamed of,[10] and ultimately the scapegoat theory is fundamentally an anti-crowd theory. After all, the crowd tends to be completely on the 'right' or on the 'left'. An intellectual has the obligation to avoid such dichotomies.

Isn't your position rather elitist?
It's a misunderstanding. During the Cultural Revolution, those who were incompetent claimed that it was 'elitism' which should be criticized, not their mediocrity. It is quite true that those who are truly talented, those who are originally creative, are taken for incompetent by the majority of people. Matisse and Picasso in 1900 were considered incompetent by 99 per cent of their contemporaries. The truly original artists and thinkers run this kind of risk, which is almost impossible to eliminate.

Which thinkers and writers were important to you when you moved to the USA?
I wasn't really reading many thinkers. I wasn't even aware that my interest in Proust could turn into publishing my own books. My studies in France had been pretty bad. I had even been thrown out of the lycée for misbehaviour! However, I remember a novel which was important to me, even though the first time I read it was in an abridged French edition for children: Cervantes' *Don Quixote.*

How old were you at the time?
I was 9 or 10 years old. I really remember learning how to read by myself. And this is typical of me, because I never learned anything from schools and universities. I'm a self-taught man. I believe that's one reason why I'm constantly looking over my shoulder towards another field. I didn't learn anything at the lycée and I didn't learn anything at the Ecole des Chartes. I did a PhD at Indiana University, but it wasn't special. It was in contemporary history, and my dissertation was on the American opinion of France from 1940 to 1943. It was fairly easy for me to do because I wrote a letter to the French embassy and they sent me all their newspaper clippings from that period, so I had all my quotes![11] What was marvellous at Indiana University was the library, and I remember those years as years of intense reading. In particular, I remember reading poetry, like Saint-John Perse.[12] Later on, I wrote an essay on his work. It was my first published article.[13]

Did you read Sartre at that time, considering that he was one of the most important French philosophers and intellectuals?
Sartre only became really important to me when I was already in the USA. I never liked his novels, with the exception of *Les Mots.* I found *La Nausée* literally nauseating. However, the first philosophical book that I really understood was *L'Etre et le néant.* I remember the chapter on bad faith.[14] I couldn't agree completely with him, but at that time I wasn't able philosophically to convey

my disagreement. Then from Sartre I went to Merleau-Ponty and all the authors related to phenomenology, which fascinated me and for a while I wanted to write in the phenomenological style.

2 'Ce moment capital dans ma vie'

When you finished the PhD it seems your intellectual interests were not clearly defined.
They weren't. I was more interested in parties and American cars! Then I started to teach some novels, and that was my first intellectual breakthrough. When I started to read and to teach Stendhal I was impressed by the similarities with other novelists: *vanité* in Stendhal, snobbery in Proust, and something in between in Flaubert. Finally, I realized that there was a great deal of that in Cervantes and Dostoevsky too. In other words, I was on my way to the mimetic theory, which allows the definition of difference in what is similar without renouncing the latter, as deconstruction does. What I wanted to do was to write a history of desire through the reading of the great literary works.

In fact, you have already identified 'ce moment capital dans ma vie où les grandes lignes de mon oeuvre se sont présentées à moi; c'est très exactement au début de 1959, pendant je termine Mensonge romantique'.[15]
That's true. I was reading, sequentially, Stendhal's *Le Rouge et le noir,* Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* and Dostoevsky. The important moment was the reading of Dostoevsky's *The Eternal Husband.* I realized that it had fundamentally the same plot of *El curioso impertinente* by Cervantes.[16] That was the real insight. The fact that the plot was the same, although from a formal, linguistic and aesthetic standpoint everything in the two texts is different, turned me into the mimetic realist I have been ever since.

In your work and your life there is the constant feeling of not belonging to any environment. In Avignon, you felt uneasy among your friends; as a European in the USA, you experienced the feeling of being a foreigner; at the beginning of your career, you didn't belong to the field of literary criticism, and then later you shifted to anthropological studies. How do you explain this disquiet?
I think that, on the one hand, it is true that I tend not to belong to specific environments or fields, but on the other hand, I cannot be considered an outsider in the classical sense of the term. I never felt an *outcast,* as many intellectuals like to represent themselves. This is probably because I had, and

still have, a very strong sense of belonging to my childhood. I had a very happy childhood and I have always tried to surround myself with the things of my childhood. Simple things like food or the books I read as a child, such as my abridged version of *Don Quixote,* or the Comtesse de Ségur's novels.[17] So I don't strictly belong, but I feel I'm not an outcast, and that's probably the reason I could never lose my French accent! However, my elective place is not the Provençal region, where I was born, and which is too much admired and celebrated and which has faded in my emotional memory. It is rather the austere mountain region between the Chiase-Dieu and Ambert-en-Livradois, where we spent long holidays.

Don't you think that there might be an intellectual advantage to being an outsider?
I think there is always an advantage in being what one truly is. My relative marginality can be seen in the books that are most characteristic of me: the first book and the book on Shakespeare.[18] Above all, the parts about mimetic relationship. This is probably the centre of my work, and even the anthropological and religious aspects of it are strongly tied to that key concept.

It is also true regarding the interdisciplinary nature of my work. When I moved from literature to anthropology, I did it totally on my own. This is the reason why it took many years before I wrote my second book, because there is a whole education in anthropology in between. During that period, I probably read more books than at any time before or after – I was mainly concerned with the religious and the sacrificial elements. As a matter of fact, I never stopped reading books from the viewpoint of sacrifice.

In an interview with François Lagarde, you mentioned that you lost your position at Indiana University due to the fact that you did not publish.[19] *Was 'publish or perish' already an issue in the 1950s?*
Yes, because Indiana was a very ambitious university. My dismissal from Indiana, I have to admit, was quite fair. Two years after I was hired, another young Frenchman came to Indiana. His name was Robert Champigny. He wrote books on Sartre and other writers.[20] Finally they chose him rather than me, which was quite understandable. Then, as a reaction, I started to publish. I published an article on Saint-John Perse. Then I started to write on Malraux too. I had been influenced by one of his books: *Psychologie de l'art.*[21] I found it more congenial than New Criticism. There was a fascination with death and destruction in Malraux, which also interested me. For him,

primitive art, which greatly appealed to me, was completely bound up with the Second World War. I was really fascinated by that and there was also a common concern with the ancient world in Malraux too. This concern probably prepared the ground for *Violence and the Sacred*.[22]

In your essay on Malraux, you show that his metaphors are embedded in history. It seems to suit your conception of realism.[23]
Yes, I have always been a realist, without knowing it. I have always believed in the outside world and in the possibility of knowledge of it. No new discipline has ever produced any durable results unless it was founded on common-sense realism. This I would say is a principle that has always been verified. I think that the old German idealistic legacy has simply been misleading for the whole European culture. However, I'm not in favour of pragmatism, because utilitarian pragmatism is tied to a certain view of action in the world that I find groundless. I'm interested in thinking patterns and I think you have to take the real seriously. Language is a problem, of course, but one that can be resolved. I'm sure that the engineers who managed the flooding of the Nile in Ancient Egypt and agronomists in present-day California, after some initial introduction, would understand each other perfectly. What deconstruction can deconstruct quite well is German idealism, because it is not grounded on *real* premises.

3 *Deceit, Desire and the Novel (Mensonges romantiques)*

Are there traces of the mimetic theory in the articles published before Deceit, Desire and the Novel*?*
I remember an article on 'Valéry and Stendhal'.[24] It was a defence of Stendhal, because Valéry attacked Stendhal, accusing him of bad faith. There are already mimetic elements in my argument against Valéry, who defends a solipsistic conception of the intellectual life that's really untenable, untrue, and, in my view, much more in bad faith than Stendhal's, who discusses *vanité* quite explicitly.

Could you tell us more about the intellectual climate you found at Johns Hopkins University, Baltimore, where you moved in 1957 and where you wrote your first book?
Indeed: I was there 11 years, until 1968. Johns Hopkins had a great tradition. It had been created following the German model of a graduate

school. It was there that I met Leo Spitzer[25] and French literary critics such as George Poulet and Jean Starobinsky, as well as the Spanish poet Pedro Salinas.[26]

As a matter of fact, Spitzer read the manuscript of *Deceit, Desire and the Novel,* and suggested the connection with Max Scheler's *Das Ressentiment,* the French word already used by Nietzsche.[27] I had already read that book a few years before, but I had not seen the connections with my own work. I actually added quotes from Scheler, in a way because of the mimetic influence of Leo Spitzer.[28]

Another reader of my manuscript was George Poulet, who reacted in a very negative way. I had a letter from him, 15 pages long, single-spaced, extremely passionate and hostile, saying one should not handle literature like that because ultimately it is an intrusion into the life of the author. I was nonetheless happy with his reaction, because it confirmed the oppositional and critical value of my mimetic realism.

As though you were the Sainte-Beuve of the twentieth century.
A mixture of Sainte-Beuve and Freud. He hated Freud, and he saw my theory as a variation on psychoanalysis. His letter was very harsh, and could have discouraged a novice. Of course, I knew that Poulet would not like my book and I wanted to have his reaction because my book was in fact a reaction against the kind of aestheticism he represented. I was very conscious that *Mensonge Romantique* would infuriate the critics who saw literature as a 'world of its own', which belongs only to authors, as pure creation, detached from society! George Poulet was a prime exponent of this kind of criticism.

Are you saying that Deceit, Desire and the Novel *was a reaction against New Criticism?*
It was a reaction mainly against that kind of aestheticism. In particular, scholars such as Poulet, who would write a book about circles and enumerate the circles that the umbrella of Emma Bovary makes![29] The popularity of critics such as George Poulet helps one to understand why American literary departments were so ready for deconstruction: New Criticism was the reason. In the beginning this was very good because the New Critics were totally anti-intellectual. They had no broad European education, no philosophy at all: they just expelled philosophy. So what deconstruction brought at the beginning was a return to philosophy, a wider perspective, a rehabilitation of thinking. The first years of deconstruction represented a sort of liberation

from New Criticism, even if in many ways it was a radicalization of similar tendencies.

During the writing of Deceit, Desire and the Novel *and* Violence and the Sacred, *did you have any kind of intellectual friendship like that with Leo Spitzer, which gave you feedback?*

John Freccero, the Dante scholar, was an important and dear friend who introduced me to Dante. He was finishing his PhD with Charles Singleton, who was an authority on Dante, and came back from Harvard to Johns Hopkins that year.[30] Singleton was actually very helpful to me. I went to Johns Hopkins as an assistant professor, and after the publication of *Deceit, Desire and the Novel,* he helped me to be promoted. Even though Freccero had finished his thesis on angelology in Dante, he got interested in my book and we talked a great deal.[31] Then at Johns Hopkins after a while I started teaching very good graduate students like Eugenio Donato, Eric Gans and Andrew McKenna.[32] Sometime afterwards I met Cesareo Bandera, a Cervantes and Calderón scholar, who works along the same lines as myself,[33] and we became friends. Later, while in Buffalo, he introduced me to the Spanish Golden Age.

In October 1966, at Johns Hopkins, you organized, along with Richard Macksey and Eugenio Donato, a very important international symposium: 'The Languages of Criticism and the Sciences of Man', with the participation of Lucien Goldmann, Roland Barthes, Jacques Derrida, Jacques Lacan and others. This conference is considered to mark the introduction of structuralism to the USA.

That's true to some extent. Paul de Man came from Yale to attend the symposium. Lacan was clowning around in an extremely calculated and hilarious way. He tried to speak in English, although he didn't know English. Lacan was at his best, because he wanted to attract attention to himself alone, and the literature people really felt for him and remained fascinated while the psychiatrists remained indifferent.

When Freud came to the USA, he said, as he approached New York: 'I'm bringing the plague to them'; but he was wrong. Americans digested and Americanized psychoanalysis easily and quickly. But in 1966 *we* really brought the plague with Lacan and deconstructionism, at least to the universities! At that point, I felt at Johns Hopkins as alienated as in Avignon with my post-surrealistic friends. One year later deconstruction was already becoming fashionable. I felt uncomfortable with that fashion. That's the reason why I went to Buffalo in 1968.

Nonetheless, the whole event was really a great success.
Yes. We had received a generous grant from Johns Hopkins and the Ford Foundation. The Ford representative actually showed up at some point, and when Lacan was informed, he moved towards him, embracing him like an old friend. He wanted literally to take over America! For a while, the book with the proceedings of the colloquium was the bestseller of Johns Hopkins University Press.[34] Many people knew that it was a foundational event. All the experts in the field were there, except for Lévi-Strauss. When Lévi-Strauss cancelled his trip, I wasn't sure whom to invite, and I called Michel Deguy (who had written a long, descriptive article in *Critique* on my first book).[35] He told me that Derrida was about to publish important essays in the next two years. That's why we invited him.[36] Indeed, Derrida was the only participant who stood up to Lacan. Moreover, he delivered a lecture that is one of his best essays.[37]

Did you introduce to some of these scholars the ideas that you were developing towards Violence and the Sacred*?*
No. It was a very private affair, alien to the spirit of this group. It was Eugenio Donato who first suggested I read the English anthropologists in whose books I would find much evidence of mimetic desire. I don't remember which book I read first, possibly Frazer, and it was an illumination. Intellectually it was probably one of the strongest experiences I ever had. I started to read all the most important English monographs on single cultures: I read Tyler, Robertson-Smith, Radcliffe-Brown, Bronislaw Malinowski, among many others. I was reading them one after the other, taking notes on mimetically relevant observations, which I included in *Violence and the Sacred.* The idea of the foundational murder developed between 1965 and 1968, although the book was published only in 1972.

Around 1963–64, before I started reading anthropology, I was reading Greek tragedy and I became very interested in the Oedipus myth. I was seeing mimetic desire there as well. And in fact in *Violence and the Sacred* you can find this very sequence of analysis: Oedipus first, Euripides' *The Bacchae* second, which played a crucial role in the development of my idea of the founding murder, and then modern anthropology. I remember that in a conference at the French medieval abbey and conference centre of Royaumont, I read a paper on Oedipus and mimetic desire.[38] Lucien Goldmann didn't like it. In his view, mimetic desire and rivalry were merely characteristic of 'the imperialistic phase of Western capitalism'. This broadening of the concept to other cultures disturbed his worldview. But Theodor Adorno was there and he showed quite a lot of interest in the subject.

As already said, you can define as a realist someone who strongly believes in the 'truth' of facts. How was it possible for you to be a protagonist in the theoretical debate of the 1960s and 1970s, without being influenced by those dominant philosophical trends like hermeneutics and post-structuralism, for which there is nothing but interpretations and no possible access to 'truth'? Was it common sense, philosophical naïveté, or wisdom on your part, which allowed to you to come to terms with your own mimetism, or something else?
Certainly, philosophical naïveté is a definition that suits me. The capacity to be surprised is legitimately regarded as the main scientific emotion. There is an attitude of being blasé in an anthropologist like Lévi-Strauss that is totally anti-scientific, and which is alien to me. There is also a strong curiosity, and curiosity and understanding are obviously linked. There is a form of humility as well, in the sense that it is a methodological attitude, a postulate that you have to have in order to solve specific problems. I have the impression sometimes that the book I am reading could upset my entire existence. From the point of view of the mimetic theory, one should write a whole critique of the position of the subject, without of course erasing the position of the observer, which is essential from an epistemic perspective, although one has to put oneself in the soup!

4 The hidden things

As we noted, in 1968 you moved to State University of New York at Buffalo. The most important event in that period was probably the publication of Violence and the Sacred *in 1972. What was the reaction to this book?*
Not as good as I had hoped and thought it would be. The book was well received, but it didn't sell many more copies than my first book (which also didn't sell all that many). This was due in part to its ethnological content. Many literary critics didn't see the link between my two books, and lamented my moving away from literature in order to embrace ethnology. It is perhaps true that the fundamental role of mimetic desire was not emphasized enough.[39] They also accused me of being dispersive. The old professors repeated to me the old canonical formula of American specialization, which is a form of modesty: 'Don't you think you are spreading yourself too thin?' Today, on the contrary, they accuse me of repeating the same things over and over again.

However, the English translation of Violence and the Sacred, *which came out in 1977, triggered an intense debate.* Diacritics *devoted an issue to your work.*[40]

I was extremely lucky. I had one very good and generous review by Victor Turner, which appeared in the first issue of *Human Nature*.[41]

Victor Turner was really generous and intellectually free. He was the first one to spot my debt to Durkheim. Although he was against Durkheim's approach and methodology, he saw in my work an attempt to move beyond Durkheimism without rejecting it.

How did the anthropologists react?

Either they didn't react at all, or they reacted negatively – as, for instance, Lévi-Strauss who seems to be hostile to the mimetic theory, although I only received indirect responses from him.[42] However, I should mention the positive reaction from the Japanese anthropologist Masao Yamaguchi,[43] who became interested in the scapegoat theory. He wrote texts on Japanese culture, which I read in French translations.[44] He shows that the Japanese culture, starting from the monarchy, up to theatre and puppetry, is grounded in a sort of scapegoat system. Nonetheless, he remains in a very positivistic frame of reference, while the religious dimension is absent from his work. He encouraged me to read Kenneth Burke, whose 'principle of victimage' is very interesting, but plays only a marginal role in his system.[45]

Let me emphasize that Buffalo was also important because of the book on Shakespeare. My interest in Shakespeare started with a TV show of *A Midsummer Night's Dream,* performed by the Royal Shakespeare Company. Suddenly I was amazed by the mimetic content of the play. After that TV programme I immediately decided to write a book on Shakespeare. At the beginning of his career Shakespeare wrote mostly comedies, starting with issues and themes related to mimetic desire and rivalry. All is well that ends well, so to speak. But then I thought: what about the scapegoat mechanism? I then re-read *Julius Caesar,* which is the first real tragedy, and there the whole mimetic mechanism is fully present. Instead of being at the end of the action, Caesar's death is at the centre, something that the Greeks never produced – but Shakespeare goes way beyond the Greek tragedy. This is because the tragedy is really an exploration of the political and religious consequences of Caesar's death. From beginning to end, Caesar's death is at the centre of the representation and the author's main concern. It literally engenders the Roman Empire, which, for Shakespeare, is a sacred monarchy, because it is founded on Caesar's collective murder. The whole mimetic theory is present in Shakespeare in such an explicit form that every time I think about it I get totally enthused.

Speaking about the foundation of Rome, in Buffalo you also met Michel Serres, who made important contributions to mimetic theory.

I met him first in Buffalo where he came several times to teach, but he also got a part-time position at Johns Hopkins, so we met when I got back there in 1975. Indeed, the greatest collaboration we had was on his course on Livy, when he was writing *Rome, le livre des fondations*.[46] I was attending this course and I remember distinctly his explanation of the Tarpeian rock, which is easily identifiable as sacrificial. Tarpeia, the daughter of Spurius Tarpeius, one of the commanders in charge of the defence of Rome, betrayed the city by allowing the Sabines to invade it, and when they came to conquer the city, instead of covering her with gold and bracelets and jewellery, as promised, they threw their shields upon her (i.e. they were crushing her to death). The Tarpeian rock later became a place for capital punishment, where people were forced to jump from the cliff. Stoning (or crushing) and throwing someone from a rock are forms of sacrificial killings which are related to each other. They are forms of capital punishment where everybody participates and nobody is responsible. Nobody touches the victim. It is a form of collective and unanimous capital punishment, and it is a way of uniting the community when you have neither the central power nor judicial system that can prevent mimetic conflicts. There must be a device that makes collective killing possible at a distance, without any polluting contact with the victim. This is really the beginning of the state as an institution. There are, for instance, stoning scenes in Leviticus. It is clearly established that there must be two witnesses and those two have to cast the first stones. After the casting of the first two stones, everybody is supposed to follow suit. As in all sacrificial rites, it is the ritualization of a spontaneous collective murder.

In that sense, when we are told that the custom of the *pharmakos* must have disappeared very early because the Greeks were too civilized, it is simply wrong. In *I See Satan,* I analysed a text written six centuries after classical Greece. It is a panegyric by the pagan guru Apollonius of Tiana, which describes the stoning of a beggar who was chosen randomly. This odious crime was concocted by the guru himself in the attempt to cure a plague epidemic in the city of Ephesus. While at the beginning the community tries to resist, they eventually cast their stones with such enthusiasm that they find a monster when they try to remove the corpse. Because of their unanimous frenzy they find not a beggar but a kind of monster who is the demon of the plague; he is killed and therefore the

city is cured. Apollonius and his biographer Philostratus are quite proud of the way the whole event unfolded. (This was three centuries after St Paul!)[47]

You mentioned Serres' Rome, *but also in* Le Parasite, *in* Les Origines de la geometrie *and in* Atlas *we have elements of the scapegoat mechanism.*[48]
The origin of knowledge is also the origin of order, i.e. of symbolic classification. In order to have a symbol, you must have totality. Religion provides it, and religion, as an institution, comes into being through the scapegoat mechanism. I cannot think of any other way of constituting an originary totality. The first symbol, the scapegoat, is the source of totality, which organizes social relations in a new way. Then, through ritual, the system becomes a learning process, since ritual is repetition. Of course, primitive societies don't repeat to learn, as students do, they repeat not to have violence, but eventually it amounts to the same thing. It is also a process of learning in an experimental way, which is rooted in an event which is taken as a model.

Certainly the most important event of this second period at Johns Hopkins was the publication of Things Hidden *in 1978. Please tell us more about the genesis of this book and its peculiar structure – it is in fact a long interview.*
When I wrote *Violence and the Sacred* I really wanted to have a two-part book: one part on archaic culture and the other on Christianity, but eventually I got rid of the part on Christianity – although I already had a lot of material on it. The problem was that it was taking me so long to complete the book that I decided to publish just the part on the primitive religions. So, *Violence and the Sacred* was about two-thirds done and I was working on improving its composition. My first book was on mimetic desire and rivalry in modern literature, my second was the extension of the theses on mimetic desire to archaic religion, but I deliberately put mimetic desire only in the sixth chapter. Eric Gans was the only person who really questioned the composition of that book. He asked me: 'Why only in the sixth chapter? It should be the first, because you have to start from the beginning, from mimetic desire.'

I started with a chapter on sacrifice because that was going to be the main subject of the book. But one of the many reasons I did it in that way was that I didn't want to give the impression that I was repeating my first book. That's the reason why I only put mimetic desire in the sixth chapter. So many reviews failed to perceive the continuity between my first and second books, missing the presence of mimetic desire. They just saw the scapegoat theory which derived from the rite in Leviticus. The French anthropologists basically ignored me, despite the fact that at first I had a good press. They

didn't understand the relation of my second book to my first: that it was an extension of the mimetic theory to all culture as well as a complete theory. Perhaps the misunderstanding was partly my fault, because I did not start with the essential point: the mimetic rivalry (i.e. human propensity for conflict, above all among neighbours). I didn't suspect at that time the gulf which divides even the clearest of the authors (and I was not one of them) from his reader, even the most receptive, even the most equipped to understand what is new in a book.

Then I started to write *Things Hidden* because I wanted to present the whole theory in a complete way. I wanted to have a part devoted to mimetic desire, then the primitive world and the process of hominization, and then the sacred and Christianity. I started to write *Things Hidden* immediately, in 1971, even before the publication of *Violence and the Sacred*. I never stopped working, not even for a single day. For me it was really the continuation of my project, because I was still elaborating the same theory. It was a long and hard process because I was obsessed by the apparent impossibility of explaining myself. Not that I had trouble in getting new examples of archaic religion: quite the contrary. What was hard for me was to work out how to juxtapose all these examples and show how they illuminate each other.

By that time, Jean-Michel Oughourlian, a French psychiatrist, had written to me because he wanted me to be part of his doctoral committee in France. He was working on drug-addiction and he had discovered that mimetic theory was relevant to his field of enquiry.[49] Then he came to Baltimore to do a long interview with me, which I thought was not good enough to be published. I then suggested we do a sort of dialogue (or a trialogue . . .), using the two-thirds of the text I already had. Writing the book was really completing my manuscript, paraphrasing at times, dividing the material into questions and answers. This book wasn't written with the same care as my previous one; nevertheless, it isn't an improvised interview.

How long did it take to finish Things Hidden*?*
It took the entire summer of 1977. In late 1976 Oughourlian and his colleague Guy Lefort came to Baltimore. By the autumn, it was ready. Had it not been for Oughourlian and Lefort, it would probably have taken me at least another year to finish. It might have been better, but probably it was good for me to get shot of it because I was exhausted. The book was on the bestseller list for several months! Let me say that Françoise Verny was the one who turned it into a bestseller. She had a very good relationship with the press and television. There were also some people, like Jean Boissonat, who became

interested in the book and they were insiders of the French media. Françoise Verny could also get people invited to the famous *Apostrophe,* and that was two-thirds of her power!

What is really new in the book is the central section on Christianity. Most of my ideas are there but with two mistakes that I was able to amend only in later books, *I see Satan* and *Celui par qui le scandale arrive.* The first is the rejection of the word 'sacrifice' in relation to Christianity. The second is the hasty and wrongheaded dismissal of the Epistle to the Hebrews. Paradoxically, these errors contributed to the success of the book. They made me someone who could be used for anti-Christian propaganda.

Are there theoretical contributions by Oughourlian and Lefort?
Yes. Oughourlian wrote one entire section of the chapter on 'interdividual psychology', 'Hypnosis and possession',[50] and you can tell it has a different style.

In The Puppet of Desire, *Oughourlian writes that the concept of 'interdividual psychology'*[51] *was developed during the dialogue.*
Yes, indeed. The actual term is mine, but Jean-Michel's contribution was fundamental.

Things Hidden *was the book which made you known to a wider audience. How was it received in academia?*
Total silence. This silence is standard academic procedure with books that are too successful with the non-academic public.

Don't you think that is changing? Academics are now eager to get attention from the media in order to have more prestige in academia.
Yes. But one fact doesn't contradict the other. Just the opposite. The more you want the same thing, the more enemies you gain. So the fact that they are secretly media-oriented doesn't mean they tolerate you better if you have even some moderate success. If they were really indifferent to the media, there would be no problem. You can tell immediately who is and who isn't genuinely indifferent to the media. The people willing to acknowledge that they aren't indifferent are usually the least media-obsessed. I think that the media success, even though it can please, cannot assure the durable success of the ideas around which the whole buzz has been made. The optimists want us to believe that eventually the more remarkable and truthful ideas will triumph. I'm not really sure they are right ...

5 '... To the end'

You moved to Stanford in 1980, and retired in 1995. Whilst there you founded an interdisciplinary centre, which was responsible for the organization of very important colloquia.[52]

The starting-point of the centre was in 1982, with the symposium on 'Disorder and Order'. We had funds, because Donald Kennedy, the president at that time, supported the humanities. We invited several Nobel prizewinners, like Kenneth Arrow, Ilya Prigogine and Heinz von Foerster, to that symposium.[53]

The intellectual project behind this interdisciplinary centre was really conceived by Jean-Pierre Dupuy. He made me aware of the relationship between 'chaos theory' and the mimetic theory. I didn't contribute much to that, with the exception of an article published in *Understanding Origins*.[54] There, I talk about Derrida's concept of supplement in relation to mythology. I'm sure that the logical flaw Derrida has identified in Rousseau and other authors reflects something which is already more visibly present in mythology, and which vitiates all philosophical exploration of origins.

He also connected me with a group of economists at the CREA (Centre de Recherche en Epistémologie Appliquée) in Paris, such as Lucien Scubla and André Orleans. Dupuy was really the catalyst for many things. He was the one who set up the interdisciplinary programme in CREA, which was grounded in mimetic theory. Dupuy was the first to see this, and this interdisciplinary approach was useful to me and gave me some ideas.

As far as interdisciplinarity is concerned, the mimetic mechanism might be considered a remarkable example of Gregory Bateson's concept of double-bind, as you pointed out in Things Hidden *... Did you have any interaction with Bateson and Paul Watzlawick, while they were at the Mental Research Institute of Palo Alto?*

I first met Bateson in 1975. Later I became particularly interested in *Naven*.[55] It is a book about a single ritual. According to Bateson's own vocabulary, this ritual produces what he calls *symmetrical schismogenesis,* division of forms, which, in my own vocabulary, designates the doubles, or rather the undifferentiation of the doubles within the paroxysm of the mimetic crisis.[56] Unfortunately he died in 1980, the very same year that I came here permanently. After Bateson, I read the work of Paul Watzlawick,[57] and we

had two or three symposia to which we invited him and he attended them.[58] But it would be something of an overstatement to say that those meetings and exchanges really influenced my work.

At the Cerisy-la-Salle colloquium your work was at the centre of an interdisciplinary discussion.[59] *In the same vein, the 'Colloquium on Violence and Religion' (COV&R)*[60] *also provides a forum for this sort of approach to mimetic theory.*

Indeed, some researchers are still trying to give an interdisciplinary scope to my theory. For instance, Cesario Bandera, whose main interest is literature. There was also the Swiss theologian Raymund Schwager who became interested in chaos theory, who unfortunately passed away recently. Schwager came to visit me in France in 1972, and he was very interested in the Christian aspects of my theory. He was writing a book that runs parallel to *Things Hidden,* and as a matter of fact it was published a little before *Things Hidden.*[61] He created a theology which is tied to mimetic desire, and which he developed independently. He coordinated a centre in Innsbruck together with several other people, such as Josef Neuradomski and Wolfgang Palaver, whose collaboration is still most precious to me.[62]

You published several books after Things Hidden, *trying to clarify further your theory, above all from a Christian perspective. Do you have any other long-term projects?*

I would like to rectify the perspective of my earlier books in regard to archaic religions. So I'm always rewriting the whole project within an expanded period. I also became interested in Hindu mythology, and I gave a couple of lectures on a mimetic reading of Hindu mythology at the Bibliothèque Nationale in Lyon in 2002.[63]

There is an interesting book by a Dutch scholar, J.C. Heesteman of Leiden, entitled *The Inner Conflict of Tradition,*[64] which studies the violent roots of even the least violent Hindu rituals. This book deals with the violent nature of ritual and archaic religions in a fashion that brings it very close in some respects to the mimetic theory. I could do the same thing with the *Mahabharata,* the Indian epic, which is an absolutely astonishing and exemplary book from the viewpoint of my theory, because everything functions sacrificially. I may devote some time to writing a commentary on Vedic and post-Vedic Indian texts, but to write a book about sacrifice in India is such an enormous task ... One must first acquaint readers with

the essential data we all supposedly know in the case of the Greeks or the Hebrews. And I am not sure I am ready to do that.

Finally, allow us a question about your conversion. In a meeting with theologians of Liberation, held in Brazil in 1990, you confessed: 'As far as I'm concerned, it was my work that led to my conversion to Christianity. Both are completely joined and blended. I have never spoken about my conversion, because it seemed to me difficult, embarrassing, and a topic too dangerous to be approached.'[65] *However, in* Quand ces choses commenceront, *a long interview given to Michel Treguer, you have provided some explanation of your conversion.*[66] *Perhaps by 1994 it wasn't a dangerous topic any longer.*
The word 'dangerous' is excessive. What I meant is that my Christian faith is impeding the diffusion of the mimetic theory, given that academics today feel the obligation to be anti-religious and to keep religion at bay.

You said to Michel Treguer that yours had been an intellectual conversion.[67] *What did you mean?*
What I wanted to say is that it was my work that oriented me towards Christianity and convinced me of its truth. It is not because I'm Christian that I think as I do; it is because of my research that I became Christian. I also question the distinction between an intellectual and an emotional conversion. As for St Paul, the word 'spirit', for me, includes both the emotional and the intellectual side of a human being; and rather than 'intellectual', the expression 'the life of the mind' should be used in this instance. Conversion is a form of intelligence, of understanding.

In your specific case it is the understanding of the mimetic nature of desire.
Better: the nature of one's relationship to desire. In a talk at a recent COV&R meeting in Boston, Raymund Schwager said that my theory requires a conversion, because the main thing is understanding that one is always part of the mimetic mechanism.[68] I think that the problematic of authenticity, of existential authenticity, is important. What is authentic and what is inauthentic desire? Inauthentic desire is the desire that is influenced by others. When, for instance, Heidegger thinks of others, he always refers to the crowd. This is a pre-understanding of mimetic desire, which, however, excludes the self, because the self is always inevitably authentic in opposition to the others. The invention of mimetic desire is, in a way, only the suppression of that distinction: there is no authentic desire and any

desire is mediated by others. But this suppression implies the conversion to which Schwager was referring. A conversion in which you accept that you are part of the mimetic mechanism which rules human relationships, in which the observer acknowledges the fact that he himself is implicated in his observation. The distinction between an 'authentic' and 'inauthentic' desire is not always groundless, but when it coincides with the distinction between myself and the others, I think it is quite suspicious. Martin Heidegger believes that he stands apart from any mimetic influence from his social surrounding, with *Das Man,* that is the tagging along of all these people who believe and desire everything which is believed and desired around them. Therefore, in the moment in which everybody became Nazi around him, Heidegger became Nazi too ...

Notes

1. Right-wing journal, founded in 1908 and edited by the writer Charles Maurras (1868–1952), the historian Jacques Bainville (1879–1936) and the journalist Léon Daudet (1868–1942). At the time of the 'Dreyfus affair', a nationalist and anti-Dreyfus committee was founded which later became the 'French Action League'. Influenced by Maurras, this movement supported 'radical nationalism' and anti-parliamentary monarchy, with the Catholic Church as the guardian of traditional order.
2. François Mauriac (1885–1970) was a Christian writer. He is the author of several novels, including *La Robe prétexte* (1914); *La Chair et le sang* (1920); *Thérèse Desqueyroux* (1927), *La Fin de la nuit* (1935). He also wrote essays on Racine and Pascal and the famous *Vie de Jésus* (1936). He received the Nobel Prize in 1952.
3. René Char (1907–88), French poet, spent his youth in Provence. With his first books, *Artine* (1930) and *Le Marteau sans maître* (1934), he came close to the surrealist experience. During the Second World War he became a legendary figure in the resistance against the Germans. His book *Feuillets d'hypnos* (1946) was inspired by the wartime experience. Other works include *Recherche de la base et du sommet* (1955), and *Commune présence* (1964).
4. In September 1966, at the suggestion of Jean Beaufret – French philosopher and translator of Heidegger – Char invited Heidegger to a series of annual seminars in Le Thor, Provence. The seminars (held in 1966, 1968 and 1969) focused on Heraclitus and Parmenides and they are published in *Seminare, Gesamtausgabe,* Vol. 15 (Frankfurt a.M.: Klostermann, 1986) and in the French translation in *Questiones IV* (Paris: Gallimard, 1958), pp. 197–306. With reference to Heidegger's contact with Char, see Rüdiger Safranski, *Martin*

Heidegger. Between Good and Evil, trans. Edwald Osers (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998), pp. 303–4.

5. Christian Zervos is the author of fundamental studies on prehistoric and ancient art: *L'Art de la Mesopotamie de la fin du quatrième millenaire au xve siècle avant notre ère* (1935); *L'Art en Grèce des temps prehistoriques au debut du XVIIIe siècle* (1936); *L'Art de la Crète neolithique et minoenne* (1956); *L'Art des cíclades* (1957). He also wrote a book on Constantin Brancusi (1957).
6. Lucien Goldmann, 'Marx, Lukács, Girard et la sociologie du roman', in *Médiations,* 2 (1961): 1943–53. Also in *Pour une sociologie du roman* (Paris: Gallimard, 1961), pp. 19–57, with the title 'Introduction aux problèmes d'une sociologie du roman'.
7. René Girard, 'Les Mondes Proustiens', *Médiations,* 1 (1961): 97–125.
8. René Girard, *Mensonge romantique et vérité romanesque* (Paris: Grasset, 1961); trans. Yvonne Freccero, *Deceit, Desire and the Novel: self and other in literary structure* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976).
9. See R. Girard, 'Theory and its Terrors', in Thomas Kavanagh (ed.), *The Limits of Theory* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1989), pp. 225–54.
10. See R. Girard, *The Scapegoat* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986), p. 113. '[When] we speak of mobilizing the military, or the "militants" who must be *mobilized.* What is at work? The formation of the famous group in fusion that Jean-Paul Sartre dreamed of, without of course ever saying that it will produce nothing but victims.'
11. René Girard, 'American Opinion on France, 1940–1943', PhD dissertation, Indiana University, 1953.
12. Saint-John Perse (1887–1975), pseudonym of Alexis Saint-Léger. Léger was a diplomat and a poet. He was exiled to the USA by the Vichy goverment in 1940. He received the Nobel Prize in 1960. Among his books are *Eloges* (1911); *Anabase* (1924); *Exil* (1942); *Vents* (1946); *Chronique* (1960); *Oiseaux* (1963).
13. René Girard, 'L'Histoire dans l'oeuvre de Saint-John Perse', in *Romantic Review,* 44 (1953): 47–55. It was republished in *Honneur à Saint-John Perse* (Paris: Gallimard, 1965).
14. See *L'Etre et le néant* (1943) (Paris: Gallimard, 1991), in particular the first part, 'Le Problème de néant', Ch. 2, 'La Mauvaise foi', pp. 82–107.
15. 'Entretien avec René Girard', in François Lagarde, *René Girard ou la christianisation des sciences humaines* (New York: Peter Lang, 1994), p. 191.
16. Miguel de Cervantes, 'El Curioso impertinente', in *Don Quijote de la Mancha* (1605) (Madrid: Cátedra, 1995), Vol. I, Chs 33–5, pp. 395–438. This very analysis is in *Deceit, Desire and the Novel,* pp. 51–2.
17. Sophie Feodorovna Rostopchine, Comtesse de Ségur (1799–1874) was a French writer of Russian birth. She is best-known today for her novel *Les Malheurs de Sophie* ('Sophie's Misfortunes').

18. R. Girard, *A Theatre of Envy: William Shakespeare* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1991).
19. 'Entretien avec René Girard', in François Lagarde, *René Girard,* p. 190.
20. See, for instance, Robert Champigny, *Stages on Sartre's Way, 1938–52* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1959); *Sur un heros païen* (Paris: Gallimard, 1959); *Pour une esthetique de l'essai, analyses critiques (Breton, Sartre, Robbe-Grillet)* (Paris: Minard, 1967).
21. André Malraux, *Psychologie de l'art* (Geneva: A. Skira, 1947–50), 3 vols: *Psychologie de l'art: le musée imaginaire* (1947); *Psychologie de l'art: la creation artistique* (1948); *Psychologie de l'art: la monnaie de l'absolu. Etudes complementaires* (1950).
22. R. Girard, *La Violence et le sacré* (Paris: Grasset, 1972), trans. Patrick Gregory, *Violence and the Sacred* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1977).
23. See R. Girard, 'Les Réflections sur l'art dans les romans de Malraux', *Modern Language Notes,* 68 (1953): 544–6. On Girard's analysis of Malraux's work, see also, 'The role of eroticism in Malraux's fiction', *Yale French Studies,* 11 (1953): 47–55 and 'Le Règne animal dans les romans de Malraux', *French Review,* 26 (1953): 261–7.
24. René Girard, 'Valéry et Stendhal', in *PMLA,* 59 (1954): 389–94.
25. Leo Spitzer (1887–1961), Austrian literary critic and philologist, is considered, along with Charles Bally, one of the founders of modern stylistics. He ended a long teaching career with a position at Johns Hopkins University. His books *Stil-studien* (1928) and *Romanische Stil und Literaturstudien* (1931) include most of his essays. He also published *Essays on Historical Semantics* (1948). In this context, it is worth mentioning Leo Spitzer's welcoming lecture to Salinas's appointment to the Spanish chair at Johns Hopkins in September 1940: 'El Conceptismo interior de Pedro Salinas'. See *Lingüística e historia literaria* (Madrid: Gredos, 1955), pp. 227–94.
26. Pedro Salinas (1892–1951), Spanish poet. He taught at the University of Seville and Madrid. He also lectured at the Sorbonne in Paris, and at Cambridge University, England. In 1936 he moved to the United States. His poetry mainly focuses on love themes (*Presagios,* 1923; *La Voz e la debida,* 1933; *Razón de amor,* 1936). He also published novels (*Víspera del gozo,* 1926; *El Desnudo impecable,* 1951) and plays. As a literary critic, he published among others: *Reality and the Poet in Spanish Poetry* (1940) and *La Literatura española del siglo XX* (1941).
27. Originally entitled *Über Ressentiment und moralisches Werturteil* (1912), English trans. William W. Holdheim. *Ressentiment,* ed. with intro. Lewis A. Coser (New York: Free Press of Glencoe, 1961).
28. The *ex-ergo* in *Deceit, Desire and the Novel* – 'Man has a god or an idol' – is taken from Scheler's book.
29. See Georges Poulet, *Les Métamorphoses du cercle* (Paris: Plon, 1961), pp. 375–93.

30. Charles S. Singleton was one of the leading Dante scholars of the twentieth century. He taught at Harvard and Johns Hopkins University. He is the author of many authoritative books on Italian literature. Besides a famous edition of Boccaccio's *Decameron* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1974), he was the author of studies on Dante: *Dante's works: An Essay on the Vita Nuova* (1949); *Dante's Commedia: Elements of Structure* (1954) and *Journey to Beatrice* (1957), all published by Harvard University Press. He also produced an annotated translation of the *Divine Comedy* in six volumes for the Bollingen Series of Princeton University Press in 1970–75.
31. John Freccero, 'The Neutral Angels from Dante to Matteo Palmieri', PhD thesis, Johns Hopkins University, 1958.
32. Eric Gans is Professor of French at UCLA. He studied with René Girard in the late 1960s at Johns Hopkins. Generative anthropology is a theory formulated by Eric Gans in books such as *The End of Culture: Toward a Generative Anthropology* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1985); *Originary Thinking: Elements of Generative Anthropology* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1993). He is the editor of the online journal *Anthropoetics,* devoted to the discussion of generative anthropology (http://www.anthropoetics.ucla.edu). Andrew McKenna is the author of *Violence and Difference. Girard, Derrida, and Deconstruction* (Urbana and Chicago, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1992).
33. See, for instance, Cesareo Bandera, *The Sacred Game* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1994).
34. Richard Macksey and Eugenio Donato (eds), *The Languages of Criticism and the Sciences of Man* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1970). René Girard wrote the introduction to the volume: 'Tiresias and the Critic', pp. 15–21.
35. Michel Deguy, 'Destin et désir du roman', in *Critique,* 176 (1962): 19–31.
36. Indeed, *De la Grammatologie* was published one year after the symposium: Jacques Derrida, *De la Grammatologie* (Paris: Editions de Minuit, 1967).
37. Jacques Derrida, 'Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of Human Sciences', in Macksey and Donato, *The Languages of Criticism,* pp. 247–65.
38. See René Girard, *Oedipus Unbound. Selected Writings on Rivalry and Desire,* ed. M. Anspach (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2004).
39. René Girard, with Jean-Michel Oughourlian and Guy Lefort, *Des Choses cachées depuis la fondation du monde* (Paris: Grasset, 1978), trans. Stephen Bann and Michael Metteer, *Things Hidden since the Foundation of the World,* research undertaken in collaboration with Jean-Michel Oughourlian and Guy Lefort (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1987).
40. See *Diacritics,* 8.1 (spring 1978). See also the debate organized by the journal *Esprit,* after the publication of *Violence and the Sacred: Esprit* (November 1973): 513–81.

41. Victor Turner, 'Review of *Violence and the Sacred* by René Girard', *Human Nature* (1978): 24.
42. Lévi-Strauss's criticisms of Girard's work are mostly indirect. In a recent essay, 'Apologue des amibes' (in Jean-Luc Jamard, Emmanuel Terray and Maragarita Xanthakou [eds], *En Substances. Textes pour Françoise Héritier* [Paris: Fayard, 2000]), he wrote:

    > The simple exercise . . . shows that far from denying or ignoring violence, as I have often been reproached for doing, I place it at the origin of social life and ground it on deeper foundations than those who, through sacrifice or the murder of the scapegoat, would make society arise from customs which presuppose its existence. (p. 496)

    For Girard's answer, see the interview with Maria Stella Barberi: Girard, *Celui par qui le scandale arrive,* pp. 163–4.
43. Author, among others, of *Tennôsei no bunka jinrui gaku* ['Cultural Anthropology of the Emperor System'] and *'Haisha' no seishinshi* ['Psychological History of the Defeated'].
44. See, for instance, Masao Yamaguchi, 'Vers une poétique du bouc émissaire', in Paul Dumouchel (ed.), *Violence et vérité. Autour de René Girard* (Paris: Grasset, 1985), pp. 421–33.
45. Kenneth Burke presents his consideration of sacrifice and scapegoat in several of his books: see, for instance, *The Philosophy of Literary Form* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1973), pp. 29–51; *The Rhetoric of Religion* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1973), pp. 183–96; and *On Symbols and Society* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1989), pp. 282–302.
46. Michel Serres, *Rome, le livre des fondations* (Paris: Grasset, 1983), trans. Felicia McCarren, *Rome: The Book of Foundations* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1991).
47. See *Je vois Satan tomber comme l'éclair* (Paris: Grasset, 1999), pp. 83–5, trans. James G. Williams, *I See Satan Fall like Lightning* (New York: Orbis, 2001).
48. Michel Serres, *Le Parasite* (Paris: Grasset, 1980), trans. with notes, Lawrence R. Schehr, *The Parasite* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1982); *Les Origines de la geometrie* (Paris: Flammarion, 1993); *Atlas* (Paris: Julliard, 1994).
49. Jean-Michel Oughorlian is a professor of psychopathology at the Sorbonne in Paris. He is also a psychiatrist in the American Hospital in Paris. Author of *Un Mime nommé désir: Hystérie, transe, possession, adorcisme* (Paris: Grasset et Fasquelle, 1982), trans. Eugene Webb, *The Puppet of Desire. The Psychology of Hysteria, Possession, and Hypnosis* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1991).
50. Girard, *Things Hidden,* Book III – 'Interdividual Psychology', Chapter 2 – 'Desire without object', section D – 'Hypnosis and Possession', pp. 316–25.

51. Jean-Michel Oughourlian, *The Puppet of Desire,* p. 15.
52. In 1986 René Girard became co-director, along with Jean-Pierre Dupuy, of the 'Program of Interdisciplinary Research' at Stanford University. Three colloquia were then organized: 'Understanding Origin' (September 1987); 'Paradoxes of Self-Reference in the Humanities, Law and the Social Sciences' (May 1988); and 'Vengeance: A Colloquium in Literature, Philosophy and Anthropology' (October 1988). The proceedings of the first colloquium were edited by Jean-Pierre Dupuy and Francisco Varela in *Understanding Origins* (Dordrecht: Kluwer, 1992).
53. See Paisley Livingston (ed.), *Disorder and Order* (Stanford, CA: Anima Libri, 1984); Ilya Prigogine, 'Order out of Chaos', pp. 41–60; Kenneth Arrow, 'The Economy as Order and Disorder', pp. 162–76; Heinz von Foerster, 'Disorder/Order: Discovery or Invention?', pp. 177–89.
54. Girard, 'Origins: A View from the Literature', in Dupuy and Varela (eds), *Understanding Origins,* pp. 27–42.
55. Gregory Bateson, *Naven* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1972). In reference to the concept of *double-bind,* see G. Bateson, 'Toward a Theory of Schizophrenia', in *Steps to an Ecology of Mind* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1972), pp. 201 and 206.
56. See Girard, *Things Hidden,* pp. 291–4.
57. Paul Watzlawick, Janet Baevin, Don Jackson, *Pragmatics of Human Communication* (New York: Norton, 1967).
58. In the 'Disorder and Order' colloquium, Watzlawick presented 'Some Principles of Disorder and Order in Human Systems', in Livingston, *Disorder and Order,* pp. 61–71.
59. The 'Colloque de Cerisy-la-Salle' on the work of René Girard was organized by Paul Dumouchel and Jean-Pierre Dupuy and was held on 11–18 June 1983, with the title 'Violence et vérité. Autour de René Girard'. Paul Dumouchel edited the proceedings of the colloquium: *Violence et verité. Autour de René Girard* (Paris: Grasset, 1985).
60. 'The Colloquium on Violence and Religion' (COV&R) is an international and interdisciplinary group of scholars, founded in 1996, that takes its inspiration from the work of René Girard. Its object is 'to explore, criticize, and develop the mimetic model of the relationship between violence and religion in the genesis and maintenance of culture'. It holds an annual conference. The official journal is *Contagion: Journal of Violence, Mimesis, and Culture.*
61. R. Schwager, *Brauchen wir einen Sundenbock?* (Munich, 1978). Girard and Schwager have sustained an intense dialogue throughout the years. Besides the book quoted by Girard, Schwager wrote various articles on the mimetic theory, for instance: 'Haine sans raison. La perspective de René Girard', *Christus,* 121 (1984): 118–26; 'Pour une théologie de la colère de Dieu', in Dumouchel *Volence et verité,* pp. 59–68; 'Der Nachahamer als Sündenbock: zu René Girards Anthropologie', *Evangelische kommentare,* 17.12 (1984): 680–3. In *Le*

Bouc émissaire, Girard refers twice to Schwager's book (pp. 152 and 282), and once in *Je vois Satan tomber comme l'éclair* (p. 44).

62. The 'Theologische Literaturdokumentation Universität Innsbruck' provides an up-to-date bibliography on Girard and on the mimetic theory which can be accessed at: http://info.uibk.ac.at/c/c2/new/fak/mimdok/suche/index.html.
63. See R. Girard, *Le Sacrifice* (Paris: Bibliothèque Nationale de France, 2003).
64. J.C. Heesteman, *The Inner Conflict of Tradition: Essays in Indian Ritual, Kingship, and Society* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1985).
65. Hugo Assmann (ed.), *René Girard com teólogos da libertação. Um diálogo sobre ídolos e sacrifícios* (Petrópolis: Editora Vozes, 1991), p. 46.
66. René Girard, *Quand ces choses commenceront ... Entretiens avec Michel Treguer* (Paris: Arléa, 1994), pp. 190–5.
67. Ibid. p. 191.
68. Raymund Schwager, 'Conversion and Authenticity: Lonergan and Girard', COV&R meeting. Boston College, Boston, 31 May–3 June 2000.

CHAPTER 2
'A THEORY BY WHICH TO WORK': THE MIMETIC MECHANISM

> Here, then, I had at last got a theory by which to work.
>
> (Charles Darwin, *Autobiography*)

1 The mimetic mechanism at work

You have always put forward a genetic explanation of the origin of culture alongside a hypothesis of its historical evolution. In this chapter, for the sake of clarity, we would like to discuss the core notions of your theory in a synchronic form, as a mechanism which engenders both inter-individual psychological dynamics and more general social phenomena. And to start with, we would like you to distinguish between the notion of mimetic desire and mimetic mechanism as set out in your books.

The expression 'mimetic mechanism' covers a phenomelogical sequence which is quite broad. It describes the whole process, beginning with mimetic desire, which then becomes mimetic rivalry, eventually escalating to the stage of a mimetic crisis and finally ending with the scapegoat resolution. In order to account for this sequence, we should start from the very beginning, i.e. with mimetic desire.

First of all, we should distinguish between desire and appetites. Appetites for things like food or sex – which aren't necessarily connected with desire – are biologically grounded. However, all appetites can be contaminated with mimetic desire as soon as there is a model, and the presence of the model is the decisive element in my theory. If desire is mimetic, i.e. imitative, then the subject will desire the same object possessed or desired by his model. Now, either the subject is in the same relational domain as his model or he is in a different one. If he is in a different domain, then of course he cannot possess his model's object and he can only have what I call a relationship

of *external mediation* with his model. For instance, if he and his favourite movie star, who might act as his role-model, live in different worlds, then a direct conflict between subject and model is out of the question, and the external mediation ends up being a positive one – or at least not a conflictual one. However, if he belongs to the same contextual domain, to the same world as his model, if his model is also his peer, then his model's objects are accessible. Therefore, rivalry will eventually erupt. I call this type of mimetic relationship *internal mediation,* and it is intrinsically self-reinforcing. Due to the physical and psychological proximity of subject and model, the internal mediation tends to become more and more symmetrical: the subject will tend to imitate his model as much as his model imitates him. Eventually, the subject will become the model of his model, just as the imitator will become the imitator of his imitator. One is always moving towards more symmetry, and thus always towards more conflict, for symmetry cannot but produce *doubles,* as I call them at this moment of intense rivalry.[1] Doubling occurs as soon as the object has disappeared in the heat of the rivalry: the two rivals become more and more concerned with defeating the opponent for the sake of it, rather than obtaining the object, which eventually becomes irrelevant, as it only exists as an excuse for the escalation of the dispute. Thus, the rivals become more and more undifferentiated, identical: doubles. A mimetic crisis is always a crisis of undifferentiation that erupts when the roles of subject and model are reduced to that of rivals. It's the disappearance of the object which makes it possible. This crisis not only escalates between the contenders, but it becomes contagious with bystanders.

This hypothesis contradicts the modern conception of desire, seen as the authentic expression of the self. Desire is not something which 'belongs' to the individual, but it is rather a form of direction of appetites and interests, as it provides an augmentation of cognitive focalization in respect of the objects of reality, and this 'vector' of direction is provided by a model.

The real question is: what is desire? The modern world is arch-individualistic. It wants desire to be strictly individual, unique. In other words, the attachment to the object of desire is, in a way, predetermined. If desire is only mine, I will always desire the same things. If desire is so fixed, it means that there isn't much difference between desire and instincts. In order to have *mobility* of desire – in relation to both appetites and instincts from one side and the social milieu from the other – the relevant difference is *imitation,* that is, the presence of the *model* or models, since everybody has one or more. Only mimetic desire can be *free,* can be *genuine* desire, human desire, because

it *must* choose a model more than the object itself. Mimetic desire is what makes us human, what makes possible for us the breakout from routinely animalistic appetites, and constructs our own, albeit inevitably unstable, identities. It is this very mobility of desire, its mimetic nature, and this very instability of our identities, that makes us capable of *adaptation,* that gives the possibility to learn and to *evolve.*

It is interesting what you say because if one considers pathologies such as autism, which is defined as a radical impairment in the relational activity with others, what has become clear to researchers is the fact that imitation is the mechanism by which the infant comes to know something of the inner life of the other. It provides the early bridge between self and the other. The infant's capacity to translate the behaviour of others and to perform the same behaviour is foundational for its later development in intersubjectivity, communication and social cognition.[2] *Failing to imitate means radical cultural impairment.*
Perhaps we fail to understand the mimetic nature of desire because we rarely refer to the first stages of human development. Every child has appetites, instincts and a given cultural milieu in which he learns by imitating adults or peers. Imitation and learning are inseparable. Normally the word 'imitation' is reserved to designate what is considered *inauthentic* – and maybe that's why in the humanities there isn't a real theory of psychological action that accounts for imitative behaviour. In discussing the mimetic hypotheses, Paul Ricoeur said that if you are affected by imitative behaviour you are seen as a child who plays, meaning you are not in control of your actions – and in fact in imitation there is always a certain degree of 'unconsciousness' involved.[3] What we have in the social sciences are normally theories, as for instance in Piaget, which account for these phenomena and behaviours as limited to the early stages of psychological personal development, and they are seldom extended to the lives of adults. We don't resign ourselves to the recognition that we are imitating people we admire and envy as the expression of our desires. We see it as something to be ashamed of. Given this lack of understanding of mimesis, one may wonder if it wouldn't be better to return to imitation in the terms posited by Greek philosophy, as for instance by Plato or Aristotle. When Plato talks about imitation in the *Republic,* suddenly the image of the mirror appears, as one of the signs of the mimetic crisis: it is the sign of the appearance of the doubles, and that's why Plato eventually refuses mimesis, because he knows the danger of conflict behind imitative ideas and practices, which are not simply related to art, but to human affairs in general.[4]

Why have you opted for the word mimetic *instead of* imitative*?*
I employ the two words differently. There is less awareness in *mimetism* and more in *imitation.* I do not want to reduce mimesis to mimetic desire in all its forms. It is a typical twentieth-century epistemological attitude. Behaviourism, for instance, is a total refusal of imitation. This is also the case with Freud – as I already remarked in *Violence and the Sacred.*[5] In *Beyond the Pleasure Principle,* the word *imitation* (*Nachahmung*) is everywhere, but it has no role in Freud's theory. I think one of the reasons for this general avoidance is that the concept of imitation, removed from its conflictual element, is too 'simple' and disappoints the present (very mimetic) appetite for 'complexity'. I'm fully aware of this because my first book exemplified this way of thinking. This attitude of refusing to discuss the concept of imitation is still a dominant trend in our culture, and probably the emergence of mimetic theory is part of this process, but also a reaction to it. In his book *Le Feu sacré,* Régis Debray 'praises' me in 15 ferocious pages; he ties my work to Tarde's and to the tradition of imitation starting from Aristotle. Of course, he never takes into consideration the notion of mimetic rivalry ...

As a matter of fact, in recent years imitation has become a topic of growing interest within the fields of cognitive science and neuroscience.[6] *Developmental psychologists have claimed that newborns imitate in a way that cannot be explained in terms of conditioning or the triggering of innate behaviours.*[7] *Neurophysiologists have discovered an interesting class of neuron, the so-called 'mirror neurons', which 'fire' both when an individual is performing a particular movement, and when she is observing the same movement by another person.*[8]
Indeed, this is a very promising development in the understanding of the deep cognitive structure of our mimetic behaviour, and Michel Serres is very interested in this connection.[9] However, if you survey this literature, you will soon realize that acquisition and appropriation are *never* included among the mode of behaviours that are likely to be imitated. Theories of imitation never speak about acquisitive imitation and mimetic rivalry. And this is the crucial point of the mimetic theory. Mimetic rivalry becomes evident if we consider interactions among children. A child has a relationship of external mediation, meaning positive imitation, with adults, and of internal mediation, that is, imitation and rivalry with his peers. It is a matter not so much of experimental psychology, but of everyday observation. The first thinker who marvellously defined this type of mimetic rivalry was Augustine, in his *Confessions.* Augustine describes two infants who have the same 'wet nurse'. Even if there is more than

enough milk for both, the two children are rivals for the milk. They want to have it all in order to prevent the other from having any.[10] Even though this example is mythical somewhat, it symbolizes very well the role of the mimetic rivalry, not only among infants but also within humanity in general. Mimetic conflicts are evident in children as well as in adults, although we always refuse to acknowledge that our actions are affected by this form of behaviour.

2 Mimetic rivalry

Although the mobility of the desire is a distinctive feature of the historical process of the emergence of the modern individual, which accelerated after the Renaissance, you state that mimetic desire isn't a modern invention.
No, it isn't a modern invention. What is distinctive in modern times is that the array of models to choose from is much larger and there are no longer class differences in terms of desire – meaning that any external mediation in modern society has collapsed. People at the lowest social level desire what people at the highest level have.[11] They think they should have it, whereas in historical periods social stratification and division was much more rigid (think of the slaves in ancient Greece or the caste system in India) and access to specific goods and items was very limited or strictly regimented and controlled by social and economic class.

Nonetheless, mimetic desire and mimetic rivalry were present and clearly defined in myth and in religious scriptures, as for instance in the Bible or in the Indian Vedas. The most interesting texts from my viewpoints are the Brahmanas which are compilations of rites and commentaries on sacrifice. From a descriptive standpoint they are wonderful texts to illustrate what I call mimetic rivalry.[12] Of course, we have to assume (as I always do) that in myths there is an element of referentiality, and they are not pure invention of naïve minds, as people normally believe. Myths are forms of organization of knowledge – and in fact the word *Veda* means *knowledge, science* – and this knowledge is essentially related to desire and sacrifice.

In I See Satan Fall Like Lightning,[13] *you also claimed that the mimetic desire and rivalry is evident in the Bible, which moves from a purely descriptive to a more normative understanding of imitation and conflict.*
Yes. Starting from Genesis, desire is clearly represented as mimetic: Eve is induced to eat the apple by a snake, and Adam mimetically desires the same object through Eve, in a clear chain of imitation. There is also an element

of *envy* in the killing of Abel by Cain, and envy is one of the commonest names given to mimetic rivalry. Then I attach a great importance to the last commandment of the Decalogue: 'You shall not covet your neighbour's house. You shall not covet your neighbour's wife, or his manservant or maidservant, his ox or donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbour.' (Exodus 20.17)[14] Here you have a clear definition of mimetic desire, because the law tries to enumerate in a long list all the objects that shouldn't be desired. Then the law realizes in mid-course that there isn't any point in listing all these numerous objects: the fixed point is the *neighbour* and everything that belongs to him. The tenth commandment finally prohibits 'everything that belongs to your neighbour'. This commandment is a prohibition of mimetic desire. But what comes before the tenth commandment? 'You shall not murder. You shall not commit adultery. You shall not steal. You shall not give false testimony against your neighbour' (Exodus 20.13–16). So, these four are all crimes against the neighbour: killing him, stealing his wife, stealing his properties and slandering him. Where do they all come from? The fifth commandment asks the question and discovers the cause: mimetic desire. The last words – 'everything that belongs to the neighbour' – put the neighbour first, as the model. Thus the notion of mimetic desire is already present in the Old Testament.

The Gospels talk in terms of imitation and not in terms of prohibition, but what is at stake is the same principle already present in the tenth commandment. Most people wrongly assume that in the Gospels imitation is limited solely to one model, the imitation of Jesus, which is proposed in a non-mimetic context. But it isn't true. We are always within the context suggested by the tenth commandment. Jesus asks us to imitate him, rather than the neighbour, in order to protect us from the mimetic rivalry. The model that encourages mimetic rivalry isn't necessarily worse than we are, he is maybe much better, but he desires in the same way we do, selfishly, avidly, therefore we imitate his selfishness, and he is a bad model for us, just as we will be a bad model for him in the process of doubling that is bound to take place as soon as the rivalry escalates.

3 Scapegoating and social order

The phenomenology of the mimetic desire as illustrated seems mostly related to inter-individual relationships; however, as you have explained in your books, it can also have a disruptive effect on a larger scale, producing mimetic crises and destroying the social order.

Indeed. While the mimetic machine of this reciprocal imitation of rivals, of this 'double business', is in operation, it stores up conflictual energy and, of course, it tends to spread in all directions because, as it continues, the mechanism only becomes more mimetically attractive to bystanders – if two persons are fighting over the same object, then this object seems more valuable to bystanders. Therefore, it tends to attract more and more people, and as it does so, its mimetic attractiveness keeps increasing. While this happens, there is also a tendency for the object to disappear, to be destroyed in the conflict. As I said before, for the mimesis to become purely antagonistic the object has to disappear. When this happens, the proliferation of doubles occurs, and with it the mimetic crisis is bound to take place. As antagonism and violence erupt, they both spread in the same mimetic way, by cumulative resentment and vengeance, producing a state of Hobbesian radical crisis of all against all.

The most (or rather the only) effective form of reconciliation – that would stop this crisis, and save the community from total self-destruction – is the convergence of all collective anger and rage towards a random victim, a scapegoat, designated by mimetism itself, and unanimously adopted as such. In the frenzy of the mimetic violence of the mob, a focal point suddenly appears, in the shape of the 'culprit' who is thought to be the cause of the disorder and the one who brought the crisis into the community. He is singled out and unanimously killed by the community. He isn't any guiltier than any other, but the whole community strongly believes he is. The killing of the scapegoat ends the crisis, since the transference against it is unanimous. That is the importance of the scapegoat mechanism: it channels the collective violence against one arbitrarily chosen member of the community, and this victim becomes the common enemy of the entire community, which is reconciled as a result.

The mimetic nature of this process is particularly obvious in rituals, where all these stages of development are re-enacted. Why does the ritual so often begin with concocted disorder, with a deliberate simulated cultural crisis, and end with a victim who is expelled or ritually killed? The purpose is simply to re-enact the mimetic crisis which leads to the scapegoat mechanism. The hope is that the re-enactment of this mechanism will reactivate its power of reconciliation.

Do you think perhaps that the passage from the mimesis of acquisition and the escalation of doubles up to the victimary resolution is not as strictly consequential as your explanation would suggest? Crisis could be provoked

by circumstances which are not necessarily linked to the acquisitive mimesis, as for instance in the case of episodes of actual plague. A scapegoat may be sought and found because of ignorance of the biological basis of the disease, and the need to find someone 'responsible' for the crisis. Therefore we should try to separate the phenomenology of mimetic desire and mimetic rivalry from the scapegoat mechanism itself.

The crisis could indeed be rooted in an objective catastrophic event: an epidemic, a famine, a flood. But this objective event develops into a mimetic crisis which, as explained, very likely ends in scapegoating. There would be no scapegoat if the community didn't shift from mimesis of the desired object, which divides to a mimesis of antagonism, which permits all alliances against the victim. The whole mechanism is contained in that shift. What is crucial for the resolution of this crisis is the shift from the desire of the object, which divides the imitators, to the hatred of the rival, which reconciles when hatred is channelled onto a single victim. The rivalrous and conflictual mimesis is spontaneously and automatically transformed into reconciliatory mimesis. For, if it is impossible for the rivals to find an agreement around the object which everybody wants, this very agreement is quickly found, on the contrary, against the victim whom everybody hates.

To summarize, then: the victimary mimetic is triggered when mimetic desire turns into mimetic rivalry. This rivalry, this mimetic conflict, through mechanisms of social contagion, reaches social proportions, and ultimately a scapegoat polarization and resolution, with a final mimetic reconciliation of the community.

That is correct. In the beginning the mimetic rivalries may be separated centres of attention, but then they tend to contaminate each other more and more, becoming more mimetically attractive as they include more rivals, since mimesis is cumulative. By its dynamics, the scapegoat mechanism must ultimately end with one *skandalon* devouring all the others, and therefore it produces one single victim. If there is one single victim, once the victim is killed, there isn't any rebound of vengeance, because everybody is hostile to this one victim. Thus, there is at least one moment in which peace is restored within the community, and the community never praises itself for this reconciliation; it regards this new acquisition of order as a gift from the victim it just killed. This is both malefic because it caused the crisis, but also beneficial because its death restored peace, and therefore the scapegoat becomes divinized in the archaic sense, that is, the all-powerful, Almighty both for good and for bad simultaneously. So it is a purely mechanical fact, although it isn't deterministic.

It is possible to say why this or that victim is selected in different scapegoat events, but they do not add up to a single general rule.

Could you clarify the difference between a mechanical and a deterministic fact?
The mimetic mechanism isn't deterministic because from one side there is an element of randomness in the selection of the scapegoat victim; from the other it doesn't follow that every single social group involved in a mimetic crisis will necessarily find the scapegoat mechanism resolution.[15] Indeed, this is a crucial point. I have never said that the mimetic mechanism is deterministic. We can hypothetically assume that several prehistoric groups did not survive precisely because they didn't find a way to cope with the mimetic crisis; their mimetic rivalries didn't find a victim who polarized their rage, saving them from self-destruction. We could even conceive of groups that solved one or two crises through the founding murder but failed to re-enact it ritually, developing a durable religious system, and therefore succumbing to the next crisis. What I have said is that the threshold of culture is related to the scapegoat mechanism, and that the first known institutions are closely related to its deliberate and planned re-enactment.

Could you then say that the victim has to be randomly chosen?
Not necessarily. It depends on the degree of awareness of the scapegoaters, but also of the victim. For instance, if someone denounces the scapegoat mechanism, and if the scapegoat mechanism eventually prevails, the scapegoat mechanism is immediately provided with its victim, which is that particular troublemaker. This works in the case of the Servant of Jahweh, and in the case of Christ. Therefore I don't make Jesus a random victim, contrary to what Hans Urs von Balthazar argues in *La Gloire et la croix*. Christ flags himself as the victim to his persecutors. This pattern works also in the case of Plato – which shows how aware Plato was of this mechanism. There is an astonishing sentence in Plato, which still remains unexplained. One of the characters in the *Republic* says that if there existed a perfect man in whom there would be absolutely no evil, no vengeance, he would end up being killed.[16] Socrates is close to being such a man. He criticizes cultural inequities; therefore, he designates himself as a scapegoat. This could perhaps be derived from the Bible, which Plato may have known, since he travelled to Egypt, where there were many Jews at that time.[17] However, there isn't a real history of the Diaspora and the early period is still mysterious. Nietzsche wrote about the fact that Plato knew the Bible. (Maybe that is why he did not like Plato ...)[18]

Going back to your question: I do not think we could say that the victim is randomly chosen. After all, randomness means pure chance. If we look at myths, we will see that the victims are too often chosen among physically challenged people or foreigners, to be a purely random event: these 'preferential signs' increase the possibilities of being selected as scapegoat. It is very clear in Isaiah, in the 'Servant of Jahweh'. People have what could be called a natural dislike for exceptions, physical deformities, which become signs of victimizations. In the 'Servant of Jahweh', there is a passage that reads: 'He had no beauty or majesty to attract us to him, nothing in his appearance that we should desire him. He was despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows, and familiar with suffering. Like one from whom men hide their faces he was despised, and we esteemed him not' (Isaiah 53.2–3). Preferential signs of victimization are given as *reasons* for victimizing this person, reasons that are insufficient, scandalous, but do not allow us to always speak of pure randomness. Infirmities, or unpleasant traits, are mistaken for guilt. That is the reason why in medieval illustrations witches very often are represented a little bit like the Jews in anti-Semitic caricatures, with distorted features, hunch-backed, limping. If you look at the Greek gods, far from being beautiful, they are very often like that: short, one-eyed, mutilated, stuttering, deformed (there is a parodical text by Lucian of Samosata, *Tragodopodagra,* which is all about that).[19] There are also exceptions, which show out-of-the-ordinary beauty, like that of Apollo or Venus, but we have to remember that both extremes are usually more scapegoated than average people. The king is a preferred target for victimization. After all, the institution itself originates in scapegoating. Therefore, the king tends to go back to his original status.[20] So we shouldn't say randomness *stricto sensu,* and it would be better to say arbitrariness.

Therefore, it is a combination of arbitrariness and necessity.

Very often, but not necessarily, because even if there isn't a preferential sign of victimization, the scapegoat will be chosen anyway. At that crucial moment something will often be interpreted as a sign. Anything. And everybody thinks that they have found the solution, the culprit. In a way, the scapegoat mechanism functions like false science, like a great discovery that is made, or something that is suddenly revealed, and then one reads in the eyes of other people the same insight, that, therefore, the conviction of the crowd becomes increasingly reinforced. Hocart talks about a sort of naïve 'fetishism' of the physical object seen as direct evidence.[21] Take the example of Phaedra, the protagonist of Euripides' tragedy *Hippolytus,* who

kills herself blaming her stepson. Why is Theseus easily convinced that Hippolytus raped her? Because Phaedra has his sword. In the biblical story of Joseph, Potiphar's wife has Joseph's tunic, which seems to prove that the young man tried to have sexual relations with her. There is a physical object that looks like a proof, evidence, exhibit no. 1, so to speak.

With reference to randomness, nonetheless, as you said in Things Hidden, *rituals seem to keep 'memory' of the aleatory elements at the base of victim selection in the scapegoat mechanism, by staging games or riddles, for contingent selection of the victim to be sacrificed.*[22] *At least the selection of the surrogate victim could be made by pure chance.*

That's true. That was also related to my reading of Callois' book *Les Jeux et les hommes,* in which it is evident that the only element in playing and games which are not shared with animals is in fact *alea,* chance, which is a cultural byproduct of ritual practice.[23] Of course the outcome of a chance game could be double: either you are selected as a victim, or your life is spared. Ritual is a cultural form that prepares for the sacrificial resolution, but it serves mainly as a form of controlling violence, and the increasing sophistication of ritualistic forms and elements helps in distancing further and further a given culture from the original violence implicit in the ritualistic act. That's evident in several myths. By solving the riddle of the Sphinx, Oedipus, as a sacrificial victim, saves himself and the city of Thebes, which enthrones him as its king. The labyrinth is a ritual architectural machine which has the Minotaur (i.e. sacrificial violence) at its centre. If one 'solves' it, as in the case of Theseus with the help of Ariadne, he can spare his life, becoming a hero. All these performative elements are also common in the so-called 'rites of passage'.[24]

In order to account for the escalation involved in the scapegoat mechanism, could we say that it presupposes the previous collectivization of the phenomenon of the doubles as seen on the individual scale, which leads to the collective undifferentiation, which then involves the entire social group? Undifferentiation is the mirroring of the mechanism of doubling at the social level.

Yes. The less differentiated people become, the easier it is to decide that any one of them is guilty. The word *doubles* is the very symbol of desymbolization, and it means undifferentiation: the absence of all differences. The mythical twins are a metaphor of undifferentiation. The twins played a great role in my discovery of the scapegoat mechanism. I remember when I was reading Lévi-Strauss, that in his theory everything

is difference up to the point that there is difference even between twins. But the twins are a logical denial of difference, and Lévi-Strauss doesn't take that into account. Lévi-Strauss, following Saussure, says that language cannot express any absence of difference. However, language does talk about undifferentiation. This is what twins are for, and the metaphor is taken with deadly seriousness by certain societies in which twins are actually killed. (Of course, other societies are aware that biological twins haven't anything to do with the process of social undifferentiation, and nothing happens in these cases.) That was very important in my critique of Lévi-Strauss. Nonetheless, Lévi-Strauss is indispensable for the discovery of what twins really mean. In order to fear twins, there must be the primacy of difference. Primitive culture can talk about undifferentiation, even if in principle language cannot. Language resorts to twins in order to talk about undifferentiation. Language is wiser than Lévi-Strauss realizes, more realistic.

It is because the scapegoat mechanism actually precedes any sort of cultural order, and in particular it precedes language. Indeed, it is what allows culture to be developed.

Yes. The question, then, is how does culture develop? The answer is through ritual. As I said, in an effort to prevent frequent and unpredictable episodes of mimetic violence, acts of planned, controlled, mediated, periodical, ritualized surrogate violence were put in place. Ritual in this way becomes like a school because it repeats the same scapegoat mechanism over and over again on substitute victims. And since ritual is the resolution of a crisis, it always intervenes at points of crisis; it will always be there at the same point of the mimetic crisis. Therefore, ritual will turn into the institution that regulates any sort of crisis, like the crisis of adolescence and the rites of passage, like the crisis of death, which generates funeral rituals, like the crisis of disease, which generates ritual medicine. Whether the crisis is real or imaginary makes very little difference, because an imaginary crisis may cause a real catastrophe.

There are two possible views of ritual. On the one hand, the Enlightenment view for which religion is superstition and if ritual is everywhere it's because cunning and avid priests impose their abracadabras on the good people. On the other hand, if we simply consider that the clergy cannot really precede the invention of culture, then religion must come first and far from being a derisory farce, it appears as the origin of the whole culture. And humanity is the child of religion.

Hocart supports this claim by writing the following:

> *Ritual isn't in good odor with our intellectuals. It is associated in their minds with a clerical movement for which most of them nurse an antipathy. They are therefore unwilling to believe that institutions which they approve of, and which seem to them so eminently practical and sensible as modern administration, should have developed out of the hocus-pocus which they deem ritual to be. In their eyes only economic interests can create anything as solid as the state. Yet if they would only look about them they would everywhere see communities banded together by interest in a common ritual; they would even find that ritual enthusiasm builds more solidly than economic ambitions, because ritual involves a rule of life, whereas economics are a rule of gain, and so divide rather than unite.*[25]

This is surely a wonderful text, but it is not radical enough. Here, I think that the story of Cain is fundamental. It reveals that Cain is the founder of the first culture, but there are no specific acts of foundation in the text. What is there? The murder of Abel. Then, immediately after that, one finds the law against murder: 'if anyone kills Cain, he will suffer vengeance seven times over' (Genesis 4.15). That law represents the foundation of culture, because capital punishment is already ritual murder, and the proof of it is the stoning in Leviticus, which is a strictly regulated form of capital punishment in which the whole primitive community participates. As soon as the capital punishment is established, the repetition of the original murder is so re-enacted, i.e. a murder in which everybody takes part and for which no one is responsible. From this proto-ritual killing, then, every aspect of culture emerges: the Bible gives Cain's legacy as legal institution, domestication of animals, music, and technology (Genesis 4.20–22).

This is exactly the equivalent of the Prometheus myth as exposed in Aeschylus.

Yes. Prometheus is the sacrificial victim who is chained and cannibalized over and over again (the eagle perpetually eats his liver) in a repetition of the sacrificial ritual. As a sacrificial victim, he is 'responsible' for the invention of culture, he is represented as the matrix from which language, mathematical science and technology emerge. The myth of Marsyas is another myth in which art and sacrifice are connected: an artistic context is ended with the slaughtering (flaying alive) of the hero. The same could be said of the only episode in the

Gospel in which there is a direct reference to art: the dance of Salomé in Mark: it is the dancer who decides that John the Baptist has to be beheaded.

In The Ruin of Kasch, *Calasso synthesizes the convergence of sacrificial and performative-artistic spaces in an aphoristic but effective way: 'The din of the applause drowns out the victim's cries. When the movie star or the politician is killed for being "too famous", it is said that the murderer is mad. But his madness reveals the origin of the applause.'*[26]

4 Cultural mimesis and the role of the object

After this general explanation of the mimetic mechanism, we would like to focus on the question of the object in your theory. For instance, you said that whenever an appetite becomes a desire it is affected by a model. Desire is completely socially constructed. However, it seems that in your general theory there is no scope for basic needs.

Let me draw a fundamental distinction: an appetite doesn't imply imitation. When someone is being choked, there is a great appetite for breathing and there isn't imitation in it because breathing is physiological. One doesn't imitate anyone when one walks for miles in a desert in order to find some water. Nonetheless, in our modern world, it is different because there are social and cultural models of fashionable eating and drinking, and any form of appetite is mediated by behavioural models, and, paradoxically, the more we do it, the more we think we are exercising 'personal', 'individual' preferences which are only our own ...

The more cruel and wild a society is, the more violence is rooted in pure need. One must never exclude the possibility of violence that has nothing to do with mimetic desire but simply with scarcity. However, even at the level of basic needs, when rivalry begins and is related to an object, any kind of object, there's no doubt that it will soon become impregnated with mimesis. In these cases, there is always some social mediation at play. Marxists are convinced that certain sentiments are specifically social, since they appear in one specific social class. For them, mimetic desire is a form of aristocratic distinction, a kind of luxury. I would simply answer: of course it is! Before modern times, only the aristocrats could afford it. The theory of chivalry, for instance, is a way of glorifying mimetic desire, and Cervantes understood this perfectly. Don Quixote is a *hidalgo,* meaning 'son of someone', a man of leisure, an aristocrat. There's also no doubt that in a world of dire need,

the average man has only needs and appetites. If you look at the medieval genre of the *fabliau,* it deals chiefly with physical appetites, and the struggles or fighting which occur are connected with the piece of bread which the disputants don't have. So the Marxists are partly right: if the mimetic theory denied the objectivity of certain struggles it would be false; it would be no more than a denial of existence and its basic needs. It is no less true that mimetism, especially among those who have a knack of it, can flourish in the most extreme misery. Witness, for instance, the snobbery of Marmeladov's wife in Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment.*

That is why you did not accept Lucien Scubla's reading of your work, according to which 'mimetic rivalry is the only source of human violence'.[27]
I agree about the essential part, although this formula undervalues objective needs and appetites too much. As I just said, basic appetites can trigger conflicts, but it is also true that the conflicts once triggered easily become trapped in a mimetic mechanism. One might say that any violent process that has any duration, any temporality, is bound to become mimetic. Nowadays there is a growing concern about 'the act of violence', meaning the random act of violence, like being robbed or mugged or raped, that could happen to anybody in the 'harmonic life' of a big city. That is what people are most worried about in contemporary affluent societies. It is a violence that is totally divorced from any relational context. Therefore, it has neither antecedents nor followers. Nonetheless, specialists on violence show that haphazard aggression isn't the main cause of violence. Violent behaviour mostly occurs among people who know each other, who have known each other for a long time.[28] Violence has a mostly mimetic history, as in those sad cases of domestic violence. That is the most common type of crime, much more than violence between strangers. Being mugged in the street isn't directly mimetic in the sense of a relationship between the victim and the mugger, although behind random aggression there are mimetic relationships in the mugger's personal history, or in his relationship with society at large, which remain invisible but could nonetheless be discovered and explored.

We should also emphasize, however, that mimesis does not only engender disruptive effects through acquisitive mimesis, but it also allows for cultural transmission.
That is true. In the past I have mainly emphasized the rivalrous and conflictual mimesis.[29] I did so because I discovered the mimetic mechanism through the analysis of novels, where the representation of conflictual relations is

essential. Thus, in my work, the 'bad' mimesis is always dominant, but the 'good' one is of course even more important. There would be no human mind, no education, no transmission of culture without mimesis. However, I do believe that the 'bad' mimesis needs to be emphasized because its reality remains overlooked, and it has been always neglected or mistaken for non-mimetic behaviour, and even denied by most observers. The intense capacity of humans to imitate is what forces them to become what they are, but this capacity carries a high price, with the explosion of conflicts related to acquisitive mimesis. Imitation channels not only knowledge but also violence.

A strong emphasis on positive mimesis is given in theories such as the one proposed by Richard Dawkins. His theory of memes, as a minimal unity of cultural transmission, would be a case in point.[30]

Dawkins has no awareness of mimetic rivalry, mimetic crisis, scapegoating and other figures uncovered by mimetic theory. However, I think that, in general, and from my perspective, biological or neurocognitive theories of mimesis are more advanced than literary ones.

Scientists aren't afraid of developing theories and concepts which are the most relevant to the human mind and social behaviour, like imitation and mimetism, for instance, but which remain totally alien to most literary scholars and students of social sciences. Traditionally, literary studies have been grounded in the idea of individuality, on the notion of the uniqueness of a given author. Therefore, literary criticism tends to deny mimetic desire. The denial of mimetic desire and the prevalence of individualism are one and the same thing. Because the more mimetic desire one has, the more one has to be individualistic in order to deny it.

Are you suggesting that the institutionalization of literary studies helps to conceal the mechanism of mimetic desire?

Yes, absolutely. This is exactly what Sandor Goodhart affirms in *Sacrificing Commentary.*[31] According to him, the real function of criticism is to bring literature back to conventional individualism, refusing and masking mimetic desire. Literary criticism has a social function which is always bringing literature back to the social norm, rather than emphasizing the gulf between the vision of a great writer and the vision of that norm. Literary criticism should help to uncover the mimetic nature of desire instead of concealing it through its engagement with concepts such as originality and novelty, constantly advocated in an incantatory and empty fashion.

Returning to the definition of mimesis: wouldn't your approach be clearer if you distinguished 'cultural mimesis' from 'acquisitive mimesis'?[32]
I don't think so. This expression would entail that cultural imitation does not involve any form of rivalry, which is not true because we could compete over cultural objects as well. Maybe we could say that mimesis has a double-bind structure, since it isn't necessarily acquisitive, in the sense of being conflictual, but also cultural. However, I fear that there is the tendency to reduce mimesis to mimicry, while only the most superficial and harmless aspects of it are stressed. That is why I have emphasized the violent side of mimesis.

We could also say that conflictual mimesis has some 'positive' aspects, because in generative terms, it engendered the social complexity of rules, taboos and social structures in order to keep violence at bay. In your anthropological account, the object usually plays the role of triggering the acquisitive mimesis. Nonetheless, is it not possible that the object can also play a fundamental role in the 'culturally peaceful mimesis'? In a historical perspective, the so-called 'hunting hypothesis of hominization' states that social groups, both animal and human, can emerge as a result of 'cooperation for hunting and the distribution of meat'.[33]
This is true. However, one has to remember that this 'good' object is *killed*. Hunting always has, I believe, a sacrificial dimension as well as a social dimension that cannot be generated solely by the need for hunting meat. Neither can religion be solely generated by the fear and admiration that wild animals inspire. Besides, the hunting hypothesis doesn't do justice to the role of human sacrifice.[34] I think that any form of complex cooperation must be founded on some sort of cultural order, which is itself founded on the victimary mechanism. That is my hypothesis on the origins of culture. The little that is known about the prehistoric world of hunting suggests a complex cultural organization.

Of course we recognize that the originality of your approach is related to the unmasking of the acquisitive dimension of mimesis: the way in which a concrete object has a fundamental role in engendering this disruptive effect. However, as Dupuy and Dumouchel suggested, the object of the consumer society isn't exclusively the object of the acquisitive mimesis. Rather it can produce forms of controlling the explosion of mimetic rivalry.
I have no objection to this view. Dupuy and Dumouchel are fundamentally optimistic about modern society. They say that the consumer society is

the way to defuse mimetic rivalry, to reduce its conflictual potentiality. By making the same objects, the same commodities available to everybody, modern society has reduced the opportunity for conflict and rivalry. The problem is that if this is pushed to the extreme, as in contemporary consumer societies, then people ultimately lose all interest in these universally available and identical objects. It takes a long time for people to become disaffected, but this finally happens. The consumer society, because it renders objects available, at the same time also makes them eventually undesirable, working towards its own 'consumption'. Like all sacrificial solutions, the consumer society needs to reinvent itself periodically. It needs to dispose of more and more commodities in order to survive.[35] Moreover, the market society is devouring the earth's resources, just as primitive society devoured its victims. However, all sacrificial remedies lose their efficacy because the more available they are, the less effective they become.

Then, how should we interpret Dupuy's claim that 'the object is an actual creation of mimetic desire. That it is the composition of mimetic codeterminations which makes it appear out of nothing: it is neither the creation of an authentic freedom, nor the focal point of a blind determinism.'[36]
It goes too far in my view. First of all, I must say that if the object is entirely created by mimetic desire, it is a false object. Prestige and honour are examples of false objects created by mimetic desire. Nonetheless, there is an array of real objects for which people are competing, like two students for the same fellowship, or two physicists for the Nobel Prize.

The consumer society turns mimetic desire and its possible crisis into a positive instrument of economic wealth, but it has a side-effect: when more of the same objects are offered, they become less and less mimetically desired. This creates an inflation of objects, the consequence of which is that one now has an array of objects which go directly from the shop to the bin, with hardly a stop in between. One buys objects with one hand, and throws them away with the other – in a world where half of the human population goes hungry ...

Therefore, we live in a world where the question isn't having the object but constantly shifting it.
The consumption society has simply become a system of *exchange of signs,* rather than an exchange of actual objects. That is why we live in a minimalist and anorexic world, because the world in which consumption is a sign of wealth is no longer appealing. Therefore, one has to look emaciated or

subversive in order to look 'cool', as Thomas Frank would put it.[37] The only problem is that everybody resorts to the same tricks, and once again we all begin to look alike. The consumer society, at its extreme, turns us into mystics in the sense that it shows us that objects will never satisfy our desires.[38] It can corrupt us in the sense that it can lead us to all sorts of useless activities, but it also brings us back to an awareness of our need for something entirely different. Something that the consumer society itself cannot provide.

At the same time, it should be remarked that the increasing level of internal mediation in contemporary society doesn't necessarily end in mimetic crisis. Our world shows itself to be quite capable of absorbing high doses of undifferentiation. Seeing this problem in primitive societies, does the scapegoat represent the return of the object? Would the corpse of the victim allow for (re)turning the doubles (in their collective form) to the previous level of differentiation?

One cannot immobilize the desire at the level of the object. That is why the non-object (not eating, exhibiting one's indifference) is so important. It isn't an invention of business, although business can always make some profit out of it. Business always prefers to sell more and more. Moreover, this formulation seems too philosophical to me, proposing a dialectic between subjectivity and objectivity that would entail a too-modern consideration of these problems, which are in fact mostly anthropological. I think we have to adhere to an anthropological appreciation of these issues. The objectiveness of the victim is precarious at that stage of the scapegoat mechanism. In the mimetic frenzy of undifferentiation, which is solved with the polarization of the victim, the corpse is eventually torn apart and consumed. This objectiveness is then immediately converted into the transcendence of the victim, which is the most important aspect of the scapegoat phenomenon at this stage. What is the relationship of transcendence with the object? There is already a theological problem in that question, which is just a fascinating question in itself.

5 *Méconnaissance*

To underscore the structural continuity of the social phenomena we have been discussing – in spite of the obvious historical differences they present – we could say that as much as mimetic desire isn't a modern invention, the scapegoat mechanism is not only visible in primitive rituals or ancient societies, but is also present in the modern world.

It's true, and to see how the scapegoat mechanism works in modern societies, it is necessary once more to start with mimetic desire. The paradox of mimetic desire is that it seems solidly fixed on its object, stubbornly determined to have that object and no other object, whereas in reality it very quickly shows itself to be completely opportunistic. When mimetic desire tends to become opportunistic the people affected by it focus, paradoxically, on substitute models, substitute antagonists. The age of scandals, in which we live, is a displacement of desire of this kind. A massive collective scandal corresponds to the *skandalon* of the two biblical 'neighbours' multiplied several times. Let me repeat that *skandalon* in the Gospels means *mimetic* rivalry, therefore it is that empty ambition, that ridiculous reciprocal antagonism and resentment that everybody feels for each other, for the simple reason that our desires are sometimes frustrated. When a small-scale *skandalon* becomes opportunistic, it tends to join the biggest scandal spread by the mass media, taking comfort from the fact that its indignation is shared by many people. That is, mimesis, instead of moving just in the direction of our neighbour, our specific mimetic rival, tends to become 'lateral', and this is a sign of growing crisis, of growing contagion. The biggest scandal is always devouring the smaller ones, until there is only one scandal, only one victim, and that is when the scapegoat mechanism resurfaces. The growing resentment that people feel for one another because of the increased size of the mimetic rivals conflates into a bigger resentment towards a random element of society, such as the Jews during Nazism in Germany, the Dreyfus affair in late-nineteenth-century France, the immigrants from Africa in present-day Europe, the Muslims in the recent terrorist events. A magnificent literary example of this phenomenon can be found in Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar,* in the mimetic recruiting of the conspirators against Caesar.[39] One of them, Ligario, is very sick, 'a feeble tongue', but at the idea of killing Caesar he revives and his floating resentment starts to focus on Caesar. He then forgets everything because now he has Caesar as the fixed point of his hatred. What progress! Nine-tenths of politics unfortunately remembers exactly that. What people call the partisan spirit is nothing but choosing the same scapegoat as everybody else. However, because of the Christian revelation of the fundamental innocence of the scapegoat victims and the arbitrariness of the accusation against them, this polarization of hatred is soon revealed as such, and the final resolution of unanimity fails. Since I have already touched upon Christianity, let me briefly clarify my contention regarding the special place occupied by it in the history of mimetic mechanism (although most of my readers probably know about it).

In a nutshell: before the advent of Judaism and Christianity, in one way or the other, the scapegoat mechanism was accepted and justified, on the basis that it remained unknown. It brought peace back to the community at the height of the chaotic mimetic crisis. All archaic religions grounded their rituals precisely around the re-enactment of the founding murder. In other words, they considered the scapegoat to be *guilty* of the eruption of the mimetic crisis. By contrast, Christianity, in the figure of Jesus, denounced the scapegoat mechanism for what it actually is: the murder of an innocent victim, killed in order to pacify a riotous community. That's the moment in which the mimetic mechanism is fully revealed.

This brings us back to the concept of méconnaissance, *which is central to the mimetic theory. You said that the 'sacrificial process requires a certain degree of misunderstanding'. If the scapegoat mechanism is to bring about social cohesion, then the innocence of the victim must be concealed in a way that allows the entire community to unite in the belief as to the victim's guilt. And you have remarked that as soon as the actors understand the mimetic mechanism, knowing how it works, it collapses and fails to reconcile the community. However, according to Henri Atlan, this fundamental proposition is never posited as a problem. Rather, it is presented as self-evident.*[40]

The issue here is that I did not place enough emphasis on the unconscious character of the scapegoat mechanism. This is a very simple issue and, at the same time, a crucial point of my theory. Let's take, for instance, the Dreyfus affair. If you are against Dreyfus, you firmly believe Dreyfus is guilty. Imagine that you are a Frenchman in 1894, worried about the army and concerned about the Germans. If suddenly you become convinced that Dreyfus is innocent, this would destroy the spiritual comfort, the righteous anger, you derive from the belief that Dreyfus is guilty. That is all I mean here! It isn't the same to be against Dreyfus as to be for him. I feel that Atlan, even though he is very astute, misunderstands what I have said. Most of the theologians who have reviewed *Things Hidden* also misunderstand this issue. There were even critics who said that if there was such a thing as a scapegoat religion, it must be Christianity, since the Gospels explicitly refer to this phenomenon! My answer is very simple: precisely because Jesus is explicitly represented as a scapegoat, Christianity, as a religion, cannot be founded on scapegoating; rather it is the denunciation of it. The reason should be obvious – if you believe the scapegoat is guilty, you are not going to name it as being 'my scapegoat'. If France scapegoats Dreyfus, no one will recognize that Dreyfus *is* a scapegoat. Everybody will only repeat that he *is* guilty. If you recognize the innocence

of the victim, you are not going to be able to use violence so easily against that victim, and Christianity is precisely a way of saying, with maximum emphasis, that the victim is innocent. After all, the victim is the Son of God. This is the key role of the *méconnaissance* in the process – it allows one to have the illusion that one is justly accusing someone who is *really* guilty and, therefore, *deserves* to be punished. In order to have a scapegoat, one must fail to perceive the truth, and therefore one cannot represent the victim as a *scapegoat,* but rather as a righteous victim, which is what mythology does. The parricide and incest of Oedipus are supposed to be real, let's not forget. To scapegoat someone is to be unaware of what you are doing.

In Shakespeare's Julius Caesar *there is a remarkable speech by Brutus in which this principle is twice made explicit: 'Let's be sacrificers but not butchers, Caius'; 'We shall be call'd purgers, not murderers.*[41] *How do you interpret that?*

Brutus exalts the difference between the legitimate violence of sacrifice and the illegitimate violence of civil war, but he and his co-conspirators ultimately cannot make themselves credible as sacrificers. Brutus knows what he is doing, and he knows that to do it well he should claim that it is not a murder. In my own vocabulary, he unmasks the necessary *méconnaissance,* which accompanies the killing of the scapegoat. Brutus says we must do this in such a clear fashion that it will appear as different from murder as possible. This is an incredible text with a most powerful insight. The principle is that the right hand shouldn't know what the left hand is doing. And that shows an understanding of sacrifice in Shakespeare which is extremely powerful and far superior to that of modern anthropology.

Why did you opt for the term méconnaissance *rather than the more common 'unconscious'?*[42]

Because, in the reader's mind, the word 'unconscious' would have the Freudian connotation. I used *méconnaissance* because there is no doubt that one must define the scapegoat mechanism as a form of misrecognition of its injustice, without ignoring who has been killed. Now, I think that the unconscious nature of sacrificial violence is revealed in the New Testament, particularly in Luke: 'Father, forgive them, for *they do not know* what they are doing' (Luke 23.34). That sentence has to be taken literally, and the proof of it is a parallel statement in the Acts of the Apostles. Peter, addressing the crowd who had been present at the crucifixion, says 'you acted in ignorance' (Acts 3.17).[43] The word 'ignorance' is really the Greek word for 'not knowing'.

But in our contemporary language one has to say 'unconscious'. However, I do not want to say *the* unconscious with the definite article because it implies a form of ontological essentialism that I distrust. However, there is definitely a lack of consciousness in scapegoating, and this lack of consciousness is as essential as the unconscious is in Freud. However, it isn't the same thing and it is collective rather than individual.

Could you then clarify your criticism of Freud's concept of the unconscious?
What I'm against is the idea that there is *an* unconscious, as a separate mental entity. There isn't anything wrong with the idea of something being unconscious, but the idea of *the* unconscious, as a kind of 'black box', has been proved misleading. As I just said, I should have placed more emphasis on the unconscious nature of the scapegoat mechanism, but I refuse to lock it up into an unconscious that has a life of its own, in the style of Freud.

In Freud, the unconscious also has a collective structure, but it is indeed basically composed of individual experiences. Regarding interdividual psychology, the méconnaissance *seems also to prevent the recognition of the mimetic nature of desire. Do you think that the more mimetic one is, the stronger the* méconnaissance *will be?*
I will answer with a paradox. The more you are mimetic, the stronger is your *méconnaissance* and also the possibilities of understanding it. Suddenly you can realize that the nature of your own desire is strictly imitative. I believe all great writers of mimetic desire are hyper-mimetic. As I tried to show in my books, Proust and Dostoevsky, for instance, are extraordinary examples of this. In their novels, there is a radical break between the mediocrity of their early works, which are attempts of self-justification, and the greatness of their later works, which all represent the *fall* of the self, in the sense of Camus' last book, *La Chute.* I think *La Chute* is a book about the bad faith of modern writers, who condemn the entire creation in order to justify themselves and build a fortress of illusory moral superiority.

How would you define a hyper-mimetic person?
Authors such as Proust or Shakespeare obviously talk about themselves. Take the relationship of Proust's narrator with Albertine. The mechanical nature of the mimetic desire is so obvious (to the point of caricature): when she is absent, he is in love with her; when she is present, he is no longer interested. It doesn't just happen once or twice, it happens so many times that it begins to look like a scientific experiment. It is reminiscent also of the

relationship between Kafka and Felice, as revealed in their correspondence. One of the best essays on Kafka is by Elias Canetti.[44] It is a text about the mimetic Kafka, which is intensely comical. In Freudian terms, it would have been described as an analysis of Kafka's neurosis. However, it is an essay on Kafka as an absolutely hyper-mimetic man, and Canetti seems to have understood that in a powerful way.

We could say that if one is hyper-mimetic, one is in a better position to understand oneself as a puppet of mimetic desire, simply because the caricature one has become makes it easier to understand the systematically self-defeating nature of one's own behaviour. In its mechanical nature it is quite close to the demonic possession cited in the Gospels.

Then is a hyper-mimetic person someone who has a special sensitivity to the mimetic mechanism?

Yes. In my view, there are two types of hyper-mimetic men: those who are totally blind to their own mimetism, and those who become totally lucid. What is so interesting about Dostoevsky – and to a large extent the Proust of *Jean Santeuil* – is that, in his first works, Dostoevsky is totally blind about himself. He is a caricature of his mimetic desire, and he idealizes his mimetic reactions. If one reads Dostoevsky's correspondence, one can see that it could be totally interchangeable with his novels of the early period. Then, suddenly, with *Notes from Underground,* he had his great insight.[45] But he doesn't unveil the mimetic mechanism in the way that Shakespeare did. He is the equal of Shakespeare in many things, but Shakespeare is more knowledgeable with respect to the mimetic mechanism and its power to regenerate archaic societies. Shakespeare is surely closer to our present anthropological research than Dostoevsky. *A Midsummer Night's Dream* is incredibly powerful on this score, so much so that even great writers such as George Orwell cannot grasp it, accusing Shakespeare of superficiality! Orwell does not realize how this work rises above its characters and their minuscule childish actions. He fails to grasp its generative dimension.

Notes

1. See Girard, *Things Hidden,* Book III, Chapter 2: 'Desire without Object', pp. 299–305.
2. See, for instance, Andrew N. Meltzoff and M. Keith Moore, 'Infant Intersubjectivity: Broadening the dialogue to include imitation, identity and

intention', in Stein Braten (ed.), *Intersubjective Communication and Emotion in Early Ontogeny* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), pp. 47–62; A.N. Meltzoff and M.K. Moore, 'Persons and Representation: Why infant imitation is important for theories of human development', in J. Nadel and G. Butterworth (eds), *Imitation in Infancy* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1999), pp. 9–35; A.N. Meltzoff and A. Gopnik, 'The Role of Imitation in Understanding Persons and Developing a Theory of Mind', in S. Baron-Cohen, H. Tager-Flusberg and D.J. Cohen (eds), *Understanding Other Minds* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), pp. 335–66.

3. At the COV&R meeting in Saint Denis, Paris: 'Education, Mimesis, Violence and Reduction of Violence', 27–30 May 1998. Ricoeur also presented a paper on 'Religion and Symbolic Violence', later published in *Contagion,* 6 (1999): 1–11.
4. The image of the mirror is in *Alcibiades,* 133a; *Timaeus,* 46a–c; Plato, *Epigrams,* 11; *Sophist,* 239d. In the *Republic,* Plato describes unbounded imitation as an actual crisis of doubles: *Republic,* III, 395e–396b. Girard already referred to this idea in *Things Hidden,* p. 15. See also Giuseppe Fornari, *Fra Dioniso e Cristo. La sapienza sacrificale greca e la civiltà occidentale* (Bologna: Pitagora, 2001), 389–91. Derrida, in the chapter 'The Double Session', in *Dissemination,* remarks that in the *Republic,* Plato says that Homer 'is condemned because he *practises* mimesis (or mimetic, rather than simple diegesis)' while on the contrary Parmenides 'is condemned because he *neglects* mimesis. If violence must be done on *him,* it is because his *logos,* the "paternal thesis", would prohibit (one from accounting for) the proliferation of the doubles ("idols, icons, likeness, semblances") . . . (*Sophist,* 241d–e).' Jacques Derrida, *La Dissemination* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1972), trans. with Intro. and notes by Barbara Johnson, *Dissemination* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1981), p. 186.
5. Girard, *Violence and the Sacred,* pp. 169ff.
6. A conference, 'Perspective on Imitation. From cognitive neuroscience to social sciences', was held at the Royaumont Abbey, 24–26 May 2002.
7. See, for instance, A. Meltzoff, 'Foundations for Developing a Concept of Self: the role of imitation in relating self to other and the value of social mirroring, social modeling, and self practice in infancy', in D. Chicchetti and M. Beeghly (eds), *The Self in Transition: Infancy to Childhood* (Chicago, IL: Chicago University Press, 1990), pp. 139–64.
8. See, for instance, G. Rizzolati, L. Fogassi and V. Gallese, 'Neurophysiological mechanisms underlying the understanding and imitation of action', *Nature Reviews Neuroscience,* 2.9 (2001): 661–70.
9. See R. Girard and Michel Serres, *Le Tragique et la pitié. Discours de réception de René Girard à l'Academie Française et réponse de Michel Serres* (Paris: Le Pommier, 2006).
10. 'I have personally watched and studied a jealous baby. He could not speak and, pale with jealousy and bitterness, glared at his brother sharing his mother's milk. Who is unaware of this fact of experience?' (I, 11). Saint Augustine, *Confessions,* trans. Henry Chadwick (Oxford: Oxford University Press), p. 9.

11. There is a quite candid but sharp comment in one of Andy Warhol's books:

> What's great about this country is that America started the tradition where the richest consumers buy essentially the same thing as the poorest. You can be watching TV and see Coca-Cola, and you can know that the President drinks Coke, Liz Taylor drinks Coke, and just think, you can drink Coke, too. A Coke is a Coke and no amount of money can get you a better Coke than the one the bum on the corner is drinking. (A. Warhol, *The Philosophy of Andy Warhol [From A to B and Back Again]* [San Diego, CA: Harcourt Brace, 1975], pp. 100–1.)

12. See Girard, *Le Sacrifice.*
13. See Girard, *I See Satan Fall Like Lightning,* pp. 7–8.
14. The version of the Bible here quoted is the New International Version. We will refer to this version throughout the book.
15. On this issue, see Paul Dumouchel and Jean-Pierre Dupuy (eds), *L'auto-organisation. De la Physique au politique* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1983), pp. 283ff.
16. See Plato's *Republic,* II, 361b–362a: 'a just person in such circumstances will be whipped, stretched on a rack, chained, blinded with fire, and, at the end, when he has suffered every kind of evil, he'll be impaled, and will realize then that one shouldn't want to be just but to be believed to be just.' See also Fornari, *Fra Dioniso e Cristo,* p. 375.
17. Evidence of Plato's trip of can be found in Diogenes Laertius. See Diogenes Laertius, *Lives, Teachings and Sayings of Famous Philosophers,* III, 6. I owe this remark to Giuseppe Fornari.
18. F. Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols,* trans. R.J. Hollingdale (London: Penguin, 1968), p. 117: 'I find [Plato] deviated so far from all the fundamental instincts of the Hellenes, so morally infected, so much an antecedent Christian ... It has cost us dear that this Athenian went to school with the Egyptians (– or with the Jews in Egypt? ...).'
19. Carlo Ginzburg shows this widespread connection between limping, or limb mutilations of some sort, in mythological figures with ritual killing and the world of death. However, he does not take the scapegoat hypothesis into serious consideration. Cf. C. Ginzburg, *Storia notturna. Una decifrazione del sabba* (Turin: Einaudi, 1989), pp. 206–75.
20. See Girard, *Things Hidden,* Book I, Chapter 2; 'The Development of Culture and Institutions', in particular, pp. 51–8, 'Sacred Kingship and Central Power'.
21. Arthur Maurice Hocart, *Kings and Councilors* (1936) (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1970), pp. 12ff. Hocart in particular refers to the popular prejudice of historians and students of culture who pin their 'faith to direct evidence, to the writings of eyewitnesses, to coins, to ruins'. For further discussion on this subject, see Ch. 5.
22. Girard, *Things Hidden,* pp. 100–1.
23. Roger Callois groups games according to four features: *agon, alea, mimicry, ilinx.*

24. For a full analysis of the image of labyrinth in Greek mythology from a mimetic standpoint, see G. Fornari, 'Labyrinthine strategies of sacrifice: The *Cretans* by Euripides', *Contagion,* 4 (1997): 163–88.
25. Hocart, *Kings and Councilors,* p. 35.
26. Roberto Calasso, *La Rovina di kasch* (Milan: Adelphi, 1983), p. 192.
27. Lucien Scubla, 'Contribution à la théorie du sacrifice', in M. Deguy and J.-P. Dupuy (eds), *René Girard et le problème du mal* (Paris: Grasset, 1982), p. 105.
28. A recent report from the World Health Organization on violent death in 80 different countries, explains that half of them are caused by suicide, while the majority of homicides are committed within the family. Only one-fifth of violent deaths every year are caused by war. See *World Report on Violence and Health* (Geneva: World Health Organization, 2002).
29. See Girard, *Things Hidden,* pp. 15–19.
30. Richard Dawkins, *The Selfish Gene* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1976).
31. Sandor Goodhart, *Sacrificing Commentary: Reading the End of Literature* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996).
32. In a different context, Leonardo Boff addresses a similar issue:

> I still think that the other pole of mimetic desire should be more emphasized. I'm referring to the desire that brings goodness into history. On the one hand, there is a mimetic mechanism that produces victims and creates a historical culture grounded on victims. On the other hand, and at the same time, there is an inclusive desire, which looks for a 'solidary' mimetism, committed to making historically possible the production of goodness and life. (In H. Assmann [ed.] *René Girard com teólogos da libertação, Um diálogo sobre ídolos e sacrificios* [Petrópolis: Editora Vozes, 1991] pp. 56–7).

33. Walter Burkert, 'The Problem of Ritual Killing', in Robert Hamerton-Kelly (ed.), *Violent Origins. Ritual Killing and Cultural Formation* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1987), p. 164.
34. See Girard and Burkert's discussion, ibid., pp. 177–88.
35. Daniel Miller, in his book *A Theory of Shopping* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1998), speaks of shopping as *sacrifice,* although it is mostly confined to Bataille's perspective: 'The discourse of shopping is purely destructive, a marvellous envisaging of complete waste. It captures the transgressive potentiality of money itself, explored by Simmel and others, as social liberation from considerations of particularity' (p. 95).
36. J.-P. Dupuy, 'Mimésis et morphogenèse', in Deguy and Dupuy (eds), *René Girard et le problème du mal,* p. 232.
37. Thomas Frank, *The Conquest of Cool: Business Culture, Counterculture, and the Rise of Hip Consumerism* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1997).

Frank claims that an important marketing phenomenon, which started in the 1960s, is the so-called 'commodification of discontent', meaning selling people signs of their disaffection from the very system that sells them.

38. Dupuy also refers to capitalism as the most 'spiritual' of universes, because its concern is not strictly materialistic (as Max Weber's sociological analysis claimed) meaning the sheer acquisition of objects, but it is based on *envy.* Objects are 'signs of envy' in which the role of the mediator, of the other, is always present. See J.-P. Dupuy, 'Le Signe et l'envie', in Dumouchel and Dupuy, *'L'Autoorganisation',* p. 74.
39. See *Julius Caesar,* II, i. See also Girard, *A Theatre of Envy,* pp. 308–9.
40. Henri Atlan, 'Violence fondatrice et référent divin', in P. Dumouchel (ed.), *Violence et vérité. Autour de René Girard* (Paris: Grasset, 1985), pp. 434–50.
41. William Shakespeare, *Julius Caesar,* II, i ll. 166, 180. For an analysis of that passage, see René Girard, 'Let's be Sacrificers but not Butchers, Caius. Sacrifice in Julius Caesar', in Girard, *A Theatre of Envy,* pp. 210–19.
42. This concept has been developed by Jean-Pierre Dupuy in 'Totalisation et méconnaissance', in Dumouchel (ed.), *Violence et vérité,* pp. 110–35.
43. Cf. Girard, *I See Satan,* pp. 126–7. Some early manuscripts do not have Luke's sentence.
44. Elias Canetti, *Der andere Prozess* (Munich: Carl Hanser, 1969), trans. Christopher Middleton, *Kafka's Other Trial. The Letters to Felice* (New York: Schocken, 1974). See, for instance, pp. 16–17:

    > I'm jealous of all the people in your letter, those named and those unnamed, men and girls, business people and writers (writers above all, needless to say) ... I'm jealous of Werfel, Sophocles, Ricarda Huch, Lagerlöf, Jacobsen. My jealousy is childishly pleased because you call Eulenberg Hermann instead of Herbert, while Franz no doubt is deeply engraved on your brain ... But other people are to be found in your letter as well; I want to start a fight with them all, the whole lot, not because I mean to do them any harm, but to drive them away from you, to get you away from them, to read only letters that are concerned solely with you, your family ... and of course, of course, me!
    >
    > The following day he receives a letter from her that is unexpected, for it is Sunday, and he thanks her: 'Dearest, once again this is the kind of letter that makes one go hot with silent joy. It isn't full of all those friends and writers'

45. For a detailed discussion on this issue, see René Girard, *Dostoyevsky: du double à l'unité* (Paris: Plon, 1963), trans. James G. Williams, *Resurrection from the Underground* (New York: Crossroad, 1997).

CHAPTER 3
THE SYMBOLIC SPECIES

How completely man must have personified the deity.

(Charles Darwin, *Notebooks*)

1 Missing links

According to Michel Serres, your work puts forward a Darwinian theory of culture because it 'proposes a dynamic, shows an evolution and gives a universal explanation of culture'.[1] *Is this actually your aim?*

Why not? I think that Darwin is too naive in his conception of religion, I believe there is something extremely powerful and admirable in his way of arguing, but I have always been fascinated by the way he thinks. This is the reason why there is a Darwinian perspective in the process of hominization as I present it in *Things Hidden*. I feel a strong kinship with his way of arguing: *'one long argument from the beginning to the end'*.[2] The theory of natural selection seems to me quite powerfully sacrificial. After all, Darwin, in resorting to Malthus's theory of population, stresses the importance of death just as much as the importance of survival. In some sense it is representing nature as a super-sacrificial machine.[3] Any great scientific discovery that represents a paradigm and a gestalt shift is strongly determined by the larger cultural context in which this discovery developed. I think that the discovery of natural selection is marked by the time in which it was conceived. It is part of the modern discovery of sacrifice as the foundation not only of human culture but also of the natural order.

In order to explain the emergence of the symbolic sphere, in Things Hidden *you outlined a theory of hominization and the origin of culture within a naturalistic framework, mainly blending ethnographic accounts with anthropological theories. This crucial aspect of the evolution of human culture has been underexplored in your theory ever since.*

I simply didn't have the opportunity to return to it. I am also only partially equipped to articulate my theory with a specific scientific vocabulary,

but I have always tried to think inside an evolutionary framework. The compatibility between theism and evolution is not an issue for me, and the whole debate between Darwinists and creationists (or advocates of intelligent design) is simply *passé* and not very interesting from my point of view. One of the central points of the mimetic theory which could contribute a good deal to the debate, if we take it seriously, is that religion is the mother of culture. In the process of the emergence of cultural elements, one also needs to stress that there is no absolute beginning. The process is extremely complex and progressive.

According to the philosopher Elliot Sober: 'biologists interested in culture are often struck by the absence of viable general theories in the social sciences. All of biology is united by the theory of biological evolution. Perhaps progress in the social sciences is impeded because there is no general theory of cultural evolution.'[4]

Mimetic theory is, among other thing, the origins of the great cultural institutions starting from sacrificial ritual, which is fully coherent with a Darwinian framework. There is a set of hypotheses in this field that are strongly compatible with a mimetic framework and support its claims. I agree with the idea expressed by the sociobiologist E.O. Wilson. Although he believes that religion is pure fancy, he claims that it cannot be totally useless, because it has an intrinsic adaptive value; otherwise it would have been discarded as an irrelevant cultural construct.[5] This is exactly what I am suggesting when I claim that religion protects men and societies from mimetic escalation. Religion has an adaptive value. But this is not enough: it is also the source of hominization, of the differentiation between animals and human beings, because, as I explained in *Things Hidden,* through sacrifice it creates culture and institutions.

What turns many philosophers away from my theory is indeed this very point: that the creation of culture is engendered by religion through the victimary mechanism, which is in fact contingent and mechanistic. However, scientists object that this passage is purely philosophical, because it is too complex (and too hypothetical) to be proved. That is the paradoxical nature of the dialogues I found myself involved with: philosophers hardly believe in 'facts'; scientists are often not interested in moving from the physical to the symbolic ground.

There is a quite contradictory attitude in the way in which evolutionary theorists handle cultural transmission. Although they are used to working with wide temporal scales, in order to account for the evolution of species,

they often fall into a sort of a temporal perspective when they discuss human culture, and the transmission and evolution of cultural traits. There is an unquestioned presupposition, which is linked to human agency: they seem to adopt a sort of 'methodological individualism'. As soon as they start discussing human culture, they seem to assume that the modern individual is the prototype of the primitive human being that produces and transmits culture. This implicit assumption is as harmful as the opposite one, like Levy-Bruhl's 'primitive mentality'. Durkheim states that the autonomy of social facts cannot be simply explained by individual psychology. The emergence of culture is one of those facts.

With reference to the evolution of culture, it might be argued that it develops through Lamarkian patterns, rather than through a Darwinian framework.
It is true that culture and symbolism are essentially transmitted through repetition and reinforcement. But is this truly Lamarkian? Nonetheless, it is at the level of the *social group* that one has to resort to Darwinian selection. This is purely conjectural and hypothetical, as it will be impossible to find absolute proof for this, and that is why the idea of group selection has been strongly criticized in the field, although it seems that it is now back in question.[6] However, we can surely perform a conjectural exercise. Based on the presuppositions of the mimetic theory, one can argue that many groups and societies perished and were destroyed by lethal infighting, by the explosion of mimetic rivalry being unable to find any form of resolution. The scapegoat mechanism provided a fundamental contribution to the *fitness* of the group. This is the reason why such a practice is found throughout the world. This is the result of a form of systemic selection, which lasted thousands of years. It was the scapegoat mechanism, and subsequently religion, which provided that fundamental instrument of protection against the natural intraspecific violence that any group of hominids is bound to trigger at some point for purely ethological reasons. That is the liminal stage of cultural evolution, in which it makes no sense to talk about the autonomy of the individual. The group itself mediates everything.

In this sense, a hypothesis like Richard Dawkins' selfish gene is purely abstract when it comes to explaining social interactions, as it mainly resorts to game theory to show that animal altruism is possible – as if social interactions and then culture could be reduced to a purely economic explanation! To extend his theory to the cultural sphere, he then had to invent the even more problematic notion of the meme, the minimal cultural unit (which,

by the way, seems quite similar to Tarde's ideas as expressed in The Laws of Imitation*).*
In doing so, he poses a radical break between animal and human, as he never provides an explanation for the emergence of culture. Memes, in his account, seem to emerge out of nothing, while the selective force, which should discriminate between the memes that will be retained and the ones that will be discarded, remains unexplored (or it is purely contingent).[7] Dawkins' theory of imitation seems to me quite deficient overall. He proposes a theory for imitative transmission of culture which also never accounts for the negative effects of imitation.

As Stephen Sanderson wrote, Dawkins' theory remains totally 'ideational and mentalist': it has a metaphysical bias.[8] *According to John Tooby and Leda Cosmides, 'most social scientists believe they are invoking a powerful explanatory principle when they claim that a behaviour is "learned" or "cultural"'. However, 'as hypotheses to account for mental or behavioural phenomena, they are remarkably devoid of meaning. At this point in the study of human behaviour, learning and culture are phenomena to be explained, and not explanations in themselves.'*[9]
That is why we need a theory, like the mimetic theory and the scapegoat mechanism, which could account for the emergence of culture and symbolic activity, starting from a purely naturalistic standpoint, taking into account all the biological, ethological, anthropological constraints to which the primates are subject. In other words, mimetic theory, structured around the victimary mechanism, provides a common ground for the relation of different methodological approaches as well as varied sources of data.

2 Ethology and the victimary mechanism

In order to do that, it might be important to dwell on the elusive threshold between the animal and the human realms, which eventually causes the symbolic sphere to emerge. According to Konrad Lorenz's ethological observations, one can already identify in certain species behavioural patterns that form what we may call an 'instinctual scapegoating'.[10]
As a matter of fact, according to recent research, the view of chimpanzees and primates in general has become different from what it was at the time I wrote *Things Hidden*. Now, it is believed that not only can they use tools, but they also hunt together and, according to some observers, even have

rituals, or at least the beginnings of rituals. Essentially, this evolutionary and ethological approach transforms the total break, which is implied in the structuralistic hypothesis, into a gradual process, which achieves higher and higher levels of complexity.

The important thing for me about Lorenz's book *On Aggression* is the description of the behaviour of geese. When two geese approach each other, showing signs of hostility, most of the time the common aggression is redirected and discharged against a third object.[11] This redirection of aggressiveness has been 'crystallized' by evolution in an instinctual pattern which can create a bond, mainly between one male and one female (but there are also cases of homosexuality engendered by this very mechanism). In the case of geese, the couple is permanent or semi-permanent, and it is created through a kind of incipient scapegoating mechanism, even if it isn't proper to call it scapegoating since the third element often is an inanimate object. One can see there the first sketch of the future scapegoating, very much in the sense of redirecting violence onto a third party. This observation, if correct, could account for the emergence of a bond among individuals who together scapegoat a third party, a victim. The redirection of the inner aggression of a specific group against an external element (or an internal element perceived as external which is expelled) creates a strong cohesion within the group itself. This could be one of the reasons why primitive societies resorted to ritual killing: to strengthen the ties of the community. The invention of ritual sacrifice is based on a previous observation of the ethological effectiveness of shared aggression and violence and the bonding 'elation' which results from it.

Lorenz also refers to human laughter as a form of redirected aggression: when a group of people laugh at somebody, as a form of quite harmless scapegoating, one immediately perceives a form of empathic chain, a stronger bond within the elements of the group.

It is a purely ethological mechanism that we aren't aware of. The Gospel of Luke, for instance, explains that 'Then Herod and his soldiers ridiculed and mocked [Jesus]. Dressing him in an elegant robe, they sent him back to Pilate. That day Herod and Pilate became friends – before this they had been enemies' (Luke 23.12). To have a common symbolic or real scapegoat is the most efficient mechanism to reinforce friendship. At any rate, I think that the limit of Lorenz's thought is that he does not have a complete idea of social bonds, he always speaks in terms of couples: there is no society in his viewpoint. Even when there are patterns of dominance, they don't form a real society. But that is understandable, because he only speaks about animals. The scapegoat

mechanism can only emerge from social grouping, like the herd or the pack. With the pack, one gets closer to society – this may be the reason why Elias Canetti, in *Crowds and Power,* includes considerations about the pack.[12]

There is a passage in Lorenz's On Aggression *that suggests a different scenario of the primordial intraspecific violent event. It provides evidence of a form of awareness around the first man's slaughter:*

> *Some of the most intelligent and social birds and mammals react in a highly dramatic way to the sudden death of a member of their species. Greyland geese will stand with outspread wings over a dying friend hissing defensively, as Heinroth saw after having shot a goose in the presence of its family ... Professor Grzimek told me that an adult male chimpanzee, after having bitten him rather badly, seemed very concerned, after his rage had abated, about what he had done and tried to press together, with his fingers, the lips of Grzimek's worst wounds ... It is safe to assume that the first Cain, after having struck a fellow member of his horde with a pebble tool, was deeply concerned about the consequences of his action ... we are safe in assuming that the first killer fully realized the enormity of his deed. There was no need for the information being slowly passed around that the horde loses dangerously in fighting potential if it slaughters too many of its members for the pot.*[13]

If this is true, how can we then assume that primitive communities weren't aware of the 'significance' of the founding murder – a fundamental element in your theory?

Lorenz, like Darwin, prefers not to see any radical separation between animals and human beings, which is a sound idea, but they minimize symbolicity or just don't even mention it. Symbolicity is essential. Scientists have the tendency to overlook the emergence of symbolicity as the force behind the discontinuity between animals and humans. Usually, evolutionists minimize symbolicity or try to derive it from purely physiological origins. For instance, the authors that I read try to explain language purely from the evolution of the brain, while the ethologists emphasize too much the common ethological roots, as they don't see the fundamental leap (if one wants to avoid saying 'break') between human and animal culture, which is indeed triggered by the emergence of the symbolic sphere. In order to have symbolical power you must have an origin of it, and to me that is the scapegoat mechanism. In this way, one can explain how the increase in symbolical power is tied to ritual.

This demands what philosophers used to call a 'totality', so those things within the totality can refer to each other, and therefore acquire meaning through indexation and through analogical, metonymical and metaphorical connections between elements of the totality.

In the passage you quoted, Lorenz uses the story of Cain as a metaphor to explain these possible primordial events. Nonetheless, I think it isn't proper to extend Cain's story to the animal realm. That is another way of not positing a discontinuity between animals and man. However, in the last sentence – 'There was no need for the information being slowly passed around that the horde loses dangerously in fighting potential if it slaughters too many of its members for the pot.' – Lorenz seems to have the idea of a collective mechanism. He hints that Cain is a collective name. This is very clear in the biblical text: 'if anyone kills Cain, he will suffer vengeance seven times over' (Genesis 4.15). It is the law of a tribe, not the law of a single man. Of course, the Bible cannot be taken literally: Adam, Eve, Cain are collective names. Yet, Lorenz never fully develops this idea which is latent in his metaphoric language.

If Lorenz's hypothesis is correct, the scapegoat mechanism might not be a random process, but rather an alternative already found in animal groups as an instinctual pattern of self-preservation. What is random is its actualization in different groups of hominids that, precisely for 'rediscovering' this mechanism in their own terms, assimilated it into social groups through ritual and language. In other words, by constituting a symbolic order.

By defining the scapegoat mechanism as a random process, one has to see it as a series of incremental steps. One cannot point out the exact, isolated moment when it happens and, finally, culture emerges. It has to be seen in a time-frame of dozens or even hundreds of thousands, of years. In this long history of the 'discovery' of the scapegoat mechanism, one can include Lorenz's account of animal redirection of aggression as a first step in this evolution, like a sort of infra-scapegoat ritual. It is a very complex process. It is necessary to have a group, a pack, as a prerequisite for the full development of the scapegoat mechanism.

But regarding this sort of proto-awareness, could we then suggest that a system close to the scapegoat mechanism could already be found in animal groups as an instinct towards self-preservation?

When I wrote *Things Hidden,* a lot of information about animal behaviour either wasn't available or has now been interpreted differently. For instance, it

is now believed that chimpanzees have collective killings and eating of their victims, and that very often their victims are monkeys of different species.[14] There are forms of collective violence present in these groups. There are also forms of hunting with ritual aspects. Therefore, there are clearly signs of the possibility of the emergence of the scapegoat mechanism. This is another stage of the long evolutionary process that led to the scapegoat mechanism in its final form and functionality. What happens with monkeys is that their brains probably aren't developed enough to reach the level of symbolism. But in order for a symbolic level to be reached, as I said, it isn't sufficient just to have an adequate brain size. One needs a *centre of signification,* and the *scapegoated victim* provides this centre. The emergence of a symbolic sphere has to be explained within an ethological framework as the result of a conflation of instinctual patterns, in which the above-mentioned basic instinctual proto-awareness of the killing of a co-specific can be included. Moreover, one must take into account the sudden abatement of rage, reinforced by an instinctual bond experienced by the scapegoaters, which is perceived as related to the (killing of the) victim. The divinization of this victim is possibly tied to this emotional and cognitive event.

3 The evolution of the mind

This possibility was powerfully intuited by A.C. Clarke and Stanley Kubrick in the first scene of 2001: A Space Odyssey.[15]

Indeed. The victim is the focal point of the whole scapegoating event because these hominids are more or less 'aware' that they have committed something 'wrong', and are at the same time struck by the restored peace and the blissful bond they perceive as a result of the killing of the victim. This complex system of instinctual patterns and emotional effects produces a form of 'short circuit' in their perception, which has to be elaborated on a higher level. First of all, even though the mechanism is totally endogenous, it is perceived as something *external* (in Kubrick's account it would be represented by the black monolith). Then, the focal point of the mechanism is, again, the victim – a natural source of this 'something' that has to be treasured, becoming *sacred.*

This 'gift' of restored peace and the blissful bond also induced the primitive mind mimetically to *repeat* this event, perceived as the most effective way of acquiring peace and solidarity within the group in moments of crisis. In the 'superstitious' repetition of the event, a form of 'staging' in the shape of

a killing of a surrogate victim had to be set in place. This victim is no longer presumed responsible for the crisis, but it is both a *real* new victim that has to be killed and a *symbol* of the proto-event; it is *the first symbolic sign* ever invented by these hominids. It is the first moment in which something *stands* for *something else*. It is the ur-symbol. And in order to deal with the cognitive complexity of this handling of an emerging symbolic sphere, a larger size of brain was then required, and the scapegoat mechanism acted as a form of evolutionary pressure, as an element of natural selection.

In this way a symbolic system was established, metonymically moving from the first sign, the victim, as the centre of signification, to the social network implied in the progressive development of rituals.

Yes, but the process requires the existence of a group of elements of a given set, which is systemically closed. Language, in this sense, is a closed system. There are a certain number of phonemes and diacritical signs, and one cannot add new elements. Moreover, one has to play with those precise elements. Of course, the number of possible combinations is virtually infinite. However, the parts to play with are clearly defined. In this system, there are signs that refer to the outside world and signs which refer to each other, and it is precisely this referring to each other that the primates will never master. This is indeed the symbolic level. Can this level of self-reference be unfolded without a centre from which meaning emerges? I feel very strongly that only through a centre is it possible for the various elements of the totality to communicate with each other. Even if the centre eventually disappears, once communication is established, they just keep on communicating with each other. As a matter of fact, the centre should disappear, so that communication might be developed through increasing levels of complexity.

A symbolic system functions in this way. It can be decentred, but it is originally centred. That is why I don't agree with Derrida when he says that structures are *always already* decentred. The centre teaches people to communicate, to have their own roles to communicate with each other. After that one can have the dissolution of the centre, in the fashion of the forgetting of rituals and the emergence of institutions. However, this centre is very important for the birth of institutions, because either one has the Enlightenment view in which religion is nothing, or one understands that religion is everywhere, and therefore it must be the origin of everything. One has to choose between these two perspectives. If you simply reject religion, then how does one account for the fact that the only things that are common to all cultures are language, ritual and God? Therefore, religion is

the mother of everything: it is the source of that centre and, thus, starting from this idea, the emergence of ritual, of language and symbolicity become thinkable. Finally, religion itself is produced by the scapegoat mechanism.

In Origins of the Modern Mind, *Merlin Donald looks for the genetic principle that made possible the passage from what he calls a mimetic form of communication to a symbolic one. Donald acknowledges: 'the evolution of humanity is likely to have been driven at the level of cultural change, and evolutionary pressure might have emerged when a cognitive innovation granted one group of hominids, as a group, a significant cultural advantage over another'.*[16] *And then he is in search of an answer:*

> *What supported this competitive advantage? ... What sort of adaptation could possibly explain the explosion of tools, artifacts, and inventions of all sorts for all sorts of applications, and the eventual creation and maintenance of tribal political and social structures, which regulated everything from marriage to ownership, from justice to personal obligation? What change could have broken the constraints on mimetic culture with such a vengeance, leading to the fast-moving exchanges of information found in early human culture?*[17]

In modern evolutionary theory of the mind there is a 'missing link'. How do we account for the passage from animals to human beings and the emergence of symbolicity? Donald suggests that myths were developed before language.[18] I agree with this. From an evolutionary perspective, language and the symbolic sphere could only be generated by a systemic 'catastrophe', which will act as a springboard for the emergence of culture. This goes in the same direction as Terrence Deacon's *The Symbolic Species.*[19] In the part devoted to language, Deacon lays great emphasis on the opposition between indexation and symbolicity, and he constantly uses the word 'counterintuitive'. Symbolicity is counterintuitive from the viewpoint of indexation, since it dissolves the bond between the sign and the object.

Exchange is at the centre of this system. The gift is the opposite of grabbing everything for oneself, which is what the dominant animal does. The process of getting not only the dominating animal but the *whole* culture to give up that grabbing attitude and give everything to the other in order to receive from the other – this is totally counterintuitive. One cannot explain taboos, prohibition and the complexity of symbolic exchange systems simply via biological explanations of the emergence of unselfish behaviour. There must

be that upheaval there, which forced the change in behaviour. This upheaval is absolutely indispensable. The same reasoning can be applied to language. The only thing that can produce such a relational structure is *fear,* fear of death. If people are threatened, they withdraw from specific acts; otherwise chaotic appropriation will dominate and violence will always increase. Prohibition is the first condition for social ties and the first cultural sign as well. Fear is essentially fear of mimetic violence; prohibition is protection from mimetic escalation. All these incredibly complex phenomena were triggered by the founding murder, by the scapegoat mechanism.

Is it prohibition that makes symbolicity counterintuitive?
Symbols aren't equivalent to signs; they don't have a one-to-one relation with their referent. In order to break down this indexing relation between actual referent and sign, a cultural instrument is needed. Monkeys cannot reach that level, because one needs a catastrophic moment in the evolutionary process, which isn't solely tied to encephalization. This catastrophe is the mimetic crisis, the deadly struggle of all against all, in the Hobbesian sense, which isn't a fanciful hypothesis but a dreadful reality. The scapegoat resolution, which saves the proto-communities from this crisis of mimetic violence, is disciplined into a ritual system of norms and prohibitions, and produces in turn these forms of 'counterintuitive' symbolic structures that Terrence Deacon rightly emphasizes and that we can find everywhere in human culture. However, he rarely links this with other aspects of human culture, because he isn't an anthropologist.

Merlin Donald presents the following process of the evolution of human mind: episodic, mimetic, mythical and theoretical cultures. Within mimetic culture, he distinguishes three modes of operation: mimicry, imitation and mimesis.[20] *Would that distinction be relevant for mimetic theory? When you say that the mimetic mechanism entails a gradual process of complexification, can't we see it not synchronically, but as moments of a historical process? Then, mimesis would represent the moment of the scapegoat mechanism when the symbolicity emerges. That hypothesis does not provide a clear-cut distinction between symbolicity and the pre-symbolic level, but supposes increasing levels of complexity. In that sense, mimicry, imitation and mimesis would correspond to different levels of crisis: the higher the level of crisis, the higher the intellectual level of human groups.*
I share this proposal. Indeed, how much of a representation of the scapegoat mechanism must there be in order to have the corresponding ritual? I am

not sure. Probably ritual imitation appears before 'human thinking', as Donald implies. It happened first at the lowest level, and then in order to speak of religion one must have some sort of representation. When one talks about mimicry, one is talking about lower animals, like parrots. Mimesis would be already at the hominid level. Then, imitation, more and more aware of its function, would be a specifically human achievement, which emerges through both the scapegoat mechanism and ritual, that is, from the emergence of the symbolic level. I have nothing against such a distinction, even though I have the sense that Donald ties mimesis to the purely creative capacity of the human being that he overestimates. He perpetuates the modern prejudice against imitation.

Aristotle had already suggested that the difference between the animal and the human being lies in the imitative capacity of the latter.[21] *Imitation is intrinsically a pedagogical process, and it can be part of any form of mimesis. Repetition as well can be linked to imitation. One can 'imitate' oneself by repeating what one has learned. It is a form of cognitive reinforcement. It might be argued that repetition, and therefore ritualistic patterns and actions, stems from the same cognitive mechanisms of imitation.*
As a matter of fact, there is a text by Kierkegaard which seems to suggest a connection between mimesis and repetition, both in poetic terms and in the idea of reciprocal imitation and the emergence of doubles.[22]

From a scientific standpoint, however, that should be tested and proved. Luc-Laurent Salvador presents this link between imitation and repetition as a form of psychological and cognitive reinforcement through the idea of *'cycle assimilateur'*.[23] In anthropological terms, I think that ritual is a cultural practice of paramount importance, because it reveals, from one side, the structure of our cognitive mechanisms and, from the other, it functions as a pedagogical tool for primitive societies. Repetition is as important as imitation for cultural transmission, and of course they are one and the same thing.

Repetition could also be linked to forms of psychological superstition, all these random acts that are repeated as a form of conditioning reality. Everyday routines are also ritualistic repetitions of a predetermined sequence of acts; they are meant to abate anxiety about the unpredictability of the future. In obsessive-compulsive disorders (OCD), repetitions of specific acts are brought to the extreme. This hypothesis has been also addressed by the anthropologist Alan Fiske. Pascal Boyer wrote that 'comparing hundreds of ritual sequences

with clinical descriptions of OCD cases, Fiske showed that the same themes recur over and over again in both domains'.[24]

It's a compelling account, but this does not mean that ritual is a pathological behaviour, as Freud used to think,[25] only that there are mental structures which are more easily activated or magnified when the community is under condition of severe stress, as in a moment of mimetic crisis, when some action must be taken to solve the crisis. It would be interesting to see whether these 'mental gadgets' are simply inherited from our animal ancestors, or if they have in fact been selectively reinforced by ritualistic practice, as in the case of language, that according to scientists like Steven Pinker seems to be deeply wired in our brain.[26]

4 Social intelligence

In Things Hidden, *you state that due to the unique process of encephalization of the hominids, the invention of tools and weapons disrupted primitive societies that were based on social ranking.*[27] *Hence mimetic crises would ensue. R. Dunbar proposed that encephalization wasn't triggered either by the cognitive needs related to the making of tools or by the mental mapping of changing environments. Rather it was triggered by the need to cope with the constantly growing dimensions of social groups. Our intelligence would be basically social.*[28]

What I said in *Things Hidden* is that tools can be weapons, just as stones can. For instance, the Australopithecine were able to use tools in only a rather simple way, while *Homo habilis* showed a form of culture, around two million years ago. I would not dare to say anything conclusive in this regard, but I would suggest that at the level of *Homo habilis* there must be some form of religious fear, some taboos. There must be some evidence of it. The brain capacity, for instance, was already adequate for language, and the tool-making was reasonably complex.

Consider also a phenomenon such as the smith in archaic society. He was feared because the tools he made could also be used as weapons. He is a sort of permanent scapegoat and lives outside the community. He is simultaneously feared and respected. Things like that must have appeared very early: they must be the closest link to the primates acquiring prohibition and religious fear of those who make lethal tools.

At any rate, I don't see any contradiction between what Dunbar claims and mimetic theory. In order to have larger social groups, there must be problems of supply, as well as problems of social organization. Therefore,

the growing dimension of social groups must be a factor among other factors: how important, I cannot tell. If that is also a question of numbers, it is, above all, a question of many other complexities, such as the question of order, supply, kingship, and so forth. Above all, it must be a question of violence reaching an intolerable level. This, maybe, is the crucial element: the growing dimensions of social groups multiplies the possibilities for the emergence of conflictual confrontation, which then escalates to the level of total violent disruption of social stability. One of those of course is scarcity: the fact that groups grow larger but that supplies don't necessarily keep pace with this growth. As a consequence, fights for resources erupt.

There is a passage from E.O. Wilson's Sociobiology *that relates aggression to overpopulation:*

> *Leyhausen has described what happens to the behavior of cats when they are subjected to unnatural crowding: 'The more crowded the cage is, the less relative hierarchy there is. Eventually a despot emerges, "pariahs" appear, driven to frenzy and all kinds of neurotic behaviour by continuous and pitiless attack by all others; the community turns into a spiteful mob ...' Still more bizarre effects were observed by Calhoun in his experimentally overcrowded laboratory populations of Norwegian rats. In addition to the hypertensive behavior seen in Leyhausen's cats, some of the rats displayed hypersexuality and homosexuality and engaged in cannibalism.*[29]

If this hypothesis of stress-related features and mechanisms could be extended to hominids, that would be evidence of that kind of deviant behaviour typical of dionysiac frenzy: hypersexuality, homosexuality and cannibalism are all acts that were present in dionysiac rituals. Dyonisus is the name of the kind of paroxistic behaviour typical of social crisis in which ethological drives and patterns emerge. There are several studies that show how stress-group situations produce behaviours that resemble those of the mimetic mechanism. In situations of extreme stress, as for instance in crisis of famine or internecene violence, the adaptability and flexibility of the individual psychological system is inhibited or seriously impaired, giving rise to the emergence of primitive instinctive mechanisms.[30]

The ethologist Irenäus Eibl-Eibesfeldt argues that, more than the invention of tools and weapons, what really triggers violence is the capacity we have

for convincing ourselves that the adversary isn't a human being at all, but an animal, often a monster.[31] *For instance, the Mundurucu divide the world in a significant way: themselves and pariwat, that is, the others. The others are simply considered animals to be preyed upon.*[32] *This may help us to understand the scapegoat mechanism, for it reveals a basic disposition towards unifying a group against some 'other'. However, in the victimary process the 'other' is often from the same group. How do we reconcile these two features?*

It is very easy. The inside–outside relationship lies at the heart of the scapegoat mechanism. The real wrath has to be directed against some double. Some model-obstacle, which this wrath transfigures into a monstrous double. When one such monstrous double is victimized and expelled he is also eventually divinized, for his death brings back social order. As he is expelled, the 'outside' as a whole acquires the characteristics of the monstrous double. It is a place of unrestrained violence. In many archaic societies there are no human beings outside the tribe: they represent themselves as the only humans.

Sometimes an outsider can be turned into an insider in order to sacrifice him.

Exactly. We try to integrate our future victim into the community, to make it more similar to the proto-model, the primeval scapegoat victim, which initially was, very likely, a member of the community itself. Among the Tupinamba, for instance, the individual who was captured was also kept alive within the group for a considerable period of time. He was very well treated and was even given a wife. He had to be 'domesticated', acculturated, to become enough of an insider. Only then would he be a good sacrificial victim. In other words, the outsider is first turned into an insider and then the ritual enactment of the scapegoat mechanism occurs when this outsider–insider is ritually killed and actually eaten.

5 Animal domestication and the origins of agriculture

Your hypothesis on animal domestication is based on a similar reasoning.

Yes. I believe that one starts treating animals like human beings in order to sacrifice them, substituting the animal for the human victim.[33] However, animals only react to domestication if they have a disposition for that, otherwise nothing really happens. It is often suggested that successful societies are the ones surrounded by domesticated animals. But how

was it possible to domesticate these animals and why did they do it? The ordinary theories do not seem to me particularly convincing. Of course, to domesticate an animal one has to work at it continuously, maintaining the animal within the group, within the community, to 'humanize' the animal, so to speak. Contrary to what people like Régis Debray think – who in *Le Feu sacré* tries to prove me wrong – there is no incentive directly related to domestication and its advantages since no one knows about them at the start, and they will only become evident as time goes by. Moreover, in its first stages domestication was *anti-economical*: the size of domesticated animals decreases; they suffer all sort of stress-related diseases due to captivity; the amount of bacteria and viruses that wild animals introduce to the human community is very high. Domestication could not have been foreseen, nor even planned! It is a vicious circle, unless there is a better explanation than the one provided by functionalism.

There were areas in the world that didn't have domesticated animals, such as pre-Colombian Mexico, where there were also massive ritual killings of human beings, because the process of animal substitution in ritual sacrifices never occurred.[34] As I have already said in *Things Hidden,* the enlightening element was the fact that the Ainu tried to domesticate polar bears, keeping an infant bear with their children and breast-feeding it like any other child.[35] If bears were tameable, the Ainu would have domesticated them. If instead of a bear it had been a certain type of antelope, then the process of domestication might have developed. Ritual is a testimony to what may and may not happen. I read somewhere that, since the end of archaic times and animal sacrifice, no new species has ever been domesticated. While some species have returned to the wild, the opposite has never happened. Animal domestication is a human enterprise that seems to coincide historically with animal sacrifice. Human culture and humanity itself are religion's children.

Jonathan Smith in Violent Origins *seems to invert the order of this development, suggesting that 'sacrifice is an exaggeration of domestication'.*[36] Smith gets closer to the link between religion and domestication, but he is too biased against the former to acknowledge the primacy of the religious. His functionalist reasoning prevents him from understanding that a primitive community cannot think in terms of 'delayed pay-off' because they have no clue of what is going to happen. Sacrifice is not an aberration of domestication, but the opposite. Domestication is not the art of 'selective killing' but it is this ritualistic killing that produces selection. Domestication is the serendipitous 'spin-off' of animal sacrifice.

Nonetheless, does the fact of using animals for sacrificial ritual not suggest a level of awareness in primitive communities? The constant attempts to substitute animal for human victims show that sacrificing someone who belonged to the community wasn't the safest way of preventing violence.
Sure. The sacrificial victim ought to be at the same time different and similar to the members of the community. We cannot take for granted that the difference between man and animal always meant what it means to us. This question touches on the problem of the incomplete separation of the outside/inside structure. It is rather a continuum. The sacred is always outside, for it has to have transcendence in order to be sacred. At the same time, wild animals, in general, aren't sacrificed in cultures which have domesticated animals. This seems to confirm that wild animals were domesticated for the purpose of sacrifice rather than domestication. I may also say that wild animals were first sacrificed and then domesticated. The 'theology' of the cow in India seems to suggest this: the cow is in a kind of grey zone between sacredness and domestication. It has become domesticated because it was needed in sacrificial rituals, but then as the sacrificial ritual was progressively abandoned, the animal never reached a 'secularized' status: it became 'edible', but remained invested with a sacred aura.

Do you see this phenomenon as a form of enlarging of the borders of the symbolic society, or was it a form of 'tricking' the gods? Homer's episode of Ulysses and Polyphemus in The Odyssey, *for instance, could be seen as a mythical account of this substitution, of this 'tricking' of the gods, as the hiding of men underneath sheep or goats protects them from Polyphemus's rage, which in turn is blinded. The mythical story narrated by Homer therefore inverts the sequence. Through the substitution the sacrificial mechanism (the Cyclops rage) is blinded. Polyphemous represents the collective frenzy of the sacrifice, as he is a cannibal, and his name means 'of many voices'.*
The question of animal sacrifice is obviously inseparable from the belief in the existence of theriomorphic gods. Animal and human are a continuum in the primitive mind. Killing is redoing what the gods have done to save us. When one sees that things are going badly inside the culture, some action simply has to be taken. Maybe ritual does not start immediately after the scapegoating, but when renewed disorder occurs. At that point, the elders remember what happened, and they wonder why it happened. One must think that a god came down to teach them that killing the right victim reconciles the community. (When I say 'god', I mean a sacred force that is

believed to be outside the community and is powerful enough to punish as well as to protect it.) Therefore a new, appropriate victim to replace the original one has to be found. Bear in mind that the victim is always seen as the god or replaces it, since this victim brings back peace with his or her death. Thus it is seen as sacred. From a sacrificial victim who is divine, to an animal that is hunted, one can see how the two could become equated. The victim is both outsider and insider. It is ambiguous and ambivalent, which explains why human outsiders might be selected as well as animal insiders, such as domesticated animals, who have almost (but not quite) turned into members of the community.

In that context, it is worth remembering, with Michel Serres, that the Indo-European word for 'to plant', i.e. pak *– from which words like* paysage, pays, *pagan,* paysan, *(the signs of civilization), stem – also refers to the tomb as the first sign, as the first human symbolic inscription.*[37]

Of course, this intuition is totally sound. What could have given to the human being the idea of putting seeds into the ground? They buried them hoping they would resurrect like the community as a result of sacrifice – and they weren't wrong. There you can see the fecundity of religion. The fact that it seems an illusion to us does not diminish its cultural effectiveness. This also reminds me of the passage in the Gospel in which Jesus says 'unless the seed dies in the ground it will remain alone' (John 12.24). This is the idea of rebirth. Jesus even adds: 'I have spoken to you of earthly things and you don't believe; how then will you believe if I speak of heavenly things?' (John 3.12). Therefore, Jesus regards this as a pattern, of death and rebirth, which is linked both to the human and to the natural world.[38] Here Frazer also shows his greatness, because although the idea of the vegetation in Frazer is ultimately inadequate, I think, it does contain an aspect of the truth.[39] In accounting for the relationship between sacrificial rites and agriculture, there is no doubt that in many societies they were thinking of ritual in terms of vegetation dying and being reborn. I think it is the best theory because it is more than a metaphor. What is indeed more essential to human beings than agriculture? It is thought-provoking that when human beings started to bury seeds – as they did with human beings, in order to hope for their resurrection – it actually happened, that is, that the seeds came to life again, so to speak. How do you account for that? Which kind of reasoning lies behind these practices? A simple naturalistic observation of vegetation is anachronistic because the causal biological links are obvious to us, but not to the first people who 'discovered' agriculture. It cannot also be explained in purely economic terms. Only if you understand

the powerful causal link between ritual and nature, can you grasp the origins of practices like agriculture. Every natural element acquires meaning only if it is experienced within the space of ritual. We are not dealing with 'primitive' or 'magical' mentality in cases like these: there is a ritual thinking in action in which the effectiveness of ritual and religion is *actual,* it produces *real* effects. There you see how religion nurses human culture.

As a matter of fact, from a scientific standpoint it is quite extraordinary that there is no generally accepted model accounting for the origin of agriculture, above all in the consideration that agriculture was anti-economic. Indeed, an increasing array of arguments over recent years has suggested that agriculture, far from being a natural and upward step, in fact led commonly to a lower quality of life. Hunter-gatherers typically do less work for the same amount of food, are healthier, and are less prone to famine than primitive farmers: why was this behaviour (agriculture) reinforced (and hence selected for) if it was not offering adaptive rewards surpassing those accruing to hunter-gathering or foraging economies?[40]

It became reinforced because, as I think, it had a sacrificial origin. The hunter-gatherers started to settle permanently because of the increasing importance of ritual sites and the complexity of the rituals of which they were part, and which in turn produced, as I said, the domestication of animals and the discovery of agriculture. Climate changes or particular soil conditions were also important elements in this later development, but the discovery was very likely to have been made around the sacred burial sites in which any symbolic activity of the primitive community was carried out (such as burying seeds along with human beings, for instance). In cases like this, I think the symbolic relation with the scapegoat phenomenon and with ritual is just marvellously enlightening. It is a machine for experimentation and knowledge. Moreover, events which show contradictory patterns of development, or seem counterintuitive to our modern mind, start making perfect sense if one adopts the mimetic mechanism as an explanatory model.

As a matter of fact, the scapegoat mechanism could also explain this controversial and apparently counterintuitive statement made by Carl Vogt at the end on the nineteenth century, and reported also by Edward Volhard in his ethnographical work on cannibalism:

> *I will in fact prove through examples that relatively highly advanced civilizations may be tainted by cannibalism; one can even go further and*

> *factually demonstrate that tribes devoted to cannibalism and to human sacrifices are in general more advanced in agriculture, industry, arts, legislation, etc. than the neighbouring tribes who reject these horrors.*[41]

This confirms how important ritual is for the symbolic development of the human species. The ritualistic and symbolic complexity that needs to be developed in order to handle cannibalistic practice was such that inevitably it produced cognitive, technical, artistic spin-off. Of course, it is not cannibalism in itself which favours knowledge: it is not the type of victim selected to be sacrificed, it is the sacrificial mechanism and its rituals which engender knowledge.

6 'The fearful symmetry'

Eric Gans proposed a theory of human origins in which language acts as a possible stand-in for actual sacrifice. According to his account of 'the originary event' there is the emergence of a mimetic crisis, along the lines you have proposed. However, the resolution of the crisis would not necessarily suppose the occurrence of the scapegoat mechanism, but would follow an entirely different path, in which language emerges as a privileged intermediary. Let us read a crucial passage:

> *Hence, in violation of the dominance hierarchy, all hands reach out for the object; but at the same time each is deterred from appropriating it by the sight of all the others reaching in the same direction. The 'fearful symmetry' of the situation makes it impossible for any one participant to defy the others and pursue the gesture to its conclusion. The centre of the circle appears to possess a repellent, sacred force that prevents its occupation by the members of the group, that converts the gesture of appropriation into a gesture of designation, that is, into an ostensive sign. Thus the sign arises as an aborted gesture of appropriation that comes to designate the object rather than attempting to capture it. The sign is an economical substitute for its inaccessible referent. Things are scarce and consequently objects of potential contention; signs are abundant because they can be reproduced at will.*[42]

I have a couple of remarks. As far the as first sentence is concerned, I must say that, in order to believe it, you must believe that there has been

violence before. The previous violence has produced fruits of awareness of its consequences. Violence does not seem absent from this perspective. Gans presupposes a higher form of rationality that can only follow after a crucial event, like, in my view, the victimary mechanism and the scapegoat resolution. It can never precede the event itself.

Secondly, why should this 'fearful symmetry' make violence really impossible?[43] How can a simple gesture, regardless of how ostensible it may be, prevent the mimetic doubles from killing each other? As if violence did not exist! It is another way of denying violence. I think this is, again, a rhetorical manoeuvre to negate the primacy of religion in human culture. If one accepts Gans' hypothesis, then all other forms of social contract have also to be accepted. In order to have language, an embryonic form of culture is needed, some kind of cultural sheltering from violence. There must already be a non-linguistic solution to the problem of violence, which inevitably is a religious solution, and that is the result of the scapegoat mechanism, of the spontaneous grouping against an arbitrary common victim. For me, all insight into human origins must be anthropological. Every observation suggests that, in human culture, sacrificial rites and the immolation of victims come first and this is the origin of everything else, starting with language.

We cannot do away with the actual killing of a victim. This is the moment of supreme crisis. The moment when the group should be most willing to give up violence – the moment of maximum undifferentiation, when pure revenge is working at all levels – is also the moment when they can least give up violence, because they are angry, and their fury gets the better of them. At this stage – at the moment of supreme rage, supreme excitement, when you are out of your mind, ecstatic in the way of violence – there is no scope, no possibility, for social contracts. This is the problem with Gans: he minimizes violence, for he suggests an entirely linguistic form of dealing with violence. Indeed, he simply suppresses violence, and he envisages an embryonic social contract. Rather, I posit it at the very centre as far as the beginning of culture is concerned.

So, your argument concerning Gans' approach is the necessity of pre-linguistic solutions against violence.

Yes, because there are also biological aspects which have to be taken into account. Such as, for instance, the features of humans in relation to primates, characterized by 'neoteny'. Neoteny is the persistence of juvenile characteristics in animals. In the case of *Homo sapiens,* we can observe, among other things, the loss of bodily hair, smaller bones above the

eyebrows, inability to walk in infants, etc.[44] All these things are physical–cultural and researchers are still wondering about how all this came about. My idea is that the scapegoat system makes it possible at a pre-linguistic level. At some stage of the evolutionary path – which turns primates into humans – a sort of prohibition of a religious nature or some sort of fear of an immense invisible power at the most basic level triggered prohibitions against violence. These forms of prohibition protected the female, and made possible long-range care for infants. The formula 'self-domestication' has been used quite often in reference to the human being: e.g. 'man is a "self-domesticated" animal'. No, he isn't: *it is religion, it is sacrifice that domesticated him.* Religion is a structure without a subject, because the subject is the mimetic principle. I think one can have a purely realistic and materialistic interpretation of it. What I am suggesting is an integration of culture and biology through the scapegoat mechanism. It seems to me that everything Terrence Deacon says in his book, for instance, would become much more convincing if primitive modalities of the scapegoat mechanism were postulated.

Let us play the role of devil's advocate. We will try to put forward some considerations that might speak on behalf of Gans' ideas. Regarding the mimetic mechanism, your theory highlights 'the scapegoat not as story, a concept, but as the genetic mechanism of cultural actions and representations'.[45] *Nonetheless, is it possible to conceive of societies that try to cope with mimetic rivalry through the restriction of private property and the implementation of egalitarianism?*

> *Egalitarian principles also apply to the notion of ownership. If Kalahari men or women acquire valuable or beautiful objects, say a fine hunting knife or a colourful blouse or sweater, they are torn by conflicting emotions. They appreciate and treasure the object, and yet they feel exposed and threatened by having something which others don't have. The object becomes a psychological hot potato, something to be concealed for a while and got rid of as soon as possible. It will have been given to another member of the tribe within a few days, and within another two or three weeks it will probably be found in another tribe miles away. People tend to feel more comfortable not having an outstanding possession, and thereby sinking back into a less conspicuous and less envied position within the group.*

> *Such behaviour does not come naturally. It must be created, inculcated, by established custom. In the Kalahari, training to give things away starts from six weeks to six months after birth.*[46]

No doubt. In reality, this sort of peaceful pedagogical reaction is the result of learning the effects of the mimetic mechanism the hard way: learning that to be envied is worse than not being rich, because immediately one becomes a target for everybody else. Such a learning behaviour implies that, in former times, a crisis triggered by acquisitive mimesis was resolved through the scapegoat mechanism and prohibitions were established as a result. That is, violence escalated until the very end, demanding the founding murder. Starting from this event, peace was spontaneously established, and in order to preserve this peace humans perpetuated both interdictions and sacrifices before the invention of language and other cultural institutions. At this level, the scapegoat mechanism begins to be concealed, for we don't want culture and religion above all to be grounded on a founding murder.

There are many books about archaic cultures in village communities in which the exchange system assumes a ritual form. For instance, Malinowski, in *Argonauts of the West Pacific,* speaks about objects which the natives keep exchanging and which never stay in the same place.[47] It is a similar mechanism. Everybody in turn must possess them, because they are so *sacred* and so precious that they must shift from hand to hand. It is part of a complex ritual which keeps the Trobriand islands in touch with each other, without conflict, and it also does not require language, beside this endless exchange. The sacredness of these objects suggests a primeval violent foundation to this exchange system which cannot be explained from a purely economic standpoint, and this fact defeats any attempt to root culture and the symbolic sphere in a purely sociobiological explanation, or in any form of cultural materialism.

Are you negating any material determination in the cultural evolution of humankind?

It depends what you mean by that. Most of the time the best explanation is the combination of different levels. Of course men, like animals, have to feed themselves, but it is religion that makes them human. I'm just saying that people like Marvin Harris mostly think in terms of rational choice and individualistic assumptions,[48] which is frankly both an oversimplification and an anachronism. Recently the Dutch primatologist Frans de Waal

suggested that the idea of individual acts, embraced by behaviourists, sociobiologists or cultural materialists to explain evolution, is strongly connected to the Western (especially American) ideology of individualism.[49] I agree. Although they work with evolutionary patterns, most of the time these people don't see the historicity of concepts such as individualism and choice. They have an ontological understanding of the human mind based on modern presuppositions. It seems evident to me that the human mind has been slowly shaped and trained through prehistory and history by religion and rituals. Modern individualism is nothing but the late result of this process.

Notes

1. M. Serres, *Atlas* (Paris: Juillard, 1994), pp. 219–20.
2. *The Autobiography of Charles Darwin and Selected Letters,* ed. Francis Darwin (New York: Dover, 1958), p. 55. See also Ernst Mayr, *One Long Argument: Charles Darwin and the Genesis of Modern Evolutionary Thought* (London: Allen Lane/Penguin, 1991).
3. The same notion was stressed by Stanley E. Hyman, which sees *The Origin of Species* as a dionysiac 'tragic ritual', connected to the notion of *agone* and *sparagmos*; see S.E. Hyman, *The Tangled Bank: Darwin, Marx, Frazer and Freud as Imaginative Writers* (New York: Atheneum, 1962), pp. 26–33.
4. E. Sober, 'Models of Cultural Evolution', in E. Sober (ed.), *Conceptual Issues in Evolutionary Biology* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1994), p. 486.
5. > Religions are like other human institutions in that they evolve in directions that enhance the welfare of the practitioners. Because this demographic benefit must accrue to the group as a whole, it can be gained partly by altruism and partly by exploitation, with certain sectors profiting at the expense of others. Alternatively, the benefit can arise as the sum of the generally increased fitnesses of all of the members. (Edward O. Wilson, *On Human Nature* [Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1978], p. 175).

   See also E.O. Wilson, *Sociobiology: The New Synthesis* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press/Harvard University Press, 1975), pp. 559–64.
6. For a critique of the idea of group selection, see G.C. Williams, *Adaptation and Natural Selection: A critique of some current evolutionary thought* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1966). For a recent reassessment, see E. Sober and D.S. Wilson's introduction to *Unto Others. The Evolution and Psychology of Unselfish Behavior* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998), pp. 1–13.
7. Susan Blackmore speaks of a *meme machine,* which works as a pure mindless algorithm. See *The Meme Machine* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999).

8. On this discussion see Stephen K. Sanderson, *The Evolution of Human Sociality. A Darwinian Conflict Perspective* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2001), p. 153.
9. John Tooby and L. Cosmides, 'Evolutionary psychology and the generation of culture, part I: Theoretical considerations', *Ethology and Sociobiology,* 10 (1989): 46.
10. Konrad Lorenz, *Das sogenannte Böse: zur Naturgeschichte der Aggression* (Vienna: Borotha-Schoeler, 1963), trans. *On Agression* (New York: MJF Books, 1966).
11. Ibid., Ch. 11, 'The Bond', pp. 165–219.
12. Elias Canetti, *Crowds and Power,* trans. Carol Stewart (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1973). See in particular Ch. 2, pp. 109–93.
13. Lorenz, *On Aggression,* pp. 249–50.
14. See, for instance, Christopher Boesch, 'Hunting Strategies of Gombe and Tai Chimpanzees', in Richard W. Wrangham, W.C. McGrew, Frans B.M. de Waal and Paul G. Heltne, *Chimpanzee Cultures* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994).
15. The suggestion comes from G. Fornari, *Fra Dioniso e Christo. La Sapienza sacrificale greca e la civiltà occidentale* (Bologna: Pitagora, 2001), pp. 17–18.
16. M. Donald, *Origins of the Modern Mind*: *Three Stages in the Evolution of Culture and Cognition* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991), p. 210.
17. Ibid., p. 211.
18. > The myth is the prototypal, fundamental, integrative mind tool. It tries to integrate a variety of events in a temporal and causal framework ... The pre-eminence of myth in early human society is testimony that humans were using language for a totally new kind of integrative thought. Therefore, the possibility must be entertained that the primary human adaptation wasn't language *qua* language but rather integrative, initially mythical, thought. Modern humans developed language in response to pressure to improve their conceptual apparatus, not vice versa ... The primary objects of language and speech are thematic; their most salient achievements are discourse and symbolic thought. Words and sentences, lexicons and grammars, would have become necessary evils, tools that had to be invented to achieve this higher representational goal. In this view, language would have represented not an end in itself but an adaptation that met specific cognitive and cultural needs, that is, ultimately for the formalization and unification of thought and knowledge. It wasn't so much a communication system as an integral by-product of a new, much more powerful method of thinking. Above all, language was a public, collective invention. Thus, the emergence of a new peripheral adaptation such as the modern vocal apparatus must have been contingent upon a corresponding change on the level of thought skills, a fundamental change that enabled, and then accelerated, linguistic invention. (Donald, *Origins of the Modern Mind,* pp. 215–16).

19. Terrence W. Deacon, *The Symbolic Species. The Co-Evolution of Language and the Brain* (New York: Norton, 1997), esp. pp. 340–1.
20. Donald, *Origins of the Modern Mind,* p. 168.
21. See Aristotle, *Poetics,* 4, 48b.
22. Søren Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling. Repetition,* ed. and trans. with Intro. and notes, Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1983). For a discussion of this text in relation to the notion of mimesis, see A. Melberg, *Theories of Mimesis* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), pp. 130–89.
23. Luc-Laurent Salvador, 'Imitation et attribution de causalité: La Genèse mimétique du soi, la genèse mimétique du réel. Applications à la "psychose naissante" et à l'autisme' (PhD dissertation, Université René Descartes, Paris, 1996), pp. 23–32.
24. > Indeed, Fiske's list of common themes in rituals could be used as a clinical description of the common obsessions in these patients. In both situations, people are concerned with purity and pollution; pollution can be averted by performing particular actions ... [consisting] in repetitive gestures; there is a sense that great dangers lie in not performing these routines, or deviating from the usual script; finally, there is often no obvious connection between the actions performed and their usual significance. (P. Boyer, *Religion Explained. The human instincts that fashion gods, spirits and ancestors* [London: William Heinemann, 2001], p. 273).

    The reference is to A.P. Fiske and N. Haslam, 'Is obsessive-compulsive disorder a pathology of the human disposition to perform socially meaningful rituals? Evidence of similar content', *Journal of Nervous and Mental Disease,* (1985) 1997: pp. 211–22.
25. See S. Freud, *Obsessive Acts and Religious Practice* (1907), in *The Standard Edition,* vol. 9 (London: Hogarth Press, 1959), pp. 115–27.
26. S. Pinker, *The Language Instinct. How the Mind Creates Language* (New York: Harper, 1994).
27. Girard, *Things Hidden,* pp. 87–8.
28. R.I.M. Dunbar 'Ecological modelling in an evolutionary context', *Folia Primatologica,* 53 (1990): 235–46.
29. E.O. Wilson, *Sociobiology,* p. 255. Wilson is quoting J.B. Calhoun, 'Population density and social pathology', *Scientific American* 206.2 (1962): 139–48, and P. Leyhausen, 'The communal organization of solitary mammals', *Symposia of the Zoological Society of London* (1965): 249–63.
30. See R.S. Lazarus, *Psychological Stress and the Coping Process* (New York: Lazarus, 1966); J. Cullen *et al.* (eds), *Breakdown in Human Adaptation to Stress* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1984); A. Monat and R.S. Lazarus, *Stress and Coping: An Anthology* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985).

31. Irenäus Eibl-Eibesfeldt, *Liebe und Hass. Zur Naturgeschichte elementarer Verhaltensweisen* (Munich: R. Piper, 1970), trans. Geoffrey Strachan, *Love and Hate: The Natural History of Behavior Patterns* (New York: Aldine de Gruyter, 1996), pp. 99–100.
32. R.F. Murphy, 'Intergroup Hostility and Social Cohesion', *American Anthropologist,* 59 (1957): 1028.
33. As a matter of fact, this theory was first presented on a completely different ground by E. Hahn, *Die Haustiere und ihre Beziehungen zur Wirtschaft des Menschen* (Leipzig 1896). See also J.Z. Smith, 'The Domestication of Sacrifice', in *Violent Origins. Ritual Killing and Cultural Formation* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1987), p. 199: 'Sacrifice is, in part, a meditation on domestication.'
34. See David Carrasco, *City of Sacrifice: The Aztec Empire and the Role of Violence in Civilization* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1999).
35. Girard, *Things Hidden,* pp. 70–1.
36. Smith, 'The Domestication of Sacrifice', p. 200.
37. See M. Serres, *La Légende des anges* (Paris: Flammarion, 1993), p. 56; *Les cinq Sens* (Paris: Grasset, 1985), pp. 259ff. The idea of burials as ownership landmarks has been suggested also by archeologists. See Bruch D. Smith, *The Emergence of Agriculture* (New York: Scientific American Library, 1995), p. 80. Calasso also remembers that *'Quechcotona,* in Nahuatl, means both "to cut off someone's head" and "to pick an ear of grain with one's hand"' (*The Ruin of Kasch,* p. 135).
38. Mircea Eliade promotes the same understanding by reading the myth of the girl Hainuwele, recorded by A.E. Jensen in Ceram, one of the islands of the New Guinea Archipelago:

    > The next morning, seeing that Hainuwele did not come home, Ameta divined that she had been murdered. He found the body, disinterred it, and cut it into pieces, which he buried in various places, except the arms. The buried pieces gave birth to plants previously unknown, especially to tubers, which since then are the chief food of human beings. (M. Eliade, *Myth and Reality* [New York: Harper & Row, 1963], p. 104, adapted from A.E. Jensen, *Das religiose Weltbild einer fruhen Kultur* [Stuttgart: 1948], pp. 35–8).

39. See Frazer, *The Golden Bough,* Ch. 18, section 4, in particular pp. 315–16.
40. Greg Wadley and Angus Martin, 'The origins of agriculture: a biological perspective and a new hypothesis', *Australian Biologist,* 6 (June 1993): 96. See also R.B. Lee and I. DeVore, 'Problems in the study of hunters and gatherers,' in R.B. Lee and I. DeVore (eds), *Man the Hunter* (Chicago, IL: Aldine, 1968); M. N. Cohen, *Health and the Rise of Civilization* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1989).

41. M. Carl Vogt, 'Anthropophagie et sacrifices humains', in *Congrès International d'anthropologie et d'archeologie prèhistoriques* (Bologna: Imprimerie Fava et Garagnani, 1873), p. 298.
42. Eric Gans, *Originary Thinking. Elements of Generative Anthropology* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1993), pp. 8–9.
43. This is a reference to the well-known poem by William Blake, 'The Tyger' in *Songs of Innnocence and Experience*:

    > Tyger Tyger, burning bright,
    > In the forest of the night;
    > What immortal hand or eye,
    > Could frame thy fearful symmetry?

    Fearful Symmetry is also the title of a famous book by Northrop Frye: *Fearful Symmetry: A Study of William Blake* (Boston, MD: Beacon Press, 1947).
44. Neoteny is the retention of juvenile characteristics in the adults of a species, as among certain amphibians; it is also the attainment of sexual maturity by an organism still in its larval stage.
45. Interview with René Girard by Bruce Bassoff, *Denver Quarterly,* 13.2 (1978): 34.
46. John E. Pfeiffer, *The Creative Explosion. An Inquiry into the Origins of Art and Religion* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1985), p. 65.
47. See Bronislaw Malinowski, *Argonauts of the West Pacific. An account of Native Enterprise and Adventure in the Archipelagoes of Melanesian New Guinea* (New York: Dutton, 1922), pp. 81ff. In particular see Ch. 14, 'The Kula in Dobu – Technicalities of the exchange'.
48. See Marvin Harris, *Cultural Materialism: The Struggle for a Science of Culture* (New York: Random House, 1979), p. 60: 'Cultural evolution, like biological evolution, has (up to now at least) taken place through opportunistic changes that increase benefits and lower costs to individuals.'
49. Frans de Waal, *The Ape and the Sushi Master: Cultural Reflections of a Primatologist* (New York: Basic Books, 2001). De Waal presented a paper to the 1999 COV&R conference in Atlanta: 'Primatology: Violence Reduction among Primates'.

CHAPTER 4
DIALOGUES AND CRITICISM: FROM FRAZER TO LÉVI-STRAUSS

> I have almost always been treated honestly by my reviewers, passing over those without scientific knowledge as not worthy of notice. My views have often been grossly misrepresented, bitterly opposed and ridiculed, but this has been generally done, as I believe, in good faith.
>
> (Charles Darwin, *Autobiography*)

We would like now to open up a methodological digression in the form of a couple of chapters in which we address, first of all, the sources of your theory, as well as bringing to light some criticism regarding it.

I have problems in trying to establish these sources precisely. For instance, the reading of Greek tragedy played an essential role in my discovery of the victimary mechanism, parallel to the modern novel in relation to my discovery of mimetic conflict. Sophocles understood the Oedipus myth, and Euripides the myth of Dionysus, much better than our contemporaries. I found my way in myth and ritual through Greek tragedy, seen both as a form of ritual and a form of revelation, although a partial one, less radical than Christianity. The main source of my intuition is the Gospels, which unmask the role of collective foundational murder.

You studied Greek tragedy in Violence and the Sacred. *Can we then say that in* Deceit, Desire and the Novel *your intuition remained attached to mimetic desire, without developing the fundamental principles of the mimetic mechanism?*

Yes, since the full idea is not yet there. However, in *Deceit, Desire and the Novel* there are some scapegoats, for instance in Proust with Saniette who is mocked by the Verdurins. At one point, they laugh at him,

> like a group of cannibals in whom the sight of a wounded white man has aroused the thirst of blood. For the instinct of imitation and

> absence of courage govern society and the mob alike. And we all of us laugh at a person whom we see being made fun of, though it does not prevent us from venerating him ten years later in a circle where he is admired. It is in like manner that the populace banishes or acclaims its kings.[1]

This text contains everything and tells everything, even the ultimate divinization of the victim, and the victimary and ritualistic nature of monarchy, but at that time I did not realize it. The discovery of the victimary mechanism was really connected with the reading of *Oedipus* and above all with *The Bacchae*. At that time I compared the tragedies with myths and rituals. Rituals were even more important than myths because they are more transparent. They quite eloquently stage what I call the mimetic crisis, followed by its resolution through collective violence. From the moment we understand that we are dealing with a mimetic transfer against the victim, we understand why violence stops, and also why all human cultures ritually reproduce this sequence. The element that was decisive in the development of my ideas was the repetition of the entire process in the ritual re-enactment. Why is it repeated again and again? It needs to reproduce the initial effect of the mechanism, the reconciliation against the victim, to reinforce and re-establish the communal harmony disrupted by mimetic rivalries.

You have always made clear that classical ethnology (1850–1950) was fundamental to your theory. Considering the scapegoat mechanism, how important were Frazer's descriptions of rituals involving scapegoats?[2]
Some critics have said that Frazer had already recognized the scapegoat mechanism in its mimetic sense. This is wrong, because there is no scapegoat *mechanism* in Frazer. For him, the scapegoat is mainly a materialized metaphor. The primitives believed they could discharge their sins onto the backs of substitute human or animal victims.[3] Frazer did not realize that this metaphor of sin as a burden is quite elaborate and essentially 'modern'. This metaphor very likely comes from the Protestant sermons that he had heard in his youth.

Nevertheless, regarding the interplay of ritual and prohibition that follows the victim mechanism, some of Frazer's descriptions were really inspirational to me, and they opened my eyes. We find the actual effects of the scapegoat mechanism. This is where he is at his best, because he understands that all the phenomena he describes are related to one another, even though he does not

have a realistic conception of the scapegoat mechanism. That is, he does not see, as I do, that the scapegoat is more than a metaphor, a way of expressing a circumstance that has actually taken place at the threshold of human culture.

In any case, Frazer could not deepen his insight, due both to his prejudice against religion and his contempt for the cultures he studied. He thought the people he studied were fools, and many scholars interpret me as if I concurred with this view. They do not see that primitive religion, in an archaic context, is an incredibly constraining, and at the same time rational, process. The only way one can rationally account for the reconciliation of a society brought by the founding murder is if one firmly believes that the scapegoat is both culprit and reconciler. It can only happen if one attributes some sort of religious transcendence to the scapegoat. Frazer did not realize that a modified form of the scapegoat phenomenon was going on around him, in his own work: the expulsion of religion from the field of knowledge. It continues to take place whenever an anthropologist denies the actual existence of the scapegoat mechanism, reducing it to the status of a mere metaphor. In other words, modern scholars, who have been trained to be programmatically anti-religious, are continuously scapegoating religion.

Regarding, then, the foundation of the modern social sciences, how important were Gabriel Tarde's and Émile Durkheim's works in the development of your theory?[4]

With regard to the idea of imitation, Tarde was certainly a very important figure in the twentieth century and his work was excellent, albeit superficial in many aspects. He identified imitation at all levels, and explained cultural relations through it. He had tremendous phenomenological insight, that is still valid, although of secondary importance because he never even came close to the discovery of mimetic rivalry and its consequences. He collected a series of fascinating observations, but did not manage to postulate a satisfactory theory to bring them together. He remains within the limits of the traditional Aristotelian definition of imitation, minus its revelatory violence.

It is very interesting to reconstruct the history of the disappearance of the concept of imitation at the beginning of the twentieth century. Luc-Laurent Salvador, a former graduate student of mine, wrote a thesis in which he described the progressive disappearance of the concept of imitation in the social sciences after Tarde.[5] He points out that there is an avoidance of a full investigation of imitation, and that none of the scholars who worked on the subject included in their theories the negative aspects of imitation.

In the second half of the nineteenth century there was a great interest in imitation, but only the 'good' mimesis was apprehended – the 'culturally peaceful mimesis', as we decided to call it. Then the concern with mimesis went out of fashion, and finally vanished. Therefore, instead of being taken up and expanded, the concept of imitation was discarded as simplistic. It has been recently re-discussed at the level of ethological explanation and, as you mentioned, at the level of cognitive science.[6] But this research is still tied to the old superficial definition of imitation, with a stronger emphasis on representation or action, rather than desire. When we understand that imitation operates on desire as well, it becomes easier to understand how mimesis could produce conflict and rivalries when desire is directed towards the same object.

So Tarde's The Laws of Imitation[7] *did not play an important role in the development of your approach, as some critics claimed.*[8]
Not really, because my main intuition is based on mimetic rivalry, and Tarde has no idea about it. The first time I read Tarde was in an English anthology at Stanford.[9] The same happened with Durkheim. I first read *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*[10] directly after I finished *Violence and the Sacred*. Durkheim is far superior to Tarde, and reading his work was a marvellous experience for me, so I added a few relevant quotes to my book. But, contrary to what many people believe, I was never directly influenced by Durkheim.

As I have already mentioned, my anthropological education was mostly derived from English texts and English anthropologists; in particular Radcliffe-Brown's *Structure and Function in Primitive Society* was really important to me.[11] Malinowski's work was also relevant, even though theoretically I was against functionalism, and Malinowski's functionalism sounded quite simplistic to me. If there is a need for an institution, it will show up just because it is needed. Much of evolutionary theory is like that. Take the domestication of animals, for instance. One cannot dispense with a motivation that makes sense *before* animals are domesticated. One cannot simply assume that the domesticators were motivated by the future results of the process, which they could not anticipate. That is more or less the kind of simplistic reasoning that functionalism displays.

There is a general reading of your theory which sees it as opposed to Lévi-Strauss's structuralism. However, it seems that you have taken advantage of the systematic approach which a synchronic perspective, typical of

structuralism, allows, and at the same time you have added a historical dimension to it.[12]

Maybe I have argued against Lévi-Strauss, but in point of fact I think that the notion of binary differentiation was an important achievement accomplished by the structuralistic approach. Lévi-Strauss did it more systematically than Durkheim had done (perhaps *too* systematically).

However, Lévi-Strauss supposes that the differential structure is always already there, it's universal, and identity does not exist because language cannot express it. Therefore, he can work neither with continuities, nor with processes that move from undifferentiation towards differentiation or from disorder towards order. He cannot see mimetic crisis. That is why in the conclusion of *L'Homme nu* (*The Naked Man*), the last volume of *Mythologiques,* you find Lévi-Strauss at his worst: he simply condemns sacrifice as meaningless.[13] He does not see that ritual and myth are the passage from undifferentiation to differentiation. The purely linguistic–structuralist approach makes him incapable of imagining that mythology can express undifferentiation. He does not realize, for instance, that twins are 'really' undifferentiated and therefore they can serve as metaphors of undifferentiation to the general cultural undifferentiation.

Did you ever have a critical dialogue with Lévi-Strauss?

I met him once at Johns Hopkins. He was very gentlemanly, and we even had a short meeting with an American anthropologist from the University of Pennsylvania too, but it was rather superficial. Subsequently, I only received indirect responses from him. Apparently, he is hostile to the mimetic theory.[14]

Valerio Valeri has remarked that Violence and the Sacred *reminds him of Walter Burkert's* Homo Necans*. Both books were published in 1972. According to Valeri: 'Like Girard, Burkert postulates that the sacred is violence transcended and that sacrifice is a violent act making this transcendence possible. However, while Girard explains violence with a murky metaphysics of desire, Burkert founds it on genetic platitudes.'*[15]

I don't see how one can really put any metaphysics into mimetic desire, at least not in the explication of it that I give. Valeri is right to think that I am close to Burkert. In my view his theory has only one flaw: he argues that the hunting of large mammals came before religion. I think his book on Greek religion is remarkable.[16] This is true of all the German anthropological tradition on sacrifice. We had a discussion near Santa Cruz.[17] From a theoretical

standpoint, I wasn't quite ready to enter into discussion with Burkert at that time, and he found my thesis too radical. He did not buy into my scapegoat theory because he prefers a theory that ultimately remains close to some kind of functionalism, as the 'hunting hypothesis' does (we have already spoken about his 'hunting hypothesis' in the previous chapter). In Burkert's account, primitive societies of hunters developed sacrificial practice out of hunting activity, but this is a little bit like saying domestication must occur because our needs will miraculously make it happen.

Moreover, Burkert seems to me to be an empiricist. He does not confront the need for a purely generative anthropology.

A similar issue was raised by Elizabeth Traube. According to her, your interpretative system overlooks empirical evidence. For instance, in her analysis of the Mambai myth of the Mau Lelu, she shows how your model of interpretation can offer a surprisingly enlightening approach to the myth, seen only as a text. However, she argues that a reinsertion of the myth into the actual context of Mambai culture would invalidate your reading.[18]

Undoubtedly, everybody chooses to emphasize certain data more than others, and those who do not agree with me will accuse me of 'brutalizing the data'. They may be right, but I see things differently. As a matter of fact, archaeologists are much better than anthropologists, because they work in the field, and are therefore more realistic. When I referred to human sacrifice in Phoenician culture, many objected that this was a literary view which paralleled the one of Flaubert's *Salammbô.* Since that time, archaeologists have discovered an entire cemetery of sacrificial victims close to Carthage which confirms Flaubert's view; some of them were small animals and more were half-burned infants, and the two were mixed together. Even if there is no absolute proof of what this means, it seems to me reasonable to think that we find there a confirmation of sacrificial practices in Phoenician culture.[19] What is normally dismissed by cultural anthropology is normally assessed by forensic anthropologists, who can reconstruct the entire scenario of a murder from few physical residues, and they are seldomly biased by ideological *mots d'orde.* Cultural anthropologists most likely would say that one has no right to make these assumptions. Why should human sacrifice be an insult to these people anyway, considering that it had been practised for centuries all over the world? One has to have a politically correct view of anthropology in order to deny something that is so evident. There are even anthropologists, like Arens, who deny human sacrifice completely, saying it is an invention of Western imperialism.[20]

By the way, it is common that anthropologists dismiss your work because you never carried out fieldwork. This is seen as an impediment to your theory.
How can you possibly carry out fieldwork on facts that happened in a time span of thousands of years? Specialization means that you cannot do everything. If I believe in scientific research, I have to trust my peers' research in their archaeological or paleontological findings and interpretations. Either we believe this task can be carried out or we give up the idea of scholarship and intellectual achievement. Then we simply become bureaucrats of our narrow disciplines. I am not a field anthropologist. I see myself as an interpreter who is combining anthropological, archaeological and ethnological accounts to construct a general theory of culture and its origins.

Anthropologists might regard this concern of mine as scientifically irrelevant, but for me this is the main question that should be asked. In other words, why are there myths and stories that seem so similar? Why do all these cultures carry similar features and tell of an original murder? Like all scientists, I am in search of the common factor, the pattern, rather than difference.

Of course, you are aware that social scientists also look for difference. It is a fundamental step towards establishing broader cultural patterns.
Yes, but as long as one *does* try to establish such patterns. There is an incredible irony in this cultural relativism! The *victim* is at the centre of our contemporary understanding of history, culture and morality. Hence, if the whole of contemporary Western culture is founded on the worshipping of the victim, I do not understand why my argument cannot be accepted, for I place the victim at the centre of my whole concern. I am in search of the innocent victim *in any historical, mythical and fictional account*.

The main difference between contemporary anthropology and my work is that I claim that all cultures scapegoat and victimize someone, while it is fashionable to say that only Western culture did that. If one talks about ritual killing in the Amazon, it is seen as a pure fancy of Western prejudice.[21] Moreover, there would never be enough evidence to 'prove' it. At the same time, however, if one denounces bloodshed and ethnic cleansing in Europe, there is a tendency to claim that this is true, and the evidence is immediately presented. Within this framework, it becomes virtually impossible to account for the recent ethnic infighting and slaughtering in places such as Rwanda. How do we face the dilemma and the conceptual short-circuit provoked by practices such as infibulation?[22] Should a contemporary anthropologist side

with the victim of this ritual practice or with the diversity of local cultures, seen as *sacred*?

Going back to our discussion on the role of the object in your theory, how do you respond to Bruno Latour who claims that you are doing away with the object and in some sense you are 'scapegoating' it?[23] *In his view, there are some redeeming features in the object that you tend to minimize.*

Latour wants to make me anti-objectal, which is wrong. As I explained before, my realism is essential and pervasive in my approach to cultural phenomena. In my view, the object disappears only during the peak of the escalation of the mimetic crisis; otherwise it is always there. I don't see how that would affect the status of the object from a philosophical viewpoint; one should always emphasize the *realistic* aspects of my theory. The whole view of mythology implied in my theory is really a break within the twentieth-century attitude towards realism in the humanities. The good thing about the old school of anthropology is that anthropologists were looking for a common denominator, given the many similarities in the texts and in the systems of gestures that they were examining. On the contrary, contemporary social sciences do not try to find an actual solution to solve the riddle of myth. They regard it less and less as a riddle, and a way of not regarding myth as a riddle was to confine it to the fictional realm, using terms such as 'symbol' or 'imagination'. In my view, this is wrong. One has to regard mythology and archaic religion as a riddle, and the solution of that riddle is quite real. Myth is primarily the accusation of the victim presented as guilty. Moreover, the myth is written from the point of view of the accusers. Taking these aspects into account, the riddle of myth becomes solvable.

One typical objection to this hypothesis is to recall that there are thousands of myths which do not fit that pattern.

As a matter of fact, many myths do not fit the pattern I describe. But we should remember that the descendants of the protolynchers could do whatever they wanted with the heritage of their ancestors. They could change or censor its content at any time. And I have already tried to show that this censorship did exist.

Cornelius Castoriadis, in a conference on L'Auto-organization, *questioned your claim that only Christianity has been concerned with victims. He argues that it is already present in Greek culture.*[24]

Slavery was a fundamental feature of Greek culture. It was the economic basis of the culture. Take Plato, for instance. One of the reasons he refuses to look at the scapegoat mechanism is that he refuses to look at the victims of his own society. Later Aristotle bluntly justifies slavery by equating slaves to mere tools.[25] The democracy, the *polis,* was a privilege for a minority of people; Greek democracy was in fact an aristocracy, whose leaders had no material concern, no need to work for their material survival, and were concerned only with politics and warfare.

In the same conference, Castoriadis also wondered how you could believe both in science and in God.[26] *The same question was raised by Gianni Vattimo at a recent COV&R meeting.*[27]

I do not see why God could not be compatible with science. If one believes in God, one also believes in objectivity. A traditional belief in God makes one a believer in the objectivity of the world. Ultimately, I am caught in a very traditional pattern, which can be modernized, of course. What I mean is that regarding the so-called important questions, I still operate within a traditional epistemology, which considers things as real and sees God as the guarantor of that reality. Therefore, I do not understand why it should pose a problem to discuss my theory within a scientific framework. My reading of the novels, in my first book, is part of this understanding. I read them as reflections on the *real relations* that take place in society, and I have used them almost as a scientific instrument of observation.

Indeed, your starting-point was the study of literature, but your theory soon acquired an anthropological as well as a philosophical dimension. How would you position yourself in reference to modern and contemporary philosophy?

This is not a particular concern of mine. There is a book by Stephen Gardner that I really like, in which he criticizes philosophy by means of mimetic anthropology.[28] For instance, he sees Cartesian philosophy as an avoidance of mimetic crisis by putting the self at centre stage by means of the *cogito.* The *cogito* is a sort of dam against the emergence of the modern problematic of the crowd. Gardner wrote a book that I find appropriate, but I wasn't enough of a philosopher to write it myself. These questions are always asked and should be answered with the instruments of philosophical debate. Readers do not realize how unphilosophical I am, and the fact that I have been guided by the idea of contributing to a real science of man, or rather a science of human relationships, always starting from actual and real human

relationships, moving away from the 'myth' of the all-powerful subject, which is the source of most of our impotence.

What is the role of the concept of totality in your theory? Or, more than totality, perhaps the concept of system could better define your approach?
First of all, it is certainly not a Hegelian totality. To talk about a mimetic 'system' is maybe a little bit of a simplification as well. The mimetic principle is absolutely fluid and it cannot be established once and for all. Can you keep the concept of system somewhat open?

Yes, it entails a constant feedback. Totality implies a sort of closure, while the system is open to feedback. It has frontiers instead of borders.
Then, let me come back to an important point: to understand the mimetic system, one has to take into account the phenomenon of *méconnaissance.* It always tries to close borders, which ultimately cannot be closed, that are always opening somewhere. But to tell exactly the shape of these openings, how they show up, how they reappear, I would have to have concrete examples. I do not have the logical ability to do it in a purely abstract fashion. I think that there is some kind of incompatibility between traditional philosophy and mimetic theory. I feel, for instance, that scholars influenced by Thomism are handicapped in regard to mimetic theory, because they have to work with neatly distinguished categories. Philosophy is looking for logical foundation as well. It is difficult for philosophers to accept a mechanism that triggers opposite effects. Therefore, it always excludes the real anthropological foundation.

However, anthropology nowadays is totally neglecting the kind of research you are pursuing. Anthropologists such as E.E. Evans-Pritchard, for instance, dismiss any quest for the origins of religion, considering it an impossible task because of the lack of historical records, and the impossibility of identifying a common primitive mentality.[29] *Moreover, as Eugene Webb puts it, 'there would be little value in doing so, since modern scientific thought does not look for origins and essences but rather seeks to discover constant relations, such as those between ancestor cults and kinship system, the role of ritual in defining social status, and so on'.*[30]
I would challenge Webb's statement. Sociobiologists, evolutionary theorists, and scientists in general, seem to be almost obsessed with this task, as the quest for origins is the scientific endeavour *par excellence.* However, what disciplines like sociobiology still lack is an effective integration of different

explanatory levels, which could account for the emergence of culture and the symbolic sphere. They try to explain the emergence of moral values and religious beliefs solely in terms of their genetic, biological and neurological or cognitive basis. They do not recognize the autonomy of the symbolic sphere in the development of religion and culture.[31]

In this respect, however, your readers in theological and religious studies think that your position is ambiguous because you resort to scientific explanation:

> *Girard ought to drop the pretense of adhering to the methodological atheism of social science, which has decreed that religious postulates are unacceptable foundations for understanding human behavior. He ought to write straightforwardly as a Christian apologist and argue that a theological mode of knowing is required for real insight into human behavior.*[32]

I don't subscribe to religious atheism, but I do think that the approach to facts in the social sciences should be devoid of both religious and anti-religious assumptions. To call this atheism is surely wrong. The religious minds are wrong in asking for a religious postulate. If you postulate the a priori truth of religion from the start, your reasoning would have a far weaker apologetic value. The mimetic theory has an apologetic value in terms of Christianity *only* if you assume all restrictions of knowledge of the scientific attitude.

In an interview with Christian de Maussion you said that you had been influenced by Simone Weil.[33] *In what way?*
I remember reading Weil in 1955, while I was teaching the modern novel, and she had a considerable impact on me. Although her writings are somewhat diffuse, Weil's intuitions on mimetic dynamics and collective victimary processes are of great importance. A book such as *Gravity and Grace,* particularly, is very precious. Also in *Attente de Dieu,* there is a wonderful passage on the *Iliad,* in which she refers to the 'doubles' phenomenon, as I call it.[34] Weil perfectly understood the oscillations between enemies in tragic conflicts, where the winner of today will be the loser of tomorrow, and where deities change camp accordingly. The definition of tragedy that I use in my books lies in this alternate symmetry, which goes on *ad infinitum.*

Weil also shows an incredible awareness of the historical character of the Christian revelation. In the episode of the 'woman taken in adultery' (John 3)[35] she comments on Jesus' famous sentence, 'If any one of you

is without sin, let him be the first to throw a stone at her', with which he disperses the crowd mimetically prone to violence. She says that if stoning were still a common practice, Jesus would have cast the stone along with any other. She places the episode in a cultural world prior to the revelation, a world to which Jesus himself belongs. You feel that he understands the meaning of Judaic law, in contradiction to her harsh and unjust criticism of the Old Testament.

Speaking of which, in his philosophical and intellectual project, Michel Serres has tried to overcome and surpass any form of criticism, to move beyond the critical thinking which is at the core of the success of Western thought.[36] *In his view we have to renounce the inner violence of cultural progress as conceived in modern Western philosophy. To 'criticize' and to 'discriminate' are acts of expulsion, of division, of scapegoating. However, you have never relinquished a certain critical attitude, and sometimes you have resorted to a quite strong vis polemica, placing yourself within the 'violent' side of the dialectics of knowledge. What is your relationship with critical thinking and with the idea of the violent origin of this exercise?*

I have to say that I like when Scubla defines me as a classical anthropologist. As I mentioned, there should be some critique of the subject: it does not have to be the total negation, the radical destruction of the idea of subjectivity, but it should be addressed as the question of the converted subject who is capable of seeing himself as part of the mimetic process. I admire Michel Serres' effort to avoid polemic, and I acknowledge the fact that truth cannot emerge from it. But I have to say that, personally, polemic does not trouble me much. If I am treated polemically I will respond accordingly. It is true that it is a phenomenon of doubles, but I think it preferable to total silence. If you do not discriminate, you cannot distinguish, and to start thinking, you have to learn to distinguish. I see myself inside a classical enterprise of knowledge, which has been progressing also via the dispute among theories: progressing in an almost nineteenth-century sense of the word. Intellectual life needs contacts and dialogue. The more we speak about dialogue in our time, the less we seem to practise it. Being polemical means acknowledging the existence of the other as one who does not think like me. But going back to Serres' position: it is clear that we are still in a critical world. There are aspects of our culture that we cannot transcend; we are circumscribed by our limitations. But, ultimately, I don't see this as an issue of great importance.

Notes

1. M. Proust, *Remembrance of Things Past,* Vol. 2, trans. C.K. Scott Moncrieff and T. Kilmartin (London: Chatto & Windus, 1981), p. 965. In *The Guermahtes Way,* there is a similar scene in which a young singer is symbolically lynched by the audience, Vol. 3, pp. 176–7.
2. James Frazer, *The Golden Bough. A Study in Magic and Religion* (1922) (Hertfordshire: Wordsworth, 1993). See Chs 57 and 58: 'Public Scapegoats' and 'Human Scapegoats in Classical Antiquity' (pp. 562–87). For a general account of Frazer's work, see Robert Ackerman, *J. G. Frazer. His Life and Work* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987).
3. See J. G. Frazer, *The Golden Bough. A Study in Magic and Religion* (abridged edn), (New York: Macmillan, 1940), Ch. 55, §1: 'The Transference of Evil'.
4. Gabriel Tarde (1843–1904), French sociologist, and one of the main representatives of the psychological school of sociology. According to Tarde, social phenomena are rooted in individual psychological processes. On the one hand, there is creativity and, on the other, imitation and tradition. His work is a standard reference for the study of the imitative character of social relations. He is the author of (among other works): *Criminalité comparée* (1886); *Les Lois de l'imitation* (1890); *Etudes de psychologie sociale* (1898). Emile Durkheim (1858–1917), French sociologist, taught pedagogy and social science in Bordeaux (1887) and at the Sorbonne (1902). He was the founder of *L'Année sociologique* (1896) and the leading figure in French sociology, which he helped establish as a separate discipline. He is the author of *Règles de la méthode sociologique* (1895), *Les Formes élémentaires de la vie religieuse, le système totémique en Australie* (1912).
5. Luc-Laurent Salvador, 'Imitation et attribution de causalité: la genese mimetique du soi, la genèse mimetique du réel. Applications à la 'psychose naissante' et à l'autisme', PhD dissertation, Université René Descartes, Paris, 1996.
6. See, for instance, Cecilia M. Heyes and Bennet G. Galef, Jr (eds), *Social Learning in Animals. The Roots of Culture* (San Diego, CA: Academic Press, 1996), in particular Part II: 'Imitation'. See also Michael Tomasello, *The Cultural Origins of Human Cognition* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000). Imitation and emulation are concepts which are widely accepted and used in primatological studies.
7. Gabriel Tarde, *The Laws of Imitation,* trans. E.C. Parsons (New York: Henry Holt, 1903).
8. See Régis Debray, *Le Feu sacré* (Paris: Fayard, 2003), pp. 375ff.
9. Gabriel Tarde, *On Communication and Social Influence. Selected Papers,* ed. Terry N. Clark (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 1969).
10. Émile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* (1912), trans. Joseph Ward Swain (London: Allen & Unwin, 1957).

11. A. R. Radcliffe-Brown, *Structure and Function in Primitive Society* (1956) (New York: Free Press, 1965).

12. In contrast to Lévi-Strauss, who holds that any process of thought consists in 'passing from continuous quantity to discrete quantity ... Freud attempts to reconcile these two types of thinking because he needs both. He needs synchronic stability *and* diacronic dynamism: like all genuinely first-rate thinkers, he looks for a means to reconcile the stability of structure with the fluidity of structuring and de-structuring processes (Girard, *Things Hidden,* p. 366).

13. 'We have to resign ourselves to the fact that the myths tell us nothing instructive about the order of the world, the nature of reality or the origin and destiny of mankind' (C. Lévi-Strauss, *The Naked Man. Introduction to a Science of Mythology: 4,* trans. John and Doreen Weightman [London: Jonathan Cape, 1981], p. 639).

14. Lévi-Strauss's criticisms of Girard's work are mostly indirect. In a recent essay, 'Apologue des amibes', in Jean-Luc Jamard, Emmanuel Terray and Maragarita Xanthakou (eds), *En Substances. Textes pour Françoise Héritier* (Paris: Fayard, 2000), he wrote:

    > The simple exercise ... shows that far from denying or ignoring violence, as I have often been reproached for doing, I place it at the origin of social life and ground it on deeper foundations than those who, through sacrifice or the murder of the scapegoat, would make society arise from customs which presuppose its existence. (p. 496)

    For Girard's response, see the interview with Maria Stella Barberi: René Girard, *Celui par qui le scandale arrive,* pp. 163–4.

15. Valerio Valeri, *Kingship and Sacrifice. Ritual and Society in Ancient Hawaii* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1985), p. 70. Valeri refers to Walter Burkert's *Homo Necans: Interpretationen altgriechischen Opferriten und Mythen* (Berlin and New York: de Gruyter, 1972).

16. Walter Burkert, *Die orientalisierende Epoche in der griechischen Religion und Literatur* (Heidelberg: Winter, 1984).

17. René Girard is referring to a conference organized by Burton Mack, 'A Conversation on Ritual', held at Pajaro Dunes, near Santa Cruz, California, in the autumn of 1983. The proceedings were edited by Robert Hamerton-Kelly, *Violent Origins. Ritual Killing and Cultural Formation* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1987). See in particular Girard's 'Generative Scapegoating' (pp. 73–105), and Walter Burkert's 'The Problem of Ritual Killing' (pp. 149–76), as well as the discussions which followed the presentation of the papers.

18. Elizabeth Traube, 'Incest and Mythology: Anthropological and Girardian Perspectives', in *Berkshire Review,* 14 (1979): 37–54.

19. See Shelby Brown, *Late Carthaginian Child Sacrifice and Sacrificial Monuments in their Mediterranean Context* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1991);

Sabatino Moscati (ed.), *The Phoenicians* (New York: I.B. Tauris, 2001). On this issue, see also González Yolotl Torres, *El Sacrificio humano entre los mexicas* (Mexico: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1985), p. 9: 'As to human sacrifice – in the concrete case of the Mexicans – there is evidence as objective as that provided by written sources. However, when studied, the influence of the researcher's ideology drives him to deny the existence of such ritual practice or to simply dismiss the facts.'

20. W. Arens, *Man Eating Myths: Anthropology and Anthropophagy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980).
21. On this issue, see Ch. 2 of Girard, *Celui par qui le scandale arrive,* pp. 45–62.
22. In Somalia and the southern tip of the Arabian Peninsula, this procedure is freely performed on pre-pubertal girls; at present there are millions of women whose external genitalia have been altered.
23. > But Girard does not see that he himself is thus making a more serious allegation, since he accuses objects of not really counting. So long as we imagine objective stakes for our disputes, he claims, we are caught up in the illusion of mimetic desire. It is this desire, and this desire alone, that adorns objects with a value that is not their own. In themselves, they do not count; they are nothing. By revealing the process of accusation, Girard, like Boltanski and Thévenot, forever exhausts our aptitude to accuse. But he prolongs the tendency of moderns to scorn objects even further – and Girard tenders that accusation wholeheartedly; he really believes it, and he sees in this hard-won scorn the highest proof of morality (Girard, 1989). Here is a denouncer and a half. (Bruno Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern* [Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press], p. 45).
24. 'Débat Cornelius Castoriadis–René Girard', in P. Dumouchel and J.P. Dupuy, *L'Auto-organisation. De la physique au politique* (Paris: Seuil, 1983), pp. 291ff.
25. See Aristotle, *The Politics,* Book I, iv (1253b23–1254a17), 'The Slave as a Tool'; and I, v (1254a17–1255a3),

    > Slavery as Part of a Universal Natural Pattern: the 'slave by nature' is he that can and therefore does belong to another, and he that participates in reason so far as to recognize it but not so as to possess it ... The use made of slaves hardly differs at all from that of tame animals: both help with their bodies to supply our essential needs.

26. 'Débat Cornelius Castoriadis–René Girard', p. 299.
27. 'The mimetic theory and the history of philosophy', COV&R meeting 2001, University of Antwerp. Closing debate with René Girard, Gianni Vattimo and Charles Taylor, 2 June 2001.
28. Stephen Gardner, *Myths of Freedom. Equality, Modern Thought, and Philosophical Radicalism* (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 1998).
29. E.E. Evans-Pritchard, *Theories of Primitive Religion* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1965), pp. 100–12.

30. Eugene Webb, *The Self Between. From Freud to the New Social Psychology of France* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1993), p. 213.
31. See, for instance, Pascal Boyer, *The Naturalness of Religious Ideas: A Cognitive Theory of Religion* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1994): 'The content and the organization of religious ideas depend, in important ways, on noncultural properties of the human mind–brain, and ... despite, "socialization", they are perceived as intuitively unnatural by human subjects' (p. 3).
32. Charles L. Bellinger, *The Genealogy of Violence. Reflection on Creation, Freedom, and Evil* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), p. 88.
33. Christian de Maussion, 'Simone Weil vue par René Girard', *Cahiers Simone Weil,* 11.3 (1988): 201–13.
34. *La Pesanteur et la grâce* (Paris: Plon, 1947), trans, *Gravity and Grace* (1952); *Attente de Dieu* (1949) (Paris: Fayard, 1966), trans., *Waiting For God* (1951).
35. Simone Weil refers to this text in 'Formes de l'amour implicite de Dieu', in *Attente de Dieu,* p. 112.
36. See Michel Serres with Bruno Latour, *Conversations on Science, Culture and Time* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 1995), Ch. 4, in particular pp. 132–7.

CHAPTER 5
METHOD, EVIDENCE AND TRUTH

> What I believe was strictly true is that innumerable well observed facts were stored in the minds of naturalists ready to take their proper places as soon as any theory which would receive them was sufficiently explained.
>
> (Charles Darwin, *Autobiography*)

1 The question of evidence in myths and rituals

According to the editors of Questions of Evidence. Proofs, Practice, and Persuasion across the Disciplines*: 'The topic of evidence is so central for research and scholarship that it is extraordinary how little direct attention it has received'.*[1] *This is, indeed, a central issue in your endeavour. It seems that you believe you have found an indisputable amount of evidence regarding the existence of the victimary mechanism. However, it is as if the best way of presenting this evidence is yet to be discovered. How did you deal with the problem of the presentation of evidence in your work?*

This indeed is one of my main problems, and something I haven't fully developed yet. I sense there must be a perfect way to move from myth and rites to the Bible, and vice versa. Giuseppe Fornari pointed out something that is at the same time very simple and important for a mimetic anthropology: the perfect coincidence of myth and ritual.[2] Whatever one demonstrates in myth, there is a direct counterpart of it in ritual, and vice versa, just like two circles which are discovered to be concentric. The old question of the anteriority of myth over ritual, or ritual over myth, is solved: ritual is the deliberate reproduction of the mechanism; myth is the narrative (inevitably distorted) of its origins.

Normally ritual is more directly revealing than myth, and this is because it confirms the interpretation of the latter as the resolution of the mimetic crisis. This reciprocal interpretation helps to solve many hermeneutic problems. Ritual confirms that the victim is really killed. Myth suggests that the victim is killed in order to reproduce the effects of the first murder.

The Bible is different, as it deconstructs this pattern, revealing the innocence of the victim. Moreover, the Bible is constantly trying to clean up ritual and sacrifice as much as possible from primeval violent elements. For instance, there is an open disapproval of undifferentiation and orgiastic elements, like hallucinogens. Drugs are important in ritual practice because they help to recreate the original ecstatic violence. There are countless archaic cultures that used this technique. In the Old Testament ritual sacrifices still persist, but the orgiastic dimension is completely suppressed.

Violence and the Sacred *was the first book in which you faced the problem of the proper use of evidence. How did you tackle this issue then?*
Not particularly well, I fear. I think that the elements favourable to my thesis are too numerous and consistent to be disputed, but any of those taken by themselves cannot be regarded as a veritable proof. It is the multiplicity of consistent elements that constitutes proof. I remember that in those years I was reading a lot of anthropological books, and while I was comparing myths the universal presence of the scapegoat mechanism became so obvious to me that I believed everybody was going to be convinced! On the contrary, it wasn't that straightforward. I tried to do it very carefully, logical step by logical step. I feel that the problem itself is circular, and one has to choose a point of entry into this descriptive circle, which isn't self-evident. What one has to demonstrate, and what helps one to demonstrate it, is very often a continuum. Nonetheless, I must acknowledge that I haven't found a completely clear way of putting it, because my theory engenders an enormous amount of misunderstanding.

Have you tried any sort of classification of myths in order to have a better understanding of the variations in the mechanism?
No. I have simply analysed a certain number of myths, and realize that in the end they all point to the same explanation.[3] One of the most important, in my view, is the Venda myth of Python and his two wives.[4] In this myth one of the two wives (which is the sign of the presence of the double) is indicted for scaring away a divine snake and thus causing a drought. The drought is both the real and the symbolic crisis, while the fault that supposedly causes it is the scapegoat accusation. The victim is then killed by drowning in front of the community in a 'beer offering', meaning an orgiastic ritual.

Another important myth is a myth of the Dogrib Indians of Northwest Canada, which I used both in my book *The Scapegoat*[5] and my lecture at

the 'Disorder and Order' symposium, supporting my argument about the inability of structuralism to think in terms of undifferentiation:[6]

> A woman had sexual relations with a dog. She gave birth to six puppies. She was expelled by her tribe, and she had to look for food on her own. One day, as she returned to her puppies, she discovered they were really children who removed their animal skins every time she left them. She then pretended to leave, and once the skins were taken off she hid them away, thus compelling her offspring to retain their human identity. The six children were the ancestors of the Dogribs and of mankind as a whole.

This myth is indeed about expulsion and undifferentiation, and the victim presents the stereotypical victimary signs: she is a woman and she commits bestiality, and she is represented as responsible for the crisis since she gives birth to a monstrous community. However, the myth also reveals that the community itself is undifferentiated since it is represented on an animal/human threshold, and by expelling the 'culprit' it restores its order and identity. Therefore the main elements that I always find in myths are: (1) a crisis of undifferentiation (which corresponds the orgiastic elements in rituals); (2) a victimary sign that singles out a villain; (3) an expulsion/killing of this villain (which is also represented as a hero because he/she eventually saves the community).[7]

Temporality and causal links in myths are mixed up, and they do not directly correspond to the time sequence of the mimetic mechanism and the scapegoat resolution as you describe it.

In fact, for a clarification of my reading of myth and ritual in relation to what you say, I found it very important to comment on the Derridean notion of the supplement,[8] which I see as a mimetic reading of mythology. What Derrida reads in Rousseau's *Essay on the Origin of Language* is an argumentative contradiction in the form of *supplement of origin*.[9] The problem is defined by the fact that the origin seems to be there since the beginning, but at some point the victim becomes the real origin. This works exactly like old archaic myths, where at the beginning everything is always already given as general cultural determination, and then there is the scapegoat, which seems to act as a new origin. This is the apparent contradiction in any narrative that talks about origins within a cultural system: for how to account for the very emergence of the system, if the system seems to always have been already

there? As far as I know, no anthropological theory and no philosophy has ever perceived that the unanimous victim, the scapegoat, is the key to this problem, not even Derrida in spite of his brilliant essay on the notion of *pharmakos.*[10]

When I read Derrida's logic of the supplement it occurred to me that it works just as myth does. Derrida is working with supposedly rational texts, texts in which the logical break is much more subtle and less visible. Therefore, he needs a tremendous exegetical perspicacity to discover this logical break. From the viewpoint of the presentation of evidence, myths offer a great advantage: in myth, it is much more obvious that there is this logical inconsistency, and when one realizes that inconsistency is an invariant, it no longer looks like a mere logical inconsistency, but it turns into a *clue* which suggests the violent origin of the myth: a logical break, which is the same in so many myths, can't be meaningless. This constant similarity, in spite of the diversity of myths, points to the presence of a common cause of logical distortion at the threshold of human culture. I believe that this cause is the original founding murder, and myths do their best – unconsciously at first, and then more consciously – to erase the traces of scapegoating.

It is very interesting to see how nobody takes seriously this starting-point of the mimetic theory. Modern intellectuals see the founding murder as sheer naïveté. Practically every story of origin or foundational myth states that society was founded upon a murder. One has the same plot in the Bible with Cain (Genesis 4) or in Livy's account of the origins of Rome.[11] Mircea Eliade talks about what he calls the 'creative murder', which can be found in myths from the Middle East, as well as from China and beyond.[12] However, so far as my work is concerned, I am still accused of simply rehashing an old Freudian idea. It seems that some scholars aren't able to see how overwhelming the evidence is! As a matter of fact, the problem has to be turned against them, because it is this attitude that needs to be questioned: why is this question constantly dismissed? Why do so many scholars dismiss the founding murder as insanity, instead of accepting it at least as a hypothesis? Why do they refuse even to discuss the evidence? Why do scholars not take this thing seriously, even when the much-praised Freud is the one who talks about it?

However, some of your critics have addressed this very question of the evidence. For instance, Hayden White and James Williams,[13] *in different ways, argued that your theory goes beyond any criterion of falsifiability. It isn't falsifiable because it concerns the origin of culture, a moment that, by definition, is inaccessible to us.*

The question of Popperian 'falsifiability' is a red herring since we aren't talking about a natural phenomenon that can be tested and debunked in laboratories. In the same way, Darwin's evolutionary theory can't be dismissed by the standard procedure of falsification. There are plenty of undoubtedly true things which are not verifiable or falsifiable in Popperian sense. The illusory nature of witchcraft, for instance. The ineffectiveness of witchcraft is a fundamental truth for our conception of human rights and democracy. It is not an ideological conviction; therefore it can only be a scientific one. Science actually denies the possibility that some people have a hidden power that transcends scientific knowledge. The scepticism about witchcraft must be defined as scientific rather than religious or ideological. In our modern world, we reconsider all historical trials against sorcerers and sorceresses and we restore the truth, vindicating these victims. We all know that if we do that, we act according to the truth, in the most solid sense of the word. In the eyes of science, sorcery does not exist. Its nonexistence is scientific. If we look closely at the texts which convey the belief in magic, what we know of the great epidemic of witch-hunting during the late medieval/early modern period, we realize that they closely resemble archaic myths. They led to the demonization of victims, not to their divinization, which at the most is only sketched. Our critique of late medieval/early modern witch-hunting is based on common knowledge which is never questioned, therefore I simply say that it is applicable not only to these 'failed myths', which are the trials against witches, but to all 'successful' myths produced by archaic religion.

The question of finding a constant pattern when the number of variables increases surely demands a theory of interpretation which is still lacking. It is revealing that in Questions of Evidence, *Collingwood's* The Idea of History *(1946) is considered the earliest defence of an idea of evidence applicable to the human sciences. However, by 1936 Hocart had already published* Kings and Councillors*, the first chapter of which deals with the 'Rules of Evidence'. As Lucien Scubla has pointed out, Hocart had taken the first steps in the direction of an outline of a theory of evidence that can apply to mimetic theory.*[14]

I remember an occasion when Michel Serres came to me while he was writing his book *Statues*.[15] We were talking about funerary rituals, mummies and the pyramids, with the Pharaoh's dead body at ground-level at the centre of the building (that in its shape is reminiscent of the collective stoning of the original lynching). One day, Serres was very excited, because he had found a text in which it was said that the people who did the technical work of mummification performed it with a particular ritual technique: at

some crucial point of this ritual they all fled, *as if they had committed a crime.* When one is aware of the mimetic theory and finds examples such as this, one has a sense of recognition. This is the sort of evidence Hocart calls circumstantial. Hocart is probably very important to this discussion, since he has an original view of anthropological evidence. According to him, anthropological evidence is always indirect, circumstantial, like a clue in a detective story. If we isolate these clues, we cannot reach any final verdict, but they are so numerous, ubiquitous and consistent that any doubt disappears.

I feel I haven't succeeded in presenting this problem as clearly as I should have done. I think the evidence in my theory is very strong, but possibly not well presented. It would perhaps be easier for someone with a background in logic. For instance, the content-analysis methodology could be applied to an extensive number of different myths, from various cultural and geographical origins, to find invariance and repetition of similar patterns and motives.[16]

As you already pointed out, Hocart distinguishes two sorts of evidence: direct and circumstantial. He claims that 'in science, as in the courts, circumstantial evidence is not an inferior substitute for the evidence of eyes and ears: it is the very foundation of knowledge'.[17] *Then he adds:*

> *There is a popular, but natural, delusion that direct evidence is necessarily better than circumstantial, in fact that it is the only satisfactory kind of evidence ... Direct evidence not only fails to explain; it may even suggest the wrong explanation; because it tells us only a fraction of the facts, while seeming to tell all.*[18]

I agree with Hocart and I regard his account as fundamental for the social sciences. But for reasons that in part escape him, direct testimony is secondary and suspect as well. He is right to say that actors in all cultural dramas, which are always the same essential drama, 'do not know what they are doing'. But it is possible to reconstruct the authentic sense of their action by collecting the circumstantial evidence and by trying to see whether it is possible to make sense of it. That is what the theory of the founding murder is able to do – so thoroughly that it is impossible to consider it a pure fantasy. And this theory, which is already in the Gospels, in the interpretation of the crucifixion, presents itself as the religion of religions, the ultimate revelation of religion. According to Hocart, direct evidence is opposed to totality. He reverses the usual principle, saying that the direct evidence is only partial, since it refers to the viewpoint of the individual. The direct evidence is a fragment arbitrarily

separated from the totality of the complex group of facts of a given scene. This can be illustrated by the example of Joseph's tunic, which is the false direct evidence left in the hands of Potiphar's wife (Genesis 39.11–19). It tells us only a fraction of the facts. This is really the positivistic illusion too: the fact is seen as something that *in itself* already contains the truth. Potiphar's wife uses this direct evidence most effectively and thus she deceives everybody.

Hocart also addresses Darwin's theory of evolution in an original form:

> *The first Gibraltar skull was discovered in 1848: it passed quite unnoticed.* The Origin of Species *appeared in 1859. It wasn't till men had become thoroughly used to the idea of man's descent from an ape-like creature that the skull was brought out of its obscurity, in order to become a link in the evidence. It wasn't the direct evidence of a man–ape that converted biologists. Rather, having been converted by comparative evidence, they set out to find direct evidence in order to confirm their deductions and complete the confusion of their opponents. It took thirty-five years of* The Origin of Species *to set them really looking. Then Dubois went out to find the ape-like fossil and found it. Since then discovery has succeeded discovery, and the illusion of direct evidence has taken possession of the minds of anthropologists.*[19]

This is quite a remarkable passage, as it shows that in the theory of evolution, not only was the circumstantial evidence decisive but it also allowed the finding of the direct evidence, which now seems essential. The same thing happens with mimetic theory. There is no direct evidence for the apparently fantastic claim that the foundational murder is real and universal. It seems that myths and rituals are so unbelievably diverse that no common denomination can be possibly found, and that the hope for a global theory is vain. This has become today's official truth: myth is fictional. But this is simply another way of concurring in a type of false direct evidence.

2 Science, anthropology and understanding

Do you think that your approach could profit from the long-established methods employed in sciences like paleontology? Departing from residues, and based on comparisons and deduction, a reconstruction of extinct species is attempted.

Indeed, rituals are a little bit like cultural fossils, and my main evidence is ritualistic violence, even more than myths. The issue, again, is filling the gaps, and finding the overall narrative, a theory – like the mimetic theory or Darwinism – in which the single pieces of evidence, fossil or ritual, would fall in the right place, providing a compelling explanation of the phenomenon at stake.

Your theory does not claim that right after the finding of the scapegoat mechanism, religion (i.e. culture) at once establishes itself. Rather, it suggests that, after this event, for the first time, there are religious elements that, if developed through ritual repetitions, would evolve into cultural forms. This complex model of evolution seems to demand a special development of the question of evidence in mimetic theory, as well as an overall new narrative structure.

We cannot really say that humans initially 'discovered' the victimary mechanism. They *made it function,* which is different but also the opposite of 'discovering'. It is only with Christ that the mechanism is *uncovered,* and also today this *discovery* is not yet complete. Nobody is yet able to answer Christ's question: 'what is the meaning of that which is written: "The stone the builders rejected has become the cornerstone"?' (Luke 20.17). Going back to your question: if the scapegoat mechanism is our common cultural 'ancestor', ritual sacrifice is an intermediate step in the evolution of cultural forms, while social institutions are mature forms derived from this process. If people do not believe in collective murder as the origin of culture, it is because they see murder as represented in myths, and then they see cultural institutions as already established and functioning, but they don't see the relation between these two elements. This link, in my view, corresponds to the origins of culture. It represents the element that connects the original murder with cultural institutions as the outcome of ritualistic practice. We could say that it is the 'mason' who builds institutions with the 'bricks' of ritualistic re-enactments of the original murder.

Ritual is an effort to repeat the scapegoat mechanism, and it normally tends to repeat the different parts of the scapegoat mechanism, as in the case of the initial crisis and the expulsion of a culprit. For instance, in *Things Hidden* I tried to explain how both animal domestication and monarchy are 'by-products' of sacrificial rituals. A systematic study of rites of passage could also be very useful for this type of explanation. Rites of passage are in fact turned into something which we can call 'pedagogy' or 'education'. This 'education' is nothing but the emphasis on the first part of the ritual, meaning the initial crisis, which becomes the ordeal, the 'test', the postulants must undergo.

Institutions are born when certain elements in ritual are emphasized at the expense of others, specifically religious aspects which are dropped little by little by desuetude. A complete account of how this process developed is very difficult and should be done in a systematic way, and I am afraid I have not been systematic enough. It would be interesting to have maps of rituals, as you suggested, to see which elements are kept and which elements are gradually de-emphasized and eliminated. There would be gaps, of course, as in any science of origins.

This might be the reason why it is difficult to present the mimetic mechanism in a convincing way, because these 'ritualistic fossils' are the very same institutions in which we are enmeshed.

The situation in fact is quite different, and I often sense that the problem of explanation could not be simply solved by adopting a more stringent scientific approach – although it would certainly help in making my argument more persuasive. My feeling is that the real obstacle in the case of the mimetic theory hasn't simply been the incompleteness of the record but the *unwillingness and inability of our world to question its own fundamental assumptions.* In particular, a real obstacle has been the inability of anthropology to deal with the questions I am addressing, even as hypothesis. Far from being exclusively colonialists, anthropologists of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were mainly antireligious. Their main ambition was to become the Darwin of anthropology, who would discredit religion even more directly than Darwin did. Their general ambition, apart from a few exceptions, was to show that Christianity was a myth like any other. In a way, we could say that I renew that project. However, I do it *in reverse,* because I realize that it is Christianity that reads mythology better than any anthropologist, and allows us for the first time to unmask the mimetic mechanism and, particularly, the nature of the scapegoat murder. That paradox recently became more evident to me than it has been in the past, because the most decisive text for the understanding of the mimetic mechanism is the Gospels. There, one finds mimesis out in the open, in the notion of *skandalon,* in the problematic of imitation, in the problematic of Satan as the accuser (as we will discuss later), and so on.

Contemporary anthropology is experiencing a sort of disciplinary deadlock. In ethnological work, differences are preferable to similarities, and in turn any specific culture is considered as a whole, as a unicum, with no form of communication of hybridization with other cultures. Moreover, there is no

scope for comparison: comparative work has been virtually abandoned by modern cultural anthropology, which is becoming more of a hermeneutical endeavour rather than a scientific one.[20]

That's the reason why it is important to have an ethological explanation alongside an anthropological one. Either we believe that there is a continuity in human evolution or we fall into a metaphysical, idealistic bias that considers men and human culture as totally separated from nature, appearing out of nothing and borrowing no elements or features from their ancestors. If man is one species he will act out of mimetic impulses and will respond to violence and crisis in a consistent fashion. The evolution of symbols and culture will of course eventually diverge, but there are all sorts of 'residues' that can testify to the commonality of our ancient ethological and anthropological roots.

A project which espouses this line of enquiry is Luca Cavalli-Sforza's work, which tries to match genetic and linguistic similarities/divergences in human populations.[21]

The problem is that cultural anthropologists would never accept this line of enquiry, as they are reluctant to adopt an evolutionary framework: for them, culture has to be fluid and it cannot be constrained by any scientific 'structure'. It is the general poststructuralist and deconstructive attitude of dismissing scientific and historical reconstruction. To make matters worse, from an historical standpoint there has also been an ideological division inside the field, particularly with reference to violence. On the one hand, we had the Occidentalists, such as Frazer, who saw violence as present only in primitive societies, dismissing them as totally irrational. On the other hand, there is now the opposite school, which makes the Western world responsible for all possible historical atrocities, presenting primitive societies as peaceful and totally untouched by violent ritualistic practice or behaviour and even denying the historical fact that human sacrifices were actually practised. Mimetic theory is the only theory that assumes a violent component both in primitive and modern culture, considering man as ethologically violent, but with the cultural capacity (given by religion) to control this violence, promoting ethical behaviour. Mimetic theory, in this sense, has a strong ethical component, for it acknowledges that we are all orientated towards a violence that is mimetically engendered.

Are you suggesting that the understanding of mimetic theory presupposes that we acknowledge our own mimetism?

Yes. There cannot be any positivistic separation between observer and the object of observation: we are all implicated in the mechanism. The mimetic theory demands an 'existential understanding' to be fully grasped. There is also another epistemological aspect related to the mimetic theory which is very important to highlight, and which also goes back to the question which Castoriadis addressed in our discussion on *L'Auto-organization*.[22] The religious aspects are inseparable from the scientific ones, because ultimately science and religion are *both* concerned with *understanding*: religion is a true human science. This understanding is related to the involvement of the subject within the mimetic system, because from the refusal to involve the subject in it, all sorts of epistemological problems and fallacies emerge, such as the way in which the subject always tries to avoid undifferentiation and the emergence of the doubles, always thinking in terms of difference. Borrowing Freud's terminology, I would say that the mimetic theory is a 'narcissistic wound'.[23] It is a wound to narcissism *per se,* for it shows that one's desire isn't as free as modem individualism would like it to be; and it is also a wound to the traditional theories of culture, for it clearly states that the beginnings of human culture were grounded on a founding murder.

In this context, conversion means accepting the mimetic nature of desire. Otherwise, one would fall back on the old authentic/inauthentic binary opposition, which is the perspective of mimetic desire that hasn't been acknowledged as such. The 'inauthentic' person is the one who follows directives from others, whereas the 'authentic' is the person who desires autonomously. We have already seen how misleading and illusory this sort of individualism is. The only way to overcome it is through a conversion, which ultimately leads to a revision of one's own religious belief. Immediately, this conversion implies a higher understanding of the mimetic nature of our own desire. In my first book, I called this conversion 'the novelistic truth' as opposed to the 'romantic lie'.[24]

3 Literature as evidence

You never dwelt on the 'two cultures' debate, that is on the relationship between literature and science, although you are one of the few thinkers who has tried to integrate the two discourses. For instance, you transformed literature into a scientific instrument of enquiry, as indirect evidence of regularities in human behaviour. As a matter of fact, you seem to suggest that

literature accurately described human relationships much before psychology, anthropology and sociology were established as academic disciplines.
My real idea is that the natural sciences came first. As to the two cultures' debate: if there were a science of man, it would be religious.[25] From this perspective, literature approaches at the most the sciences of man as a prolegomena. The justification for the humanities in our cultural environment and in academia is there, but at the same time this might be quite dangerous for art, and literature in particular, mainly seen as instruments of revelation of the mimetic nature of desire. After all, we apparently do not wish to know about the originary role violence played at the threshold of human culture. However, in this respect Giuseppe Fornari has a more positive view. According to his idea of good internal mediation, he sees art as an instrument to unfold positive internal mediation.[26]

Could we say that you began with literature because it offered a privileged instance of circumstantial evidence, which inspired the development of mimetic theory?
Unquestionably. I discovered that great novelists had all these converging insights into the mimetic theory, and in a way only they could have this because they were systematically interested in human relations.

I'm always looking for circumstantial evidence and that is why some reviewers of my books find my single-mindedness obnoxious. Nonetheless, my obsession isn't useless repetition: in analysing a text, one cannot just reuse the same analytical approach that worked with another text. Writers are always different in their coping with mimetic mechanism. Every writer is part of a history that is both collective and individual. The possible mimetic combinations are enormous in number, as are the ways to express them. One cannot map out the way mimesis works with writers in general. Each one demands an entirely different demonstration, although a critic who is interested in the mimetic mechanism knows that ultimately he or she will unveil the same mimetic principles. This variety posits a fascinating case for the mimetic theory: if writers are all so different, and yet the same fundamental principles can be identified in their works, then this could be considered as strong indirect evidence of the viability of the mimetic hypothesis.

In the case of your book on Shakespeare it is clear that you consider his plays as a form of evidence to support your theory.[27] *The novelty of your approach has passed completely unnoticed among Shakespearean scholars.*

That's right, but the purpose of reading his plays as a form of understanding mimetic theory doesn't impair Shakespeare's enormous singularity. In any case, I didn't write a literary book about Shakespeare. I think that ultimately the question of whether I haven't taken into account the specificity of a literary text is truly unimportant. In order to reach the literature that interests me, one must reach mimetic experience, as well as the writer's dealings with mimetic components. That's why there is always an element of conversion in great authors to the mimetic perspective.

At the very beginning of my analysis of the mimetic nature of desire, back in the late 1950s, I felt that this intuition regarding mimetic theory wasn't true for Proust. However, a few years before *Deceit, Desire and the Novel* was published, Proust's *Jean Santeuil* came out.[28] And there one has the other side of the mountain with respect to *La Recherche*! It is the side on which there are scenes which are incredibly the same and incredibly different from *La Recherche,* in an enormously revealing way. For instance, in the book of *La Recherche* titled *The Guermantes' Way,* there is the scene in a theatre where the narrator, Marcel, is down in the orchestra with the crowd, and the Guermantes are in some kind of expensive and secluded box above. He looks at them as if they were gods in heaven, hierarchically superior to the crowd where he belongs.[29] In *Jean Santeuil,* there is the same scene, but in reverse: the narrator is in the box, where there is also a former king of Portugal fixing his tie, treating him like an equal, showering his favour upon him.[30] Jean is in a state of pure bliss. He has achieved his goal and he *still* desires what he has. One can immediately see the difference when it is compared to *La Recherche.* It is the same scene, but the perspective is reversed. In *Jean Santeuil*'s scene, his enemies, the Marmet, are forced to witness Jean's triumph, and they are green with envy. In other words, in *La Recherche,* like a good comedian, the writer knows that he can write good literature only at his own expense, at the expense of his own mimetic desire. The shift from *Jean Santeuil* to *La Recherche* is a 'Copernican revolution'. The suffering becomes subjective, whereas in *Jean Santeuil* there is the triumphant revenge of the snob, the wishful thinking of the snob who gets his own back by representing his mimetic desire as if it weren't eternally disappointed. As we have already seen, the illusion of mimetic desire is that as soon as one achieves the desired object, it already begins to lose its original attractiveness.

How is it in Shakespeare?

There is no written record of what Shakespeare would have written prior to his mimetic revelation, before his 'novelistic conversion'. I started with

A Midsummer Night's Dream, which is the central play for mimetic theory. It is just a marvellous model of mimetic demonstration. If the scenes are taken one after the other, one sees the unravelling and revealing of all mimetic relations. It is like a minuet. That is why one can distinguish the bad renditions of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* from the good ones: by the emphasis on the magical aspects and the fairy-tale elements of the plot. It happens when there is a failure to understand that the dynamics of the four lovers is really the core, the centre of Shakespeare's concern. The fairy-tale is both a byproduct of mimetic desire and, for the writer, a convenient cover-up of the mimetic revelation, intended for those spectators who would be scandalized by the mimetic mechanism. Shakespeare was a consummate master in writing plays that worked on two levels. On the one hand, a palatable and even popular plot, which would meet the expectations of the crowd and therefore please them; on the other hand, a subtle and sometimes disturbing revelation of the workings of the mimetic mechanism, which were probably addressed only to a few initiated spectators.[31]

Since we are discussing the narrative forms of this process of revelation, in adopting the scientific and anthropological discourse, have you been more concerned to speak to the community of scholars rather than to the general public?

My anthropological language contains very little specialized vocabulary. The key terms, such as *sacrifice* or *prohibition,* are common sense. In this respect, the fact that I went to anthropology was also a rhetorical and linguistic decision, because anthropology is less inflated with specialized and self-referential terminology. It is also the discipline that got away from a stupid definition of archaic religion, which was the ideological view of Auguste Comte, who saw religion as a lesser form of philosophy, to be completely overcome when humankind achieved the so-called positive state. Most modern anthropologists and philosophers, however, are still in that framework, considering religion as a lesser form of knowledge. On the contrary, it is a very rational form of knowledge. In sociobiological terms, it has an extremely powerful adaptive value. This is the reason why I find the arguments and the language of scientists more interesting than those of literary critics. Scientists are asking the right questions even though, from my point of view, they provide the wrong answers. Since I adopted the perspective of a scientific endeavour, it was clear to me that I had to adopt a straightforward form of narrative.

I remember when the hypothesis of the mimetic desire started to take shape in my mind. I immediately realized that its formulation would require extremely long and sustained reasoning, in the sense expressed by Darwin: 'one long argument from the beginning to the end'. In order to make it intelligible, I had to present it in the simplest possible way. So it was also a question of writing clearly in order not to make harder what was already difficult. I decided to present the evidence, the texts which support my hypothesis, as directly as possible, with no digressions. Maybe in *Violence and the Sacred* I didn't obey this rule as strictly as I should have done, since there is a chapter on Lévi-Strauss, and a chapter on Freud, that today I see as digressions. However, they are really of minor importance compared with the first part of the book. In that book the effort to present the evidence superseded all other goals – I see it better now.

Although you claim a form of simplicity or common sense in your approach to cultural phenomena, all the central mechanisms of your theory are paradoxical. They always suppose double-bind features, which unfold in opposite directions to the effects of the mechanism itself. Far from being simple, your theory is complex and all-encompassing.

This is true, but the paradox remains the same, and ultimately it is the mimetic nature of individualism, its inevitable check. I wonder sometimes if it is a single paradox or if there is a general structure of paradoxes. One of the main paradoxes is related to the sacred being a positive as well as a negative phenomenon. There is the paradox of the origin of culture through sacrifice: one can't say that culture is bad, and one can't condemn sacrifice as if one weren't part of the sacrifice itself; otherwise, it would have been eliminated long ago. If there had not been some positive aspects to sacrifice, something indispensable in its workings, it wouldn't have persisted for so long. At the same time, one can't simply say that sacrifice is a positive force *per se*. Indeed, Christian teachings aim at revealing the injustice of the sacrificial logic. Christianity is also paradoxical, because the more similar it seems to mythology, the more clearly it becomes a radical rereading of myths, the preparation of the deconstruction of all mythical presuppositions. Then I would ask whether there is ultimately a single paradox, a fundamental paradox from which all paradoxes would stem. I'm not sure I can provide a definite answer to this.

According to Paisley Livingston, you are 'overtly overconfident about the explanatory status of [your] critical meta-language, which purports to speak

the "truth of the text" instead of recognizing its own role in the constitution of meaning'.[32] *In other words, the textual presence of doubles and scapegoats might simply be a projection of your approach upon a given text.*

I would say it is true that one can see doubles where they aren't, and I don't want to underestimate forms of textualization in the creation of meaning. I would just remind my critics that there are so many examples in such a variety of texts that they should at least be a little suspicious of their own reassuring scepticism. This is a problem of hermeneutics, which is a question of identity and difference. When I want to give a good example of what I think is tremendous hermeneutic evidence in anthropology I resort to Freud. It is commonly believed that the idea of the single original murder was signalled to him through his view of the father, which is true only to a certain extent. I think that in *Totem and Taboo* and *Moses and Monotheism,* he really discovered the collective murder in rituals, although he didn't interpret it properly through the evidence of rituals.[33] If one looks at the analysis of the texts he quotes and puts together, those texts show the unity of the single murder, of course with a great diversity of ways of killing. There are many models, and the common denominator is the collective nature of all murders. And, then, if one moves from *Totem and Taboo* to *Moses and Monotheism,* one sees that, without fully realizing it, Freud shifted from one original murder to a multiplicity of murders, which he no longer regards as a copy of the first. Instead of one original murder at the dawn of history, he really shifted to one original murder at the beginning of each culture, which is what his interpretation of Moses' death demands. Furthermore, he never reflected upon his own change.

Thus, when Livingston says that I try to speak of the truth of the text, it is because, in a particular sense, I do believe in the truth of the text. I do not think all texts are truthful, but I believe, exactly like Freud, that ritual necessarily imitates an event which actually occurred. In its narrative, myth necessarily distorts that same event, but in such a way that the principle of the distortion can be discovered. To say that I simply mistake ritual and myth for the truth is a gross simplification of my work. I'm not talking about an absolute origin, I'm not talking about an absolute truth of the text, and I'm only saying that there is something hidden in the text, which refers to an actual event: the scapegoat mechanism. And it is because this mechanism repeats itself everywhere that we can find it. It is the only possible common denominator of innumerable textual variants.

The question of the actuality of the event behind the mythical account suggests a similarity between your reading of texts and the so-called 'figural

interpretation'. According to Erich Auerbach, this was a technique of reading that related two historically distant facts in a unique form.[34] *Fact A doesn't produce fact B as a linear effect, but only prefigures it. That is, instead of beginning the interpretation with fact A, one starts with fact B, in order to reinterpret the full meaning of A, which is only given its fulfilment in fact B. Moreover, the figural interpretation is always concerned with actual historical events. Your reading of myths, in the light shed on them in the Gospels, instead of reading them in a chronological order, bears a great similarity to the figural interpretation.*

Absolutely. It is also akin to the idea of 'novelistic truth' as I have described it in my first book. In *Deceit, Desire and the Novel* the religious reading is already there, above all in the last chapter where I define the 'romanesque conversion'. However, at that time, I didn't realize that when an author like Auerbach is read carefully, one sees that he is closer to the mimetic mechanism than he ever realized. This is an impressive example, because everything Auerbach says about figural interpretation implies the mimetic content, and yet he doesn't see the actual role of mimesis as imitation. Even though in the figural interpretation what is precisely at stake is the actuality of the events related.

One of the first texts discussed in his masterpiece *Mimesis* is Peter's denial, as told in Mark.[35] Auerbach talks about mimesis only as literary imitation of reality. According to him, this text is more 'realistic' than pre-Christian literature. However, the question is: why is it more realistic? Why are human relationships depicted so realistically that a servant can say: 'I can see you are a disciple of Jesus, I can hear your accent as a Galilean'?[36] What Auerbach doesn't realize is that not only is the technique of description mimetic, but above all the content of that description is mimetic as well. He doesn't see that the Gospel scene is a mimetic treatment of mimetic relations. I think that, even though his theory is too simple, there is great insight in Auerbach's interpretation of that text, which is perhaps the most revealing text as far as the role of mimetic unanimity against the victim is concerned.[37] It is impossible to represent the mimetism of our relationships without writing what critics would call a 'realistic text'. Because this is just the way human relations are! That is also why I am interested in 'Figura'. I never wrote about it, but I remember reading and rereading it because of its relevance to the Christian notion of prophecy. Auerbach sees something essential about the mimetic structure of these relational configurations. It is this mechanism that provides a sense of totality within which myths can be reread in the light of Christianity.

4 Conjectural thinking and the clues of history

We believe that Carlo Ginzburg's theoretical contribution may also prove decisive to our discussion on the question of evidence. In Clues, Myths and the Historical Method*, Ginzburg developed what he called the 'evidential paradigm'.*[38] *He suggested that since the late nineteenth century this paradigm has been developed in several fields. Its workings recall the structure of mystery novels, as you have proposed in the case of Derrida's readings.*

That's right, and in every mystery novel the mystery is indeed a murder. Actually, in anthropology there is not just one but many similar murders, and it is this striking similarity which piles up the evidence. This reminds me once again of Michel Serres. He identified *43 original lynchings* in the first book of Livy's *History of Rome.* One of the most striking is the death of Romulus, after he became the first king of Rome. Surrounded by the Senate, Romulus goes to one of Rome's seven hills. There is a big storm, and during the storm the king is within the crowd of senators. After the storm, all the senators announce that Romulus isn't with them any longer; he has been taken up to heaven. Then Livy adds a disturbing sentence: 'there were some who secretly hinted that he had been torn limb from limb by the senators – a tradition to this effect, though certainly a very dim one, has filtered down to us'.[39] This myth has something to do with the *sacred* nature of early Roman kingship. The most interesting element is also given by the fact that the murder of Romulus follows the mythical murder of Remus. There is the repetition of the same sacrificial act. There are both ritualistic and mythical elements in Livy's story. Livy, as a proto-historian, is also unconsciously working in the direction of detective work as implied by Ginzburg. I would like to have done some research on the methods of investigation of crimes, because in a crime one is dealing with the same type of evidence that I am dealing with in my work. Do many clues in criminal cases provide a greater certainty?

In another essay, Ginzburg introduced a parallelism between the scientist and the judge, which is similar to Hocart's insight: 'Evidence, like clue or proof, is a crucial word for the historian and the judge.'[40] *Ginzburg's method is also concerned with indirect evidence, and also in this case the comparative approach seems to be the best method.*

Indeed, criminal evidence is the most pertinent type of evidence in social sciences. What cultural anthropology normally denies is that human sacrifice as it occurred in the past is verifiable by forensic anthropologists, who are capable of reconstructing the actual deed from a skeleton or a

mummy. Forensic anthropology is a scientific discipline that helps in the reconstructing of the scene of a crime. And in order to account for the scapegoat mechanism one has to resort to a sort of detective work, because everybody is lying and no one is aware of it. The ones who do the lynching truly believe that their scapegoats are guilty and therefore deserve to die. It is a lie, although they aren't aware of its content. I think that Hocart's indirect evidence and the small clues Ginzburg is talking about are strongly related, because indirect evidence isn't central in the sense of a first-person confession. In fact, in *Kings and Councillors,* Hocart writes:

> There are countries where fifty eyewitnesses all telling the same story could not be trusted. On the other hand when a hundred little details which no man could have premeditated or arranged all point in one direction, and one direction only, the certainty is as great as is ever to be attained in human affairs.[41]

Then revealing enough, in his book Hocart adopts the language of trial, 'opening the case' and summoning the 'witnesses', and the witnesses in Hocart's, as well as in mimetic, theory are the myths.[42] Following this intuition, by comparing for instance the Vedic god Agni with the Greek god Hermes, he establishes a parallelism so compelling that it becomes evident that ultimately they are the same god, and that they both have a clear and undeniable sacrificial origin.[43]

However, as an historian, Ginzburg cannot accept such a straightforward conclusion, as he is looking for evidence of historical continuity, of cultural contacts and borrowing of elements among cultures. Morphological similarity needs to be matched with a consistent, however risky, genealogical and historical evolutionary path.[44]

Mine could be defined as a morphological analysis, the horizons of which are so vast as to encompass the entire human history. Which kind of methodological cautiousness could be adopted by someone who works on such an ambitious scale? The minute historical reconstruction of such a complex and all-encompassing phenomenon is such a vast enterprise that, had I had done it, I would not have been able to fulfil my ambition of providing a genetic and evolutionary interpretation of human culture. I am not an historian; I am looking for structures and proposing a hypothesis on the evolution of culture that historians such as Ginzburg could help to corroborate.

As a matter of fact, although Ginzburg explicitly dismisses your theory,[45] *in books such as* Ecstasies, *he is actually piling up evidence that seems to support the mimetic theory. Without realizing it, he works in your direction. He offers a powerful analysis of the image of limping in mythical figures, linking them in a communal morphological pattern, which is tied to the world of the dead.*[46] *Of course, Ginzburg is mainly concerned to provide a sustained historical description for the stratification of this motive in Indo-European cultures, and therefore he is unable to offer any explanation for this communality and how it might have emerged, resorting to a vague 'collective unconscious', while the scapegoat mechanism presents an economical explanation for such a variety of textual and visual elements.*

Ginzburg is a powerful historian and does wonderful detective work in his books, but he doesn't find the 'murderer', i.e. the origins of all of this. For him, as for the majority of scholars in the humanities, it will be forever unattainable: the origins of culture are considered untraceable. What I do, on the base of textual evidence, is to guess that at that origin there is a murder, and it is collective, and that the innocent victim is killed by the whole community.

5 Misrecognition and truth

There is another crucial element implicit in your theory in relation to the question of evidence: the concept of misrecognition makes this question in mimetic theory even more difficult. Evidence isn't only circumstantial: it is also hidden through the unconsciousness which defines the scapegoat mechanism.

That's right, and maybe this is one of the reasons why it is so hard to present evidence in mimetic theory. In terms of judicial evidence, it is also true that the fact that evidence has been erased may work as a super-proof, a meta-evidence because it shows the crucial importance of the element that has been erased. If someone removes the traces of a murder, it means that he is strongly implicated in it. In the case of the founding murder, the very threshold of human culture is deeply implicated, and that's what we don't really wish to acknowledge.

There is an interesting passage in *Moses and Monotheism* in which Freud seems to imply that ultimately it is impossible to hide the murder of the father.[47] Whenever it is erased, it reappears in some other place. There are always traces of the founding murder, so to speak. It is part of his theory

of the unconscious and of his interpretation of Moses' murder, and at the same time it is also true for mimetic theory. However, I haven't being able to convince scholars that the phenomena I regard as traces of the founding murder are really what I claim they are: traces of the mimetic cycle.

As far as the mechanism of misrecognition is concerned, in fact Freud resorted to a similar reasoning in this passage:

> *[This] mistake was of the same kind as would be made by someone who believed that the legendary story of the early kings of Rome (as told by Livy) was historical truth instead of what it is in fact – a reaction against a memory of times and circumstances that were insignificant and occasionally, perhaps, inglorious.*[48]

Indeed, this is a remarkable passage. And Freud even mentions Livy, who has such a flair for sacrificial evidence, as Michel Serres has shown. That's why I compare this research to a kind of mystery novel, very much in this sense of uncovering not one hidden crime, but a great number of *analogous* crimes. Freud helped more than it is thought, because ultimately, if one takes the last works of Freud, it is clear that he understands religion better than anyone, although his nineteenth-century prejudice interferes with his textual insight which brought him so close to uncovering the hidden truth of the founding murder.

Usually, hidden truths might be right before us, as in Edgar Allan Poe's The Purloined Letter. *As you have described it, your method of reading texts recalls the way Derrida has exposed 'the logic of the supplement'. Andrew McKenna has already suggested this connection.*[49] *Of course, there is the key difference that you do believe in the actuality of the textual referent.*

In a way it is so instinctive to me that even when I was reading Derrida I couldn't help applying my own realism to his *pharmakos*. I felt that we were both pursuing the same goal, and we were getting the same results. I was appropriating his Plato essay and, from my point of view, this is his best essay.[50] His analysis of the *pharmakos* family of words, and how translation erases what is most significant, is marvellous. This is what is happening with the Bible today. The word *skandalon* is no longer translated as 'scandal', or literally, 'stumbling-block', even though such expressions exist in all languages. All recent translations of the Bible efface scandals, resorting to

bland euphemisms, such as 'occasion of sin'.[51] This is done in order to avoid the real meaning of *skandalon,* which is the mimetic obstacle.

I'm convinced that there is a real event, which is hidden, covered up, traces of which are erased. Nonetheless, in a Freudian sense, this erasing of the traces isn't itself without traces. The thing that makes early Derrida exciting is that he has this detective-story method of scratching the surface and getting to the point where something appears, which the innocent reader never suspected was there, such as the presence and absence of the *pharmakos,* meaning the scapegoat, in Plato's *Phaedrus.*[52]

It brings to the fore the original layer of a palimpsest.

Yes, and some of Derrida's readings are incredibly keen. It may well be that ultimately, as a whole, Derrida has found in Plato the question of the founding murder. This same question is then spread throughout Derrida's work. It is also true, however, that he isn't aware of it. For instance, when Rousseau writes about origins, he is covering up the founding murder. He creates the notion of natural man in order to do away with mimetic violence. Therefore, in my reading of Derrida's analysis of *Essay on the Origin of Languages,* Rousseau is still erasing the traces. In other words, the notion of the supplement works just like the notion of *pharmakos.* What I resent about Derrida is that he doesn't tell us that all his key concepts are ultimately one and the same mystery,[53] and his logic is similar to the logic described by Freud in that passage we mentioned earlier.

Do you think that misrecognition in modern times corresponds to a sort of mechanism of defence, in Freudian terms? A form of denial to cover up what would be a radical form of self-criticism for the individual and society? What was collective méconaissance *for primitive society becomes self-deception and a sort of defence mechanism for the modern individual: cognitive errors and inferential failure are psychological barriers that prevent the threat of overt self-criticism that would bring about the collapse of the individual identity and its convictions.*

There is a perfect example of this in Proust, in the resistance of the narrator's grandmother to accept that he is socially superior to her. She always refuses to see facts that would destroy her belief that she is superior to Marcel. She negates these facts by mocking her grandson. It happens so many times that it can serve as an anthropological model. In answer to your question: I think you are right, because so much effort goes into preserving concepts such as

individualism and the autonomy of desire. That is the reason why the words 'revelation' and 'conversion' are important in mimetic terms.

Notes

1. James Chandler, Arnold I. Davidson, Harry Harootunian (eds), *Questions of Evidence. Proofs, Practice, and Persuasion across the Disciplines* (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 1994), p. 1.
2. 'I called this procedure, which is also the one brilliantly but just partially employed by Frazer, unified method of analysis of myths and rituals, method to which Girard provides the explicatory cause, the victim.' See G. Fornari, *Fra Dioniso e Cristo. La Sapienza sacrificale greca e la civiltà occidentale* (Bologna: Patagora, 2001), p. 27.
3. A complete list of myths used by Girard in his works is given by Stefano Tomelleri in *René Girard. La matrice sociale della violenza* (Milan: FrancoAngeli, 1996), pp. 135–43.
4. See R. Girard, 'A Venda Myth Analyzed', in R.J. Golsan (ed.), *René Girard and Myth: An Introduction* (New York: Garland, 1993), pp. 151–79; also in R. Girard, *The Girard Reader* (New York: Crossroad Herder, 1996), pp. 118–41.
5. Girard, *The Scapegoat,* p. 49.
6. René Girard, 'Disorder and Order in Mythology', in *Disorder and Order,* pp. 80ff. For Lévi-Strauss, undifferentiation and disorder are present in mythology only for the sake of linguistic contrast, of structural binarism, while in Girard's reading they form the necessary first stage that is the prelude to the scapegoat resolution.
7. A wonderful performative rendition of these elements is given in the third section, 'Sacrifice', of the 1913 version of *The Rite of Spring* by Igor Stravinsky and Vaslav Nijinsky.
8. René Girard, 'Origins: A View from Literature', in Francisco J. Varela and Jean-Pierre Dupuy (eds), *Understanding Origins. Contemporary Views on the Origin of Life, Mind and Society* (Dordrecht: Kluwer, 1992), pp. 27–42.
9. See J. Derrida, *Of Grammatology,* trans. G.C. Spivak (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976), in particular Part II, Ch. 2: '. . . That Dangerous Supplement . . .', pp. 141–64.
10. J. Derrida, *La Dissemination* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1972), pp. 94–117. Derrida analyses the Platonic notion of the *pharmakon* as in *Phaedrus* (p. 94). After discussing translations of the word *pharmakon,* he insists that the two meanings of the word ('remedy' and 'poison') are inseparable: because the *pharmakon* is artificial, and it comes from outside rather than from within, he explains, it 'can never be simply beneficial' (p. 99). Girard analyses the notion of *pharmakon* in relation to Derrida's essay in *Violence and the Sacred,* pp. 295–7.

11. See T. Livy, *The History of Rome* (ed. Revd Canon Roberts) I.4–I.7.

> Remus is said to have been the first to receive an omen: six vultures appeared to him. The augury had just been announced to Romulus when double the number appeared to him. Each was saluted as king by his own party. The one side based their claim on the priority of the appearance, the other on the number of the birds. Then followed an angry altercation; heated passions led to bloodshed; in the tumult Remus was killed. The more common report is that Remus contemptuously jumped over the newly raised walls and was forthwith killed by the enraged Romulus, who exclaimed, 'So shall it be henceforth with every one who leaps over my walls.' Romulus thus became sole ruler, and the city was called after him, its founder'. (I.7)

12. Mircea Eliade, *A History of Religious Ideas,* Vol. 1, trans. W.R. Trask (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1979), p. 72.
13. Hayden White, 'Ethnological "Lie" and Mythical "Truth"', *Diacritics,* 8.1 (1978): 2–9; James Williams, *The Bible, Violence and the Sacred: Liberation from the Myth of Sanctioned Violence* (San Francisco, CA: Harper, 1991). René Girard wrote a foreword to this book (pp. vii–x).
14. L. Scubla, 'Contribution à la théorie du sacrifice', in M. Deguy and J.-P. Dupuy, *René Girard ou le problème du mal* (Paris: Grasset, 1982), pp. 103–78, in particular pp. 159–62.
15. M. Serres, *Statues* (Paris: François Burin, 1987).
16. 'Content analysis is a research methodology that utilizes a set of procedures to make valid inferences from text', for instance to 'reflect cultural patterns of groups, institutions, or societies; reveal the focus of individual, group, institutional, or societal attention; describe trends in communication content' (Robert P. Weber, *Basic Content Analysis* [London: Sage, 1985], p. 9).
17. A. M. Hocart, *Kings and Councilors* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1970), p. 11.
18. Ibid., p. 22.
19. Ibid., p. 13.
20. For this discussion, see, for instance, Ladislav Holy (ed.), *Comparative Anthropology* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1987):

> The high value ascribed to non-comparative analytical description reflects the redefinition of anthropology as an interpretative humanity concerned with cultural specificity and cultural diversity, rather than a generalizing science ... Another reason for the retreat from comparison is practical. The concern with ethnographic specificity has produced data which in their quality of detail differ considerably from those with which anthropologists worked some twenty years ago. (p. 8)

21. See, for instance, Luca L. Cavalli-Sforza, Paolo Menozzi, Alberto Piazza, *The History and Geography of Human Genes* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994); L.L. Cavalli-Sforza, *Genes, Peoples and Languages,* trans. Mark Seielstad (London: Allen Lane, 2000).
22. See Ch. 4.
23. Sigmund Freud, 'A Difficulty in the Path of Psycho-Analysis', in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works,* Vol. 17, trans. S. Strachey (London: Hogarth Press, 1953–6), pp. 140–41. Freud comments that 'the universal narcissism of men, their self-love, has up to the present suffered three severe blows from the researches of science'. These three blows, or wounds, he names as the cosmological, associated with Copernican theory; the biological, associated with Darwin; and the psychological, associated with psychonalysis. Among the three, according to Freud, the third 'is probably the most wounding'.
24. 'We shall use the term *romantic* for the work which reflects the presence of a mediator without ever revealing it and the term *novelistic* for the works which reveal this presence' (Girard, *Deceit, Desire and the Novel,* p. 17).
25. '[Simone Weil] held that even before presenting a "theory of God", a *theology,* the Gospels offer a "theory of man", an *anthropology*' (Girard, *I See Satan,* p. 44).
26. See Fornari, *Fra Dioniso e Cristo,* pp. 14, 22–3, 163–7 (in relation to art) and pp. 406–13 (in more general theoretical terms).
27. Girard, *A Theatre of Envy*: 'Shakespeare can be as explicit as some of us are about mimetic desire, and has his own vocabulary for it, close enough to ours for immediate recognition. He says "suggested desire", "suggestion", "jealous desire", "emulous desire", and so forth. But the essential word is "envy"' (pp. 3–4).
28. *Jean Santeuil* was first published in 1952.
29. M. Proust, *Remembrance of Things Past (A la Recherche du temps perdu*), trans. C.K. Scott Moncrieff and T. Kilmartin (London: Chatto & Windus, 1981), Vol. 2. pp. 32–40.
30. M. Proust, *Jean Santeuil,* trans. G. Hopkins (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1955), pp. 536–41. For a comparative discussion of *Jean Santeuil* and *Remembrance of Things Past,* see R. Girard (ed.), *Proust: A Collection of Essays* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1962), pp. 7–12; and Girard, *Things Hidden.*
31. > Shakespeare challenges the public's resistance most directly and humorously, without risking hostile reactions on the part of those who would resent the challenge if they understood it. He knows he does not have to worry; they will not understand anything. Like a superior torero, he takes great risks. He comes very close to the bull, but so effortlessly and elegantly that almost no one realizes what a perpetual tour de force this play [*A Midsummer Night's Dream*] constitutes. (Girard, *A Theatre of Envy,* p. 76).

32. Paisley Livingston, 'Girard and Literary Knowledge', in *To Honor René Girard* (Saratoga, CA: Amna Libri, 1986), p. 222.
33. The violent primal father has doubtless been the feared and envied model of each one of the company of brothers: and in the act of devouring him they accomplished their identification with him, and each one of them acquired a portion of his strength. The totem meal, which is perhaps mankind's earliest festival, would thus be a repetition and a commemoration of this memorable and criminal deed, which was the beginning of so many things – of social organization, of moral restrictions and of religion. (Sigmund Freud, *Totem and Taboo. Some Points of Agreement between the Mental Lives of Savages and Neurotics* [1913], in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud,* Vol. 13, trans. J. Strachey [London: Hogarth Press, 1953], p. 142).
34. Erich Auerbach, 'Figura', in *Archivum romanicum,* 22 (1938): 436–89, trans. 'Figura', in *Scenes from the Drama of European Literature* (Gloucester: Peter Smith, 1973), pp. 11–76.
35. Erich Auerbach, 'Fortunata', in *Mimesis. Dargestellte Wirklichkeit in der abendländischen Literatur* (Bern: A. Francke, 1946), pp. 46ff, trans. E. Auerbach, *Mimesis. The Representation of Reality in Western Literature* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1953), pp. 40–9.
36. See Mark 14.70: 'Again he denied it. After a little while, those standing near said to Peter, "Surely you are one of them, for you are a Galilean."'
37. Peter's denial is analysed in length in Ch. 12 of Girard's *The Scapegoat,* pp. 149–64.
38. C. Ginzburg, 'Clues: Roots of an Evidential Paradigm', in *Clues, Myths, and the Historical Method* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989), pp. 96–125.
39. See T. Livy, *The History of Rome* (I, 16).
40. Carlo Ginzburg, 'Checking the Evidence: The Judge and the Historian', in James Chandler, Arnold I. Davidson, Harry Harootunian (eds), *Questions of Evidence: Proofs, Practice, and Persuasion across the Disciplines* (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 1994), p. 290.
41. Ibid., p. 11.
42. Hocart, *Kings and Councilors,* pp. 28ff.
43. Ibid., pp. 17–22.
44. See C. Ginzburg, *Ecstasies. Deciphering the Witches' Sabbath* (London: Penguin 1991).
45. Ibid., pp. 57, 254.
46. In his book on the Benandanti and the pagan agricultural cults in sixteenth-century Friuli, Ginzburg also links these forms of shamanism and their fighting rituals with the differential signs of being born with 'a shirt', meaning still wrapped in the amniotic sac. All these elements can easily fit into the

explanatory schema proposed by the mimetic theory. See C. Ginzburg, *I Benandanti. Stregoneria e culti agrari tra cinquecento e seicento* (Turin: Einaudi, 1996).

47. Sigmund Freud, *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud,* Vol. 22 (London: Hogarth Press, 1964), p. 89. See also Girard, *Things Hidden,* p. 65.
48. Sigmund Freud. *Selbstdarstellung,* in L.R. Grote (ed.), *Die Medizin der Gegenwart in Selbstdarstellung* (Leipzig: Meiner, 1925), trans. Sigmund Freud, *An Autobiographical Study* (New York: Norton, 1952), p. 37.
49. Andrew J. McKenna, *Violence and Difference: Girard, Derrida and Deconstruction* (Chicago, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1992).
50. Jacques Derrida, 'La Pharmacie de Platon', in *La Dissémination* (Paris: Seuil, 1972), trans. J. Derrida, 'Plato's Pharmacy', in *Dissemination* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1981), pp. 61–171.
51. Most of the English translations of the Bible avoid the translation of *skandalon* as 'scandal' or 'stumbling-block'. The word *scandal* is retained in the French version, Louis Segund, in the Italian translation of CEI and Nuova Diodati, and in the Spanish Reina Valera Antigua, while in the Nueva versión International, 'scandal' is translated as *'pecar',* 'to sin'.
52. See n. 9.
53. On that question of the *pharmakos* as a scapegoat and how scholars such as Frazer, Marie Delcourt and Jean-Pierre Vernant are reluctant to address the issue of similarity, see Girard, *The Scapegoat,* pp. 121–3.

CHAPTER 6
THE SCANDAL OF CHRISTIANITY

> Even an essay in Hebrew has appeared on it, showing that the theory is contained in the Old Testament!
>
> (Charles Darwin, *Autobiography*)

1 The anthropology of the Bible

Since Things Hidden, *you developed a new approach, considering the Bible, and in particular the Gospels, from an anthropological perspective. You claim that in the Bible there is tremendous anthropological insight, as far as the victimary mechanism is concerned, which not only reveals but also denies the mimetic mechanism. In that sense, the foundation of a mimetic anthropology lies in the Bible.*

That is exactly what I think. The mimetic anthropology is devoted both to the acknowledgement of the mimetic nature of desire and to the unfolding of the social consequences of this knowledge, to the revelation of the innocence of the victim and to the understanding that the Bible and the Gospels do it for us in advance.

In a nutshell: myth is *against* the victim, whereas the Bible is *for* the victim. For instance, in the case of Job, a sort of totalitarian or inquisitional trial takes place, and the dialogues with the three inquisitors are an exemplary illustration of the principle of unanimity. These 'friends' try to convince Job that he deserves to be condemned, and at times he weakens, he is ready to agree that he is guilty. Then, finally, he reacts and says: 'I know that my defender lives, and that in the end he will stand upon the earth' (Job 19.25) The word *defender* is very important. And the word *paraclete,* which defines the Holy Spirit, is tied to that concept. In Greek, *parakletos* means 'the lawyer for the defence',[1] against the accusation made by Satan, because etymologically Satan simply means 'the accuser'.[2] In Job, the three friends are the accusers, thus, they are the voice of Satan. Satan is the voice of the old religion, of the old lynching, but Job opposes this voice. In the old sacrificial order, the mimetic crisis was dealt with through the

triggering of the scapegoat mechanism, which channelled against only one victim – the scapegoat. The ones who accuse the victim are the voice of Satan, the accuser, whereas Christ is the voice of the defence who warns us: 'If any one of you is without sin, let him be the first to throw a stone at her' (John 8.7). All difference between the archaic and the Judaeo-Christian lies in these opposing attitudes.

I am just repeating here what Nietzsche said, although I am doing it *in reverse.* Nietzsche took sides with the persecutors. He thinks he is against the crowd, but he doesn't realize that the dionysian unanimity *is* the voice of the crowd.[3] One only has to take the Gospels literally to see that Christ had only a dozen apostles on his side, and even they are weak and vacillating. What Nietzsche doesn't see is the mimetic nature of unanimity. He doesn't seize the meaning of the Christian reflection of the mob phenomenon. He does not see that the dionysiac is the spirit of the crowd, of the mob, and the Christian is the heroic exception.

Why is the phenomenon of the founding murder so difficult to ascertain?
The word *phenomenon* means to 'shine', to 'appear', to 'emerge in full light'.[4] The founding murder is the phenomenon that cannot appear, because if it succeeds, then everybody is united against the victim who appears to be genuinely guilty; if it fails, if there is no unanimity, there is simply no phenomenon to watch! In order for this phenomenon to be observable, there must be a group of very lucid observers, small enough not to threaten the unanimity of the persecutors. It's the case in Christ's Passion. That is the reason why the disciples are bound to share Christ's fate, becoming scapegoats and victims themselves, becoming martyrs, which means 'witnesses' of Christ's death. They die for the truth, as a repetition of the Cross.[5] The first martyr was Stephen. In the scene of Stephen's stoning, Saul, the future Paul, is present, and he observes the event, lending moral support to the lynching: 'And Saul was there, giving approval to [Stephen's] death' (Acts 8.1). His Christian conversion is his belated awareness of being an unjust persecutor. The question Paul hears is crucial: 'Saul, why do you persecute me?' (Acts 22.7). This is the fundamental question. Christian conversion is our discovery that we are persecutors without knowing it. All participation in the scapegoat phenomenon is the same sin of the persecution of Christ. And all human beings commit this sin.

Is the mimetic mechanism the original sin?
Yes, of course. The original sin is the bad use of mimesis, and the mimetic mechanism is the actual consequence of this use at the collective level. Usually,

people don't see the mimetic mechanism, even when they can identify all sorts of rivalries which are at the base of the development of this very mechanism.

The mimetic mechanism produces a complex form of transcendence, which plays a very important role in the dynamic stability of archaic society and therefore one cannot condemn it from an anthropological and sociological standpoint, because it is necessary for the survival and development of humanity. It can be defined as the 'social transcendence' in Durkheim's terms, or the idolatrous transcendence from the point of view of the Judaeo-Christian perspective. It is an illusory and idolatrous form of sacred that, nonetheless, can protect the archaic human community from greater and more disruptive forms of violence. It is what Paul says also regarding powers and principalities,[6] meaning the secular powers of this world: they are doomed, and they are going to disappear very quickly, but he doesn't condemn them in a self-righteous way, he does not demand that they are destroyed with violence, and one has simply to submit to their authority.[7] The archaic *sacred* is 'Satanic' when there is nothing to channel it and to keep it at bay, and social institutions are there to do precisely this job, until the Kingdom of God will finally triumph.

2 Myth and monotheism

Is the fact that Judaism and Christianity are monotheistic religions fundamental to the rewriting of the myth and the ancient sacred?

I think so. The God of monotheism is completely 'devictimized', while polytheism is a product of the victimary mechanism, the result of the many foundational victims which produce more and more false gods, but are nonetheless able to protect the community of believers because of the sacrificial order they enforce. In the archaic world, every time the scapegoat mechanism works, a new god emerges. Judaism, since its inception, is the absolute refusal of this god-fabricating machinery. In Judaism God has no relationship to victimization, and victims are no longer divinized. That is what we call revelation, which, historically, unfolds in two stages. First of all, there is a shift from myth to the Bible, where, as I said, God is devictimized and the victims are dedivinized; then you have the full evangelic revelation.[8] God experiences the role of victim, but this time deliberately, in order to free man from his violence.

As I have already suggested in *I see Satan,*[9] in the Old Testament, the innocent victim appears for the first time. The victim is the only innocent

person within a guilty community. Joseph is a scapegoat, but he is a rehabilitated scapegoat. That is why there is an aura of genuine humanity around Joseph, and a form of *realism* in the account of the biblical story which is absent in the Oedipus myth. The Bible brings the reader into a fully human world, in the real historical Egypt. In the story Joseph appears as the scapegoat of his brothers who are 'jealous' of him (Genesis 37.11). Then, in the Potiphar affair, the Egyptians imprison (i.e. scapegoat) Joseph, accusing him of adultery, but the text tells us once again that he is not guilty: it was Potiphar's wife who wanted to make him her lover (Genesis 39.7). Joseph's story consistently rehabilitates him in situations that in ancient texts like *Oedipus* are always resolved against the victim. In *I see Satan* I tried to list all the similarities between this myth and the biblical text in order to emphasize the differences.

It is not just the Oedipus myth that is contradicted by the Joseph narrative, but the very structure of myths themselves. The myth always asks the question, 'Is he guilty?' and provides the answer: 'Yes'. Jocasta and Laios are right to expel Oedipus, since he will commit parricide and incest. Yes, Thebes is right to do the same, since Oedipus has committed parricide and incest. The mythical narrative always confirms that the heroes are guilty. In the case of Joseph, everything works in reverse. The hero is wrongly accused. The question is the same, but the answer opens our eyes to an entirely different world. I think there is a fundamental opposition between biblical texts and myths. The truth of the biblical text isn't a question of referentiality/non-referentiality. It doesn't have to be referential to be true. It is true in so far as it is *the denial of the myths,* which are the source of the lie, since they always confirm the scapegoat mechanism, and in so doing cover it up.

By saying that the question of reference isn't so important, are you implying that the Bible rewrites the whole history of myths, and therefore that it includes an element of intertextuality vis-à-vis mythical accounts?
I think it isn't true of all biblical stories that they have to be understood through an intertextual operation. I think that the story of Joseph in particular is paradigmatic of what you are suggesting: it is, for me, a rewriting of myth, a rewriting *against the mythical spirit,* because it features the mythical spirit as a source of deception and injustice.

In the Greek world there was also an increasing potential awareness of that problem, above all in the tragic poets. Sophocles suggests that many murderers killed Laios. This is a crucial passage usually overlooked by critics. Oedipus asks the question: 'how could the many and one be the

same thing?'[10] He doesn't realize that he is defining the scapegoat principle. However, Sophocles is surely aware of it, and he is winking at us. Sophocles seems to guess this truth but he doesn't say it as clearly as the Bible does. He cannot say it openly, because he writes for an audience that is totally immersed in a mythical framework, and wants the myth to always be told in the same way, as a ritualistic practice. If the tragic poet did away with the lynching of the victim, he himself would be 'lynched'.

On the contrary, the biblical story changes the ending and tells the reader about it. The last episode proves that Joseph's story is about scapegoating. Joseph welcomes his brothers. The first time they come from Palestine asking for grain, Joseph gives them the grain. However, they do not bring Benjamin, the youngest of Jacob's sons, who is a half-brother to them but a full brother to Joseph (Benjamin and Joseph are the last two brothers). When the other ten show up, they don't recognize Joseph, who is dressed as an Egyptian lord, whereas Joseph, on the contrary, recognizes them. He gives them the grain and says: 'Leave one of your brothers here with me, and take food for your starving households and go. But bring your youngest brother to me so I will know that you are not spies but honest men' (Genesis 42.33–4). They go back, and when famine strikes again they bring Benjamin along. Then Joseph tells one of his servants to hide a silver cup in Benjamin's bag. At the border they are all searched. The cup is found and they are arrested. Joseph then says: 'Only the man who was found to have the cup will become my slave. The rest of you, go back to your father in peace' (Genesis 44.17). That is to say, he offers them the possibility of casting off the youngest brother a second time, just as they previously cast off Joseph himself! They all accept this solution except for Judah who says: 'Now then, please let your servant remain here as my lord's slave in place of the boy, and let the boy return with his brothers. How can I go back to my father if the boy isn't with me? No! Don't let me see the misery that would come upon my father' (Genesis 44.33–4). Joseph, hearing this, forgives all his brothers and invites them, along with his father, to join him in Egypt.

In relation to the biblical reversal of scapegoats and to Christianity, the story is astonishingly pertinent. The theme of forgiveness of scapegoating is there, prominent at the end of the story, undertaking a powerful rereading of mythical accounts, doing it *in reverse,* saving the victim rather than condemning him. (Remember that the cup is put on purpose in Benjamin's bag, Benjamin being Joseph's *figura.* At the crucial point of a mimetic crisis, when a victim is chosen to be scapegoated, false evidence is used in order to prove that the victim is actually guilty.) I use this story as its

conclusion demonstrates that the scapegoat interpretation is authentic. This is the eternal story of collective violence, which, instead of being recounted deceptively, as in mythology, is recounted truthfully, as it will be again in the Passion of Christ. That is why traditional Christianity sees in Joseph a *figura Christi.* It is anthropologically and scientifically true.

As a matter of fact, in this story Judah is the biblical ancestor of Christ.
That's true. Indeed, if Joseph had agreed to Judah's proposition, Judah would have taken the place of Benjamin, and would have accepted being victimized (so to speak) in place of his brother. The notion of Christological prophecy is in fact about the willing scapegoat: Judah is an ancestor of Christ because he is willing to be scapegoated in order to save his brother.

Before announcing the end of sacrifice, with Christ, the Bible shows his gradually moving away from it in the story of Isaac. When Isaac asks his father: 'The fire and wood are here, but where is the lamb for the burnt offering?' Abraham's answer is extraordinary, and one of the most significant points in the whole of the Bible: 'God himself will provide the lamb for the burnt offering' (Genesis 22.1–8). This sentence announces the finding of the ram that will replace Isaac, but Christians have always seen a prophetic allusion to Christ as well. God, in this sense, will give the one who will sacrifice himself in order to do away with all sacrificial violence. It is not ridiculous, it is marvellous. The great scene of Abraham's sacrifice is the renunciation of the sacrifice of infants (which is latent in the biblical beginning) and its replacement with animal sacrifice. However, in the prophetic texts, we are a step further: it is the moment in which animal sacrifices will not work any more, as expressed, for instance, in Psalm 40: 'Sacrifice and offering you did not desire, but my ears you have pierced; burnt offerings and sin offerings you did not require.' In other words, the Bible provides not merely a replacement of the object to be sacrificed, but the end of the sacrificial order in its entirety, thanks to the consenting victim who is Jesus Christ.

In order to free oneself from sacrifice, someone has to set the example, and renounce all mimetic retaliations: 'turn the other cheek', as Jesus says. To learn about the role of mimetism in human violence helps us to understand why Jesus' teachings in the Sermon of the Mount are what they are. They are not masochistic; they are not excessive. They are simply realistic, taking into account our almost irresistible tendency to retaliate. The Bible conceives the history of the elected people as constant relapsing into mimetic violence and its sacrificial consequences. Just remember, for instance, when Moses'

people are very close to murdering him collectively. It is what we read in Numbers: 'the whole assembly talked about stoning them'.[11]

Is this the moment in which revelation and monotheism are opposed to scapegoating and polytheism?

Any form of opposition would be mimetic, so I would rather not see any radical break. This is also something more powerful in the long term, because archaic polytheism in a way becomes part of the revelation in a figural sense: Freud's thesis – the idea that Moses was eventually lynched – is deeper and more authentically biblical than it seems.

I think that *Moses and Monotheism* is Freud's greatest book. It is full of insights, based on a Jewish 'legend' of Moses being killed by his people, without being aware that similar 'rumours' circulated about Romulus, Zoroaster and most foundational religious figures. Zoroaster is supposed to have been killed by groups of sacrificers (sacrificial associations) which were part of the old religion, and they decided to kill Zoroaster precisely because he was hostile to sacrifice. All these stories resemble the story of Moses, as interpreted by Freud, but he never related them, and that is why he was not able to discover the scapegoat mechanism. Freud sometimes shows very powerful intuitions, but with a typical non-religious, nineteenth-century interpretation, much in the manner of Darwin, when as a matter of fact, they actually reinforce the biblical message. Freud's works, to me, are texts, which support and validate the mimetic theory. It is clearer in *Moses and Monotheism* than in *Totem and Taboo,* although it remains indirect.

If in the biblical account the beginning of culture is determined by an original sin, aren't you somehow implying that in the Gospels there is a radical reinterpretation of this very origin whereby an alternative is suggested. Could we then say that the New Testament is a radical rereading not only of the mythical tradition but also of the Old Testament?

We cannot speak of radical reinterpretation, but of revelation. Revelation is the reproduction of the victimary mechanism by showing the truth, knowing that the victim is innocent and that everything is based on mimetism. The Gospel represents the crucifixion as a mimetic phenomenon. The true cause of Peter's denial, of Pilate's behaviour, of the bad thief's attitude, is their imitation of the crowd, the collective mimetism, the violent contagion. Jesus is innocent. But everything lies upon a mimetic unanimity, which is fallacious. The more we understand the truth of this description, the more we understand that it discredits not only those who crucified Jesus, but all

the myth-makers in the history of humanity. And we must add to this, all the definitions of the same founding mechanism that the Gospels put in Jesus' mouth, all the definitions I have already quoted: 'the stone that has been rejected by the builders has become the keystone'; 'Satan is the murderer since the beginning'; 'it is better that only one man dies ...'

We shouldn't say, then, that there is radical reinterpretation: rather, you would stress a strong continuity. Some of the reviews of I see Satan *said that your work is against the Old Testament, while, according to Sandor Goodhart, the Gospels say the same things which are already included in the Bible, and don't add anything new.*[12]

Indeed. In the Old Testament there is a series of dramatic events which account for the death of a single victim, very much in the same way as the Gospels, that is, by revealing the innocence of all collective victims. The first great example is the story of Joseph, as discussed. If it were mythical, it would have sided with Joseph's brothers against him, while it does the opposite. The same could be said about the story of Job and the one of the Suffering Servant.

However, in Christianity, there is a clearer and more definite revelation of this mechanism, and the victim, Christ, more explicitly is seen as a saviour.

Jesus saves all human beings because of his revelation of the scapegoat mechanism, which also deprives us more and more of sacrificial protection, therefore forcing us to abstain from violence if we want to survive. In order to reach the Kingdom, man has to renounce violence. All human communities reject the offer of Christ. This rejection already started with his own earthly community at the moment of the crucifixion. This is why the prologue to John says: 'He was in the world, and though the world was made through him, the world did not recognize him. He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him. The light shines in the darkness, but the darkness has not understood it' (John 1.10–11 and 5). Individuals, however, may do their best to emulate Christ, and that is why the prologue to John adds: 'Yet to all who received him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God' (John 1.12). This is the idea of personal salvation available through the spirit of Christ and his Father as a result of the Cross, which re-established the direct relationship between man and God, which has been interrupted by the original sin.

Within the framework of the mimetic theory one should read mythology as a more distant, and more obscure form of prophecy, which, in order to

be intelligible, must include the inversion of mythical values. In fact, in the Old Testament one still finds a good deal of violence: in Judges and other historical books, there is still a mythical valorization of the community against the scapegoat victim. In the so-called psalms of malediction or execration, there is also the hatred and resentment of the victim. However, this hatred is the response to the despair experienced by a man who has become, for whatever reason, the victim of his entire community.[13] It is a stage in a growing process of discovery of the scapegoat mechanism, which presents moments of regression and moments of fast progression. Some of this progression, like the shift from human to animal sacrifice, is common to most societies, but it remains low-key, while in the Bible it is made fully visible and glorified.

3 *Figurae*

Don't you think that your readers might find it disconcerting that your reading of history recalls the medieval tradition of the figural interpretation? Let us remind the reader of the important difference between allegory and figura*: while the former implies only an allusion, the latter necessarily supposes two similar events united by the interpretation. If one prefers to adopt a different formulation, we could say that it is a morphological interpretation, which implies a historical perspective, showing a growing awareness, or rather a revelation, of specific cultural patterns.*

The mimetic theory rectifies the figural and shows what is most essential: the violence which is not divine but human. The emergence of these revelatory texts triggers or facilitates the advent of new possibilities in our human history. For instance, let me return to Sophocles. In the Byzantine period, *Oedipus Rex* was interpreted as the *passion* of Oedipus, that is, as a *figura* of which Christ was to be the *consumatio.* Oedipus was already seen as a victim, as an innocent sufferer, as in the sense of Christ.[14] I think this is the most profound interpretation. The Byzantines couldn't have formulated their insight into the theoretical language that we use today, but they had the right intuition, they guessed the innocent victim behind Oedipus. Freud did not, because he mistook parricide and incest for a great truth. This mistake produced the modern revival of the myth, because Freud wrongly believed that Oedipus is psychologically, if not actually, guilty. Through Freud we relapsed onto a mythical understanding of sociopsychological structures (Freud is a baffling combination of 'blindness and insight').

At the time I discovered the scapegoat mechanism, whilst writing *Violence and the Sacred,* I felt that this question of a figural interpretation must have important repercussions in the religious field. However, I wasn't sure of how it was going to fit in with the Gospels, how it was going to be different, what kinds of difference would be involved. It has been my main problem ever since. If I were to rewrite *Things Hidden* now, I would emphasize the question of representation more than I did. The myth describes the scapegoat mechanism in the way it appears to those who can make it functional, because they don't realize the nature of its effectiveness; because they are duped by the subconscious nature of the process. The Bible considers the same mechanism from a distance, it fully *represents* the mimetic mechanism, and thus it can reveal its nature, by the sheer fact that it always sees the essential point: the innocence of the scapegoat victim.

In the first chapter of Mimesis, *Auerbach presents a wonderful analysis of the difference of mentalities between Greek and Jewish cultures by comparing Homer's* Odyssey *and the story of Isaac in the Bible.*[15] *Characters in the latter are much more developed, and the reader can have an easier identification with them, bringing the meaning of the text closer to his/her own personal experience. We could say that realism is an agent of conversion, so to speak, because good imitation is more easily triggered, whereas mythical accounts do not produce this effect, since they are pervaded by an ineluctable divine aura.* In that text Auerbach shows how much our modern mentality is indebted to biblical stories, more so than to Homer. There is an awareness of the temporal dimension of our historical experience which is not present in the Greek poet, whose heroes still live in a mythical framework, where destiny is fixed. The psychological complexity of Homer's characters is limited, as they experience an alternation of emotions and appetites, while the Jewish writer shows the various layers of the characters' consciousness and the conflict between them. But the essential point for me is not there. The essential point that nobody is able to see – neither Auerbach nor anyone else – is that in myths the victim is represented as guilty before being divine, while in the Bible the victim is shown to be innocent, falsely accused. Auerbach, like other interpreters, misses what for me is essential.

In 'Figura', Auerbach claims that St Paul was the first to apply the figural interpretation to biblical texts. However, you seem to suggest that the Old Testament itself is a text whose structure is figural.

I would rather say prophetic. The prophets already refer to earlier biblical texts in order to discredit the arbitrary and violent designation of the scapegoat. The biblical text which goes further in this revelation is possibly Isaiah 40.3–4. It begins with the description of a crisis, where all mountains are eradicated and all valleys elevated.[16] The interpreters say this is a reference to the building of a road for Cyrus, the Persian king who freed the Jews from exile. It is like a process of geological erosion and I would say it is the most tremendous *figura* of the sacrificial crisis, of the violent undifferentiation process. There is no more difference between mountains and valleys. The fact that John the Baptist quotes that passage (at the beginning of all four Gospels) means that Jesus emerges at the cynosure of a crisis which calls for the designation of a new scapegoat, and this would be Jesus; this new scapegoating will be the occasion for God to reveal himself.[17] The notion of prophecy involves this constant return to previous mimetic crises and scapegoat resolution. Many of the biblical prophecies about Christ define the victim mechanism. For instance, in the Gospel, there is the quote from the Psalms, which says: 'They hated me without a cause.'[18] This is a previous scapegoat complaining about his being randomly scapegoated, and it is subsequently applied to Christ. Christ is hated without a cause, when everybody starts to imitate the crowd of his enemies. Pilate goes with the crowd because he is afraid, and Peter also forsakes Jesus for the crowd out of fear. What is marvellous about this quote from Psalms is that in order to understand, from a mimetic viewpoint, the central element in the Bible and in the Gospel, one doesn't need to think in terms of transcendence. What is happening here is related to strictly empirical observation. That is why I claim that the superiority of the Bible and the Gospels can be demonstrated scientifically. The book of Job is also an immense song in which the victim addresses the people who are about to lynch him and affirms that he isn't guilty, and that therefore, the mob will murder an innocent person ('They hate me without a cause'). In myths there always seems to be a good cause for hating the victim, but in reality it is a spurious, illusory cause.

That is why the victim is at the core of the Bible: God himself becomes the victim who ends the unjust usage of victims. Your reading of the Bible shows that the text deconstructs itself, rereading the tradition of the mythical accounts, but also that it keeps a centre, namely, the centre is the victim.
Yes, this formulation is sound. There the relationship with archaic religion becomes tremendously important. Ultimately, archaic religion and Christianity are structurally similar because man, even at the most archaic level, has always

worshipped his own innocent victims, without being aware of it. This is, the unity of religion lies: it centres on the worshipping of the victim. The God of Christianity isn't the violent God of archaic religion, but the non-violent God who willingly becomes a victim in order to free us from our violence. The evidence is all there under our eyes and we don't have to resort to theology to understand it, for it is purely anthropological. The discovery of his innocence is unwelcome because it coincides inevitably with the discovery of our guilt. The continuous teaching of Christ's message through the diffusion of the Gospels is as important as this revelation. It is exactly what transforms the world, not in a sudden and abrupt way, but gradually, through a progressive assimilation of his message, which is often readdressed to be used against Christianity itself with the Enlightenment philosophy or with contemporary atheism, which is above all a protestation against the sacrificial elements of religion.

4 Revelation and Eastern religions

Lucien Scubla challenged the Judaeo-Christian character of the revelation of the innocence of the victim within the scapegoat mechanism. He argued, 'The Orphic tradition condemned with vigor all forms of blood sacrifice and already reproached men with having founded their polis on murder.'[19]
That is only partially true. Freud also referred to the Orphic tradition, at the end of *Totem and Taboo.*[20] For some aspects, it seems close to Christianity, in particular to the notion of the original sin, in the sense that we all have some Titanic inheritance in us, as well as little sparks of goodness, of divinity, in the sense of the Gnostic tradition. When Scubla says there is something about the Orphic mysteries that is close to Christianity, I believe that he is right up to a point. Orphism became popular in a world that was influenced by the Bible, at least indirectly.[21] The revelation of the innocence of the one who had been victimized was only spread around by means of the Judaeo-Christian scriptures. It cannot be denied that the Orphic tradition comes close to the Christian conception in some respects. However, it is very incomplete and fragmentary, and it simply did not change the world because it was purely doctrinal and contained no equivalent of the four accounts of Jesus' crucifixion. The Gospel texts are the real power behind the modern demystification of unanimous violence.

As a matter of fact, a possible objection to the claim about the centrality of Christianity in the revelation of the sacrificial structure of ancient religions

could be made by advocating the fact that religions like Jainism in India moved away from any sacrificial order, refusing sacrifice altogether.
Certainly, the mimetic theory does not exclude the possibility that a given society or religious group could reach a form of radical awareness of the violent nature of human beings. Because of that awareness, groups like the Jains were strongly persecuted in the past: being against the sacrificial order often entailed being scapegoated. Jainism probably reached that stage of awareness and proposed a form of radical anti-sacrificial asceticism,[22] which is compatible with a Christian understanding. Ghandi saw a connection between Jainist philosophy and Christianity, but eventually he opted for the kind of political action that is more compatible with the latter. Christianity suggests a political dimension. It entails an intervention in worldly matters, not in the form of sheer proselytism, as it is commonly believed, but in the form of a personal, individual conversion, by proposing Christ as a model to imitate. It's our Christian spirit which allows us to single out Jainism as a religion that carries our ethical presuppositions. What is appealing for the contemporary mind in Eastern religions is the absence of a transcendental God. The founding narrative of Buddhism, for instance, is strictly individual: it is a personal path which leads to revelation, and thus fits much better with contemporary individualism.

However, in Jainism there is a system of extensive worshipping of all sorts of deities, which present residual sacrificial elements.[23] *In Christianity worshipping has been defined in terms of the imitation of Christ, with positive external mediation, which is fundamental to the idea of Christians' involvement in worldly matters. As a matter of fact, there are historical sources that speak of connections between Jainism and Judaism, which remain underexplored and which are simply fascinating. The most striking evidence is given by Frazer, who reports the presence of versions of the judgement of Solomon, which is so central to Judaeo-Christian tradition, in Jainist texts.*[24] *Although non-violent in nature, Jainism has eventually relapsed into a patriarchal caste system of Hindu Brahmanical heritage which is so widespread in India and which still represents a form of exclusion, of symbolic and actual outcasting.*[25] *This is 'structural violence', i.e. radical injustice. Moreover, as was suggested at a recent COV&R meeting, the history of religions and societies in Asia testifies, from a descriptive standpoint, that Hindu and Buddhist cultures and states have not been without violence, as is commonly believed, pretty much in the same way as has happened with historical Christianity.*[26]
What I gathered in that conference is that all these religions are fully aware, from a normative standpoint, of the injustice of violence and I fully

acknowledge that the Easter traditions have contributed in making those societies less violent. They know that the human being should withdraw from anger, resentment, envy, violence, but they are not fully aware of the scapegoat mechanism. They know what sacrifice is, and they progressively tried to forbid it. The difference that I see between them and Christianity is that the latter was able to formulate in the Gospels and unmask in a full light the anthropological mechanism of mimetic scapegoating and sacrifice.

5 The judgement of Solomon and the non-sacrificial space

As already hinted, the judgement of Solomon is one of the most powerful anti-sacrificial texts in the Old Testament, and it is central in the development of your argument in Things Hidden, *in which you tried to define the possibility of a non-sacrificial space.*[27]

That's right. *Things Hidden* is entirely built on that immensely powerful text, which played an essential role in my reflection on sacrifice. As you know, in this text there are two prostitutes fighting over a child. They both claim in front of Solomon that the other woman stole her child. Then Solomon brings the sword and threatens to divide the child between the two women. One of them accepts, while the other one prefers to give up her child, in order to save him. This action was prophetic of Christ in the highest sense. In the Middle Ages the figure of Christ was seen not in the good prostitute but in Solomon. The fundamental human situation is a judgement of Solomon without any Solomon to be the arbiter. In *Things Hidden* I suggested that one shouldn't use the same word to define the behaviour of both the bad and the good prostitute. What the bad prostitute does is to accept the murderous type of sacrifice, while the good one refuses it. At that time, I did not want to say that she *sacrifices herself,* since I was still afraid of possible interpretations of her actions as 'masochism'. One cannot say that a woman ready to die for her child is a masochist, simply because she wants to save the child. The text keeps on emphasizing the fact that the good mother gives up her child so that 'he will live'. She isn't in love with death, she is in love with life, but she is willing to give up her life in order to save the child's life. This is the true meaning of Christ's sacrifice.

In *Things Hidden* I said that there is no greater difference than the one that lies between these two actions; therefore I refused to use the same word to describe them both. Since the meaning of sacrifice as immolation, as murder, is the oldest one, I decided that the word 'sacrifice' should apply

to the first typology, the murderous sacrifice. Today I have changed my mind. There is no doubt that the distance between these two actions is the greatest possible, and it is the difference between the archaic sacrifice, which turns against a third victim the violence of those who are fighting, and the Christian sacrifice which is the renunciation of all egoistic claiming, even to life if needed, in order not to kill.

Indeed, the two actions are juxtaposed in the same story.
This is the crucial point. A similarity is also at stake here. If one must use the term 'sacrifice' for the good prostitute, it doesn't mean that it cannot be used for the other woman as well. *Things Hidden* was still written from the perspective of anthropology and, therefore, Christianity seems like a kind of 'supplement', rather than converting everything to its perspective. Today I would write from the point of view of the Gospels, showing that the Gospels read the bad woman and the bad sacrifice as a metaphor of the old humanity, unable to escape violence without sacrificing others. Christ, through his own sacrifice, frees us from this necessity. We have then to use the word 'sacrifice' as self-sacrifice, in the sense of Christ. Then it becomes viable to say that the primitive, the archaic, is prophetic of Christ in its own imperfect way. No greater difference can be found: on the one hand, sacrifice as murder; on the other hand, sacrifice as the readiness to die in order not to participate in sacrifice as murder. These two forms are radically opposed to one another, and yet they are inseparable. There is no non-sacrificial space in between, from which everything could be described from a neutral viewpoint. The moral history of humanity is the shifting from the first to the second meaning, accomplished by Christ but not by humanity, who did everything to escape this dilemma, and above all not to see it.

This change of perspective in your theory is even more evident if compared with the debate you had with the liberation theologians in 1990, in Brazil. There, Franz Hinkelammert distinguished the concepts of 'non-sacrificial' and 'anti-sacrificial' in order to suggest: 'Do we really understand Girard's thought if we define it as anti-sacrificial? I think we don't, because his thought is non-sacrificial . . . The anti-sacrificial position can be extremely sacrificial.'[28]
I remember that discussion and I think he is right. I wrote an article on my latest position on the subject, which was published in a volume in honour to Raymund Schwager.[29] Schwager thinks like me that we need to see a spontaneous scapegoat phenomenon behind the crucifixion, as well as behind the myths. The whole difference rests on the recognition of this phenomenon,

that cannot be found in myths, but is there in the Gospels. But the most extraordinary thing in the Gospels is that this recognition comes from Christ himself, rather than the evangelists, who do everything they can in order to follow Christ, and overall they accomplished it. I would like to write a total Christian interpretation of the history of religion that would really be the history of sacrifice. It would show that archaic religions are the real educators of mankind, which they lead out of archaic violence. Then God becomes victim in order to free man of the illusion of a violent God, which must be abolished in favour of Christ's knowledge of his Father. One can regard archaic religions as a prior moment in a progressive revelation that culminates in Christ. Thus, to those who say that the Eucharist is rooted in archaic cannibalism, instead of saying 'no', we have to say 'yes!'. The real history of man is religious history, which goes back to primitive cannibalism. Primitive cannibalism is religion, and the Eucharist recapitulates this history from alpha to omega. All this is essential and once it is understood, there is a necessary recognition that the history of man includes this murderous beginning: Cain and Abel. To put it bluntly, we cannot have a perfectly non-sacrificial space. In writing *Violence and the Sacred* and *Things Hidden* I was trying to find that non-sacrificial space from which to understand and explain everything without personal involvement. Now I think that this attempt cannot be successful.

6 History and sacrificial awareness

Adopting a more theological formulation, does the idea of a 'transient, mutable God', sponsored by thinkers such as Sholem, Hans Jonas or Sergio Quinzio, have something in common with your idea of religion as a form of growing awareness, of Christianity as revelation and transformation of the violent logos *into a divine one?*[30]

I don't see God as a changing entity. I am in favour of an ontological understanding of God. However, this is a God with a pedagogical strategy, so to speak, starting from archaic religion and moving towards the Christian revelation. This is the only way that a free mankind can develop. One can put the problem in purely logical terms, as Sartre did: God cannot be, because, if God made man, he would be free, therefore, man is free and there is no God. The scapegoat system shows that Sartre is wrong, and that, even if the impossibility of which he speaks is actual, God transforms it by allowing sacrifices, thanks to which human beings educate themselves to leave their violence. But they cannot accomplish this completely and they need Christ who will make good their insufficiency. Thus it is not God who is changing, but humanity.

There is a structural difference between archaic religion and Christianity. Within an archaic framework, one doesn't realize that the scapegoat is only a scapegoat. One believes that the victim is guilty, because everybody says so. In the Gospel there is also a moment of unanimity when all the disciples run away from Jesus and go with the crowd. Then the unanimity is destroyed by the Resurrection, and the disciples, who are (directly or indirectly) responsible for the Gospels, denounce the crowd and the scapegoat system as well. In the Gospels one sees the two positions in confrontation, and thus the system is completely revealed: first the disciples join the crowd, and then they go against it, denouncing the crowd.

The 'transient' God these thinkers are talking about is the gradual transformation of the *sacred* into the *holy.* The God of the Bible is at first the God of the sacred, and then more and more the God of the holy, foreign to all violence, the God of the Gospels. The Christian refusal of the Marcionite[31] attitude, that is the refusal to abandon the Jewish Bible, the Old Testament, is rightly the sign of the growing awareness of the ancient Christian communities. There are elements of violence in the Ancient God, but these elements are logically necessary, since they prefigure the refusal of violence that is the centre of the Gospels, that there is both a break and a continuity between the archaic, sacrificial religions and the biblical revelation, which dispels but does not authorize us to condemn sacrifice, as if we were by nature strangers to violence.

Regarding that question, how do you see the Gnostic tradition? Is it also part of the history of revelation?

We cannot really speak of one Gnostic tradition. The gnosis is a current trend nowadays, because there is always an attempt to move away from the Cross, that is, to perpetuate man's misrecognition of his violence and protect his pride from the revelation. Without the Cross, there is no revelation of the fundamental injustice of the scapegoat mechanism, which is the founder of human culture, with all its repercussions in our relationships with each other.

We believe that you are aware that your view of the history of revelation can be criticized on the grounds of it being linear and dependent on a continuity that cannot be demonstrated. Don't you think that this account you have just provided seems overdetermined by a linear progression from archaic myths to Christianity?

I must agree that there is a sense of progress. I have no problem in saying that it is indeed progress to recognize the innocence of the victim, and that is what Christianity does. However, I have never posited the process as purely

linear, evolving without interruption once the revelation was out in the open. On the contrary, it is a highly complex process, because man is free to choose his own path. And quite frankly he has fairly consistently opted for violence, and today more than ever.

Roberto Calasso addresses precisely the same criticism to your belief in the progressive anti-sacrificial action of Christian revelation: 'In this tortuous application of the Enlightenment, however, Girard's chief weakness emerges: persecution, in fact, has never been so widespread as in the modern West, which knows nothing of sacrifice and considers it a superstition.'[32]
Calasso isn't aware of the complexity of my approach. I think that his description of modern society is profound, with great insights, but it is too unilateral. He doesn't see that I define the modern world essentially as deprived of sacrificial protection, that is, more and more exposed to violence. For me, the modern movement of rationality is not intrinsically negative; the progress of science is real progress. Calasso saw in me an 'Enlightenment man'. I always use Jacques Maritain's formula: 'with the passing of time there is always more good and more evil in the world'.[33] Calasso is too pro-sacrifice. He is anti-modern in the extreme, and makes no distinction between the Christian revelation and the way it is misused today. He has that Nietzschean and esoteric idea that to be *against* violent sacrifice must entail some kind of weakness in individuals and communities. Like Nietzsche, he wants to believe that to be *for* sacrificial violence is infinitely better, and thus the right thing to do. One of the things he understands most powerfully is the positive usefulness of sacrifice. As a result he is unjust towards Christianity, in a sense that must be ultimately Nietzschean, even though he understands sacrifice better than Nietzsche did. He understands the positive role of sacrifice in archaic societies and he sees that the modern world is threatened because of the loss of sacrificial protection. Few people are enlightened enough to see that.

The reading of Nietzsche was fundamental to many contemporary philosophers. You have recognized that Nietzsche made your interpretation of Dionysus possible. According to you, in the much-quoted aphorism 125 of The Gay Science, *in which he claims that God is dead, he touched upon the foundation of the sacrificial resolution.*[34]
I tried to show that everybody distorts this text. Instead of saying 'God is dead', Nietzsche is actually saying: 'We killed him.' After that we have to invent some ritual of atonement, that is to say, a new religion.[35] In other words, Nietzsche is really telling us about the religious re-foundation of society. All gods begin first

of all by dying. It is a great text about the eternal return of sacrificial religion, a text about the creation and re-creation of culture that always involves the initial presence of the founding murder. There are texts that go beyond the explicit thinking of their authors and this is the case for the one who defined the eternal return as an endless succession of sacrificial crisis that we can find in the well-known aphorism by Anaximander and Heraclitus. Commentators, including Heidegger, place this text within the modernist routine of the death of God.

I repeat that I don't think that Nietzsche is aware of what he is expressing in that famous aphorism. I think this is one of those examples of a text that runs away from its author. I am not sure that Nietzsche realized the essentially ritualistic and sacrificial connotations of the words he used. It is a richer reading than the 'death of God'. The text is speaking about the birth of religion as well as its death, because they amount to the same thing. The most revealing sentence is the one that says that God's death forces the murderers to invent a new religious cult.

Don't you think that the very last words he wrote in 1889, on the verge of madness, 'Condamno te ad vitam diaboli vitae' (I condemn you for eternity to the life of the devil) are the emblematic short-circuit of his intellectual project?[36]
This is certainly quite a powerful passage, and it is hard not to interpret it within a Christian framework. He wanted to side with Dionysus, against Christ, and by doing so he condemned himself to hell, because Dionysus and Satan are the same thing. There is a sentence by Heraclitus that says Dionysus and Hades are one and the same.[37] Being jealous of Christ, as Gide said of Nietzsche, inevitably means siding with Satan. And to be on the side of Satan means that one sides with the crowd against the innocent victim, whatever name one chooses to give to that.

7 *Celui par qui le scandale arrive*

In your theory it seems that human beings are neither autonomous – for their desire is always mimetic – nor pacific – for they cannot avoid the emergence of forms of violence engendered by the mimetic nature of their desire. Do you believe that this conception of mankind has had a negative influence on the reception of your work?
I must reject your formulation. Desire is always mimetic, but some human beings resist desire and being carried away by mimetic violence. When Jesus says: 'scandals must happen' (Matthew 18.7–8)[38] he is talking about communities. In

communities, there are so many people that it would be statistically impossible for mimetic violence not to be present, but the individual isn't bound hand-and-foot to mimetic desire. Jesus himself was not. To talk about freedom means to talk about man's ability to resist the mimetic mechanism.

Hence, the only freedom we have is to imitate Jesus, that is, by not joining the mimetic cycle.

Or to imitate someone like Jesus. Remember what Paul said to the Corinthians: 'I urge you to imitate me' (1 Corinthians 4.16). He did so not out of personal pride or self-righteousness but because he himself imitates Jesus who, in turn, imitates the Father. He is just part of an endless chain of 'good imitation', non-rivalrous imitation, that Christians try to create. The 'saints' are the links of this chain.

Therefore, our free will is given by the choice we have of accusing others or having compassion for them.

I don't see why the idea of this imitation would imply the accusation of those who don't practise it. All accusation is the attempt to get out of the game at the expense of a scapegoat. It is what Christ never does. The Gospel of John says: 'You are the son of Satan because you don't listen to my voice.'[39] There are two arch-models: Satan and Christ. Freedom is an act of conversion to one or the other. Otherwise, it is a total illusion. That is why Paul says: 'we are in chains but we are free'.[40] We are free because we can truly convert ourselves at any time. In other words, we can refuse to join the mimetic unanimity. As we already explained, conversion means to become aware that we are persecutors. It means choosing Christ or a Christlike individual as a model for our desires. It also means seeing oneself as being in the process of imitating from the very beginning. Conversion is the discovery that we have always, without being aware of it, been imitating the wrong kind of models who lead us into the vicious circle of scandals and perpetual frustration.

If the word skandalon *means 'mimetic rivalry', why in the Gospel is it associated both with Satan and with Christ, as he called himself 'a* skandalon' *(John 6.41–2)?*

Christ announces before his Passion that he will become a *skandalon* for everybody and for his disciples as well, for they will also play a part in his Passion. The word *skandalon* means a 'mimetic stumbling-block', something that triggers mimetic rivalry. The treatment of the word *skandalon* shows how incomplete scriptural exegesis is. There are bulky volumes on words which happen to show up in the Gospel once or twice, like the word *logos* – which

is undoubtedly very important, but confined to John's prologue. However, one cannot find books on the word *skandalon.* On that notion the silence is complete, although the word constantly shows up in all parts of the Bible and in all four Gospels.

As I said in *I See Satan,* Satan and the *skandalon* are one and the same thing.[41] When Jesus announces the Passion for the first time he associates the two terms, as he says to Peter: 'Get behind me, Satan! You are a *skandalon,* a stumbling-block to me' (Matthew 16.23). Although *skandalon* and Satan are fundamentally the same thing, the two terms emphasize different aspects of the same phenomenon. In the case of *skandalon* the emphasis is on the early phases of the mimetic cycle, mimetic rivalry between individuals who are obstacles to each other; whereas Satan refers to the whole mimetic mechanism. It is also true that the word *skandalon* applies to the Cross, since Jesus says 'happy are the ones for whom I am not a *skandalon*' (Matthew 11.6).[42] One of the greatest of Paul's formulas is: 'the Cross is a *skandalon* for the Jews, folly for the Greeks' (1 Corinthians 1.23).[43] The Cross is a *skandalon* because men will not understand an impotent God who suffers his persecutors humbly. Therefore, they stumble against this idea.

Both Jesus and Satan prompt imitation. Imitation is the road to our freedom, because we are free to imitate Christ in his incomparable wisdom in a benevolent and obedient way, or, on the contrary, to imitate Satan, meaning to imitate God in a spirit of rivalry. *Skandalon* becomes the inability to walk away from mimetic rivalry, an inability that turns rivalry into an addiction, servitude, because we kneel in front of those who are important for us, without seeing what is at stake. The proliferation of scandals, meaning of mimetic rivalry, is what produces disorder and instability in society, but this instability is put to an end by the scapegoat resolution, which produces order. Satan casts out Satan, meaning that the scapegoat mechanism produces a false transcendence that stabilizes society, through a satanic principle, and the order cannot but be only temporary, and it is bound to revert, sooner or later, into the disorder of scandals.

In bringing together Satan and skandalon, *does Christ reveal the falsity of the accusations on which the sacrificial order is based? Does he unmask the true nature of Satan?*

Yes. In Christianity, one shouldn't *believe* in Satan. The Christian creeds make no mention of Satan. It is rather a powerful trope for describing the unanimity of the crowd when it accuses the victim of being guilty, and then murders the innocent victim without any remorse. We could say that Satan is a non-being in the sense that the scapegoat mechanism is unconscious. Satan is the subject of

the structure, and he is the system of the bad mimesis. There is no coordination from outside, the system functions all by itself. (Maybe that's why in the pit of *The Inferno* Dante represents Satan as a big machine, a sort of colossal puppet.) In the rivalry business of the doubles a transcendental force has always been perceived: it is called *Destiny* in the Indian epic, *Moira* in Greek culture and *Schicksal* in Heidegger. It is important to see how in the Bible, starting with Cain and Abel, the same notion of destiny is not present. Cain is free to choose, and God tries to persuade him not to kill his brother. That is why, in Christian terms, Satan does not have any substantial being. It is the entire mimetic system which still runs human relations. This is the deeper meaning of all this: we will always be mimetic, but we don't have to be so in a satanic fashion.[44] That is, we don't have to engage perpetually in mimetic rivalries. We don't have to accuse our neighbour; instead, we can learn to love him.

Notes

1. *Parakletos* means 'summoned', 'called to one's side'. One who pleads another's cause before a judge, a pleader, counsel for defence, legal assistant, advocate. Christ is a *paraclete* in his exaltation at God's right hand, pleading with God the Father for the pardon of our sins. In the widest sense, it is also a helper, succourer, aide, assistant. *Parakletos* also refers to the Holy Spirit destined to take the place of Christ with the apostles (after his ascension to the Father), to lead them to a deeper knowledge of the gospel truth, and give them divine strength needed to enable them to undergo trials and persecutions on behalf of the divine kingdom.
2. *Satan,* Hebrew word for 'adversary', 'opponent', Septuagint 3 Kings 11.14,23; trans. from *epiboulos* (plotting against) in Septuagint 1 Kings 29.4; also 'accuser', trans. *ho diabolos* (slanderous, backbiting) in Job 1.6, Zechariah 3.1: hence as *chief of the evil spirits, the Devil,* 2; Corinthians 12.7.
3. See Ch. 2, n. 47.
4. *Phenomenon* derives from the neuter present participle of *phainesthai,* 'to appear', 'bring to light', 'cause to appear', in a physical sense.
5. *Martyr* means 'witness': the one who is a spectator of anything, e.g. of a legal transaction or a contest. It applies also in an ethical sense: for instance, to those who after his example have proved the strength and genuineness of their faith in Christ by undergoing a violent death.
6. See Ephesians 6.12–13:

   > For our struggle isn't against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms. Therefore put on the

full armour of God, so that when the day of evil comes, you may be able to stand your ground, and after you have done everything, to stand.

7. For this discussion, see Girard, *I See Satan,* pp. 95–100.
8. As far as the passage from polytheism and monotheism is concerned, one could point out that in Genesis 1.1 the first word used to name God is *Elohim,* which is the plural form of the root *eloh,* which normally refers to the divine. The root itself finds its origin with an older root, *el,* which means 'God', 'deity', 'power', 'strength', etc. The use of the plural in the name God and the ambiguity of its etymology seem to be clear evidence of the sacrificial nature of this original deity, which presents the double-bind feature of being cursed and also deified, as always happens to the victims of the scapegoat mechanism. They are seen as both the radical evil, because they are responsible for the crisis, and the radical good, as they restore peace. The origin of culture is sacrificial and the Bible bears this element at its inception in naming the divine as 'the gods', who are the original sacrificial victims. If the biblical text starts by making an explicit reference to the archaic religion of polytheism, it also moves to the newer monotheistic religion of Yahweh. Indeed, the word *Yahweh,* which is probably of Mosaic origin, appears in Genesis 2.4 and runs throughout the Old Testament in the original Hebrew text. However, it *disappears* in the New Testament. The coming of Christ brings about a major change in God's relationship with his people. Now he is projected solely as the Father of all true believers, Jew and Gentile alike, without any distinction being made between them, as Paul explains in Romans 10.12.
9. See Girard, *I see Satan,* pp. 148–63.
10. Sophocles, *Oedipus the King,* trans. F. Storr

    In thy report of what the herdsman said
    Laius was slain by robbers; now if he
    Still speaks of robbers, not a robber, I
    Slew him not; 'one' with 'many' cannot square.
    But if he says one lonely wayfarer,
    The last link wanting to my guilt is forged.

11. See Numbers 14.2–10.
12. S. Goodhart, *Sacrificing Commentary: Reading the End of Literature* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), pp. 185–8.
13. See, for example, the verse in Psalm 35.7–8: 'Since they hid their net for me without cause and without cause dug a pit for me, may ruin overtake them by surprise – may the net they hid entangle them, may they fall into the pit, to their ruin.' For a thorough discussion, see René Girard, 'Violence in Biblical Narrative'. *Philosophy and Literature,* 23.2 (1999): 387–92.
14. On the innocence of Oedipus, see Ch. 3 of Girard, *Violence and the Sacred,* 'Oedipus and the Surrogate Victim' (pp. 68–88). On the mythical construction of Oedipus as 'guilty', see Ch. 3 of Girard, *The Scapegoat,* 'What is a Myth?' (pp. 24–44). On the performance of the tragedy as a quasi-passion play, see the postface by Francis Goyet in *Oedipe roi* (Paris: Livre de Poche, 1994).

15. E. Auerbach, *Mimesis. The Representation of Reality in Western Literature,* trans. Willard R. Trask (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1953), pp. 3–23.
16. See Isaiah 40.3–4: 'A voice of one calling in the desert, "Prepare the way for the Lord; make straight in the wilderness a highway for our God. Every valley shall be raised up, every mountain and hill made low; the rough ground shall become level, the rugged places a plain"'.
17. See Matthew 3.3; Mark 1.1–3; Luke 3.4; John 1.23.
18. See, for instance, Psalm 109.3: 'With words of hatred they surround me; they attack me without cause'; or Psalm 119.86: 'All your commands are trustworthy; help me, for men persecute me without cause.' See also: Psalms 7.4; 35.7; 35.19; 69.4; 119.78; 119.161 and Lamentations 3.52.
19. Lucien Scubla, 'The Christianity of René Girard and the Nature of Religion', in Paul Dumouchel (ed.), *Violence and Truth* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1988), p. 162.
20. Sigmund Freud, *Totem and Taboo. Some Points of Agreement Between the Mental Life of Savages and Neurotics* (New York: Norton, 1950), pp. 190–2.
21. On the relation between Orphic tradition and Christianity, see Giuseppe Fornari, 'Labyrinthe Strategies of Sacrifice: *The Cretans* by Euripides', *Contagion,* 4 (1997): 170ff. and G. Fornari, *Fra Dioniso e Cristo. La Sapienza sacrificale greca e la civiltà occidentale* (Bologna: Pitagora, 2001).
22. 'The Jains do not take food which involves the killing of animals. Along with flesh, wine and all kinds of intoxicants, even honey, are prohibited.' However, 'it is enjoined upon a householder to abstain from ... intentional violence but not from accidental, occupational and protective violence' (N.N. Bhattacharyya, *Jain Philosophy. Historical Outline* [New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal, 1999], p. 5).
23. There are five supreme beings, collectively called *Pañcaparamesthin,* who are objects of worship:

    > They are pre-Vedic deities whose cults were naturally revived in this anti-Vedic system. Besides, the Jains have a pantheon of their own, consisting of the *bhavanapati* (residential), *vyantara* (peripatetic), *jyotiska* (stellar) and *vaimanika* (heavenly) gods. They also worship some Hindu gods like Ganesa, Skanda, Bhairava, Hanuman and others of non-Vedic origin. Various forms of Mother-goddesses and village deities, and also sacred animals, trees, places and the like, are worshipped. Every caste and family has its own caste and family deity. (Ibid., p. 4)

24. J. Frazer, *Folk-lore in the Old Testament,* Vol. 2 (London: Macmillan, 1918), pp. 570–1.
25. Hocart claims that the caste system has a sacrificial origin. See *Imagination and Proof. Selected essays of A.M. Hocart,* ed. Rodney Needham (Tucson, AZ: University of Arizona Press, 1987), p. 104.

26. 'Violence and Institution in Christianity, Judaism, Hinduism, Buddhism, and Islam', COV&R Conference, Boston College, Boston, 31 May–3 June 2000. The proceedings of the conference, edited by Robert J. Daly, are in *Contagion,* 9 (2002).
27. 1 Kings 3.16–28. See Girard, *Things Hidden,* pp. 237–45.
28. F. Hinkelammert, in H. Assmann, *René Girard com téologos da libertação. Um dialogo sobre ídolos e sacrificios* (Petrópolis: Editora Vozes, 1991), p. 42.
29. R. Girard, 'Mimetische Theorie und Theologie', in Joseph Niewiadomski and Wolfgang Palaver (eds), *Vom Fluch und Segen der Sündenböcke* (Thaur–Vienna: Kulturverlag, 1995), pp. 15–20. Also in Girard, *Celui par qui le scandale arrive,* pp. 63ff.
30. See, for instance, Sergio Quinzio, *La Sconfitta di Dio* (Milan: Adelphi, 1992):

    > Sholem realized that the conception of a living God isn't compatible with the principle of God's immutability. Another Jewish contemporary thinker, Hans Jonas, employs the image of a God who is becoming, a God that comes into being in time, although in the time of eternity God is a complete Being, always identical to Himself. Moreover, the Hebrew tradition speaks of the unification of God with his *Shekhinah* – his presence in the world, his Glory, interpreted as his wife. They do so through the translation of the words addressed to Moses by God from the Burning Bush: 'I will be what I will be' (Exodus 3.14). When we translate it as 'I am who I am' we are favoring the concept of 'God-Being'. (p. 43)

31. In early Christianity, Marcionism is the dualist belief system that originates in the teachings of Marcion of Sinope around the year 144. The premise of Marcionism is that many of the teachings of Christ are incompatible with the God of the Jewish religion. Focusing on the Pauline traditions of the Gospel, Marcion felt that all other conceptions of the Gospel, and especially any association with the Old Testament religion, were opposed to, and therefore a backsliding from, the truth.
32. Roberto Calasso, *La Rovina di kasch* (Milan: Adelphi, 1983), pp. 158–9.
33. 'History progresses both in the direction of good and in the direction of evil', Jacques Maritain, *On the Philosophy of History,* ed. Joseph W. Evans (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1957), p. 43.
34. René Girard, 'Le Meurtre fondateur dans la pensée de Nietzsche', in Paul Dumouchel (ed.), *Violence et vérité: Autour de René Girard* (Paris: Grasset, 1985), pp. 597–613. For an extensive reassessment of Nietzsche in the light of the mimetic theory, see R. Girard and G. Fornari, *Il Caso Nietzsche. La ribellione fallita dell'anti-Cristo* (Milan and Genoa: Marietti, 2001).
35. God is dead. God remains dead. And we have killed him. 'How shall we comfort ourselves, the murderers of all murderers? What was holiest and mightiest of all that the world has yet owned has bled to death under our knives: who will wipe this blood off us? What water is there for us to clean ourselves? What festivals of atonement, what sacred games shall

> we have to invent? Is not the greatness of this deed too great for us? Must we ourselves not become gods simply to appear worthy of it? There has never been a greater deed; and whoever is born after us – for the sake of this deed he will belong to a higher history than all history hitherto.' (Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science,* trans. W. Kaufmann [New York: Random House, 1974], p. 181).

36. Friedrich Nietzsche, *Nachgelassene Fragmente. Anfang 1888 bis Anfang Januar 1889,* in *Werke: kritische Gesamtausgabe,* ed. Giorgio Colli and Mazzino Montinari (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1972), p. 461.
37. 'But Hades and Dionysus are the same.' See Charles H. Kahn, *The Art and Thought of Heraclitus* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), p. 81; H. Diels and W. Krantz, *Die Fragmente der Vorsokratiker* (Zurich: Weidman, 1985); Fornari, *Fra Dioniso e Cristo.*
38. The New International Version avoids the word *scandal*: 'Woe to the world because of the things that cause people to sin! Such things must come, but woe to the man through whom they come!' Cf. Young's Literal Translation: 'Woe to the world from the stumbling-blocks! for there is a necessity for the stumbling-blocks to come, but woe to that man through whom the stumbling-block doth come!'
39. > Why is my language not clear to you? Because you are unable to hear what I say. You belong to your father, the devil, and you want to carry out your father's desire. He was a murderer from the beginning, not holding to the truth, for there is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks his native language, for he is a liar and the father of lies. Yet because I tell the truth, you don't believe me! Can any of you prove me guilty of sin? If I am telling the truth, why don't you believe me? He who belongs to God hears what God says. The reason you don't hear is that you don't belong to God. (John 8.43–7)
40. Romans 6.18: 'You have been set free from sin and have become slaves to righteousness.'
41. See Girard, *I See Satan,* p. 33.
42. New International Version: 'Blessed is the man who doesn't fall away on account of me.' Cf. Young's Literal Translation: 'and happy is he who may not be stumbled in me'.
43. New International Version: 'but we preach Christ crucified: a stumbling-block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles'. Cf. Young's Literal Translation: 'we preach Christ crucified, to Jews, indeed, a stumbling-block, and to Greeks foolishness'; *Biblia Sacra Vulgata*: 'nos autem praedicamus Christum crucifixum Iudaeis quidem scandalum gentibus autem stultitiam'. See also Girard, *I See Satan,* p. 193.
44. The Christian replacement of the sacrificial order, with the new order based on the Ten Commandments, is made clear in Mark 23.29–33: 'To love [God] with all your heart, with all your understanding and with all your strength, and to love your neighbour as yourself is more important than all burnt offerings and sacrifices.'

CHAPTER 7
MODERNITY, POSTMODERNITY AND BEYOND

> Believing as I do that man in the distant future will be a far more perfect creature than he now is, it is an intolerable thought that he and all other sentient beings are doomed to complete annihilation after such long-continued slow progress.
>
> (Charles Darwin, *Autobiography*)

1 The apocalyptic feeling

In one of the conversations you had with Gianni Vattimo, he hinted that you are not concerned with elaborating a theory of modernity and postmodernity, and that you seem not to take into account all possible interpretive implications of your theory in relation to the contemporary world.[1] *How do you respond to that?*

First of all, I have to say that I am a theorist of mythology: I am not a moralist, or a religious thinker. I can answer questions on these themes, but they are not my main concern. However, there is a sort of outline of a theory of modernity at the end of *I See Satan* that is purely apocalyptic.[2] For me, any understanding of the contemporary world is mediated by the reading of Matthew 24. The most important part is the sentence 'where the corpse lies, the vultures shall gather' (Matthew 24.28) because it seems to be a decomposition of the mimetic mechanism. The mechanism is visible, but it doesn't work. In John's Gospel there are apocalyptic elements as well: since Jesus triggers disagreement among the Jews, the rejection of him becomes more and more violent (John 8.31–59).

The apocalyptic feelings of the early Christians were not pure fantasy. These texts should be discussed: they are just as relevant today as they were at the time of their writing, and I find it disconcerting that many churches have stopped preaching on them. This started around the time the nuclear bomb

was invented and used, when they decided to do away with the fear which was spreading in the world. We have these fundamental texts about our collective, yet we refuse to discuss them. Jefferson, following Darwin, couldn't conceive of the extinction of a national species. Marx, being an Aristotelian, believed in the eternity of the world. The experience of our own times, however – with their ruthless and unbounded use of violence – gives you the feeling that there is no time left, which was what the first Christians inevitably felt: 'the time is short', Paul writes to the Corinthians (1 Corinthians 7.29). The apocalyptic feeling is the consciousness that the scapegoat business has run its course, that therefore nothing more can happen. What else could happen after the Christian revelation? And at the same time, what might happen to our world if the precarious order of false transcendence imposed by the scapegoat mechanism ceases to function? Any great Christian experience is apocalyptic because what one realizes is that after the decomposition of the sacrificial order there is nothing standing between ourselves and our possible destruction. How this will materialize, I don't really know.

Derrida speaks of a general 'apocalyptic tone in philosophy' in recent years, as he writes that the eschatological themes, starting in the 1950s, have been our 'daily bread' ever since.[3] *Is your theory part of this trend?*

No, I don't belong to that school of thought.[4] However, I must say that, on the historical level, after the Second World War, something has happened to the principle of the victim: it has become infinitely more widespread. It has acquired enormous political importance. As I said in *I See Satan,*[5] I believe that the most plausible philosophical interpretation of the Holocaust, from my viewpoint, is that it was an attempt to divorce the West from its dedication to saving victims. Of course, the same attempt was already present during the First World War and, above all, in the recurrent anti-Semitism from the Middle Ages onwards. Nonetheless, the explicit character of the Nazi Holocaust is unparalleled. It supposed that the principle of the victim could be buried under *so many* victims that everybody would see that it was not true. The attempt failed.

We have experienced various forms of totalitarianism that openly denied Christian principles. There has been the totalitarianism of the left, which tried to outflank Christianity; and there has been totalitarianism of the Right, like Nazism, which found Christianity too soft on victims. This kind of totalitarianism is not only alive but it also has a great future. There will probably be some thinkers in the future who will reformulate this principle in a politically correct fashion, in more virulent forms, which will be more

anti-Christian, albeit in an ultra-Christian caricature. When I say more Christian and more anti-Christian, I imply the figure of the Anti-Christ.[6] The Anti-Christ is nothing but that: it is the ideology that attempts to outchristianize Christianity, that imitates Christianity in a spirit of rivalry.

Is it the Nietzschean programme against Christianity?
It's the combination of the two positions. You can foresee the shape of what the Anti-Christ is going to be in the future: a super-victimary machine that will keep on sacrificing in the name of the victim.

Francis Fukuyama, in his controversial and much-criticized pamphlet The End of History, *wrote that we have reached the 'end point of mankind's ideological evolution'. However, he hints that man may be willing at some point 'to drag the world back to history with all its wars, injustice and revolution'.*[7]
The idea of the end of history as the end of ideologies is simply misleading. Ideologies are not violent *per se,* rather it is man who is violent. Ideologies provide the grand narrative which covers up our victimary tendency. They are the mythical happy endings to our histories of persecutions. If you look carefully, you will see that the conclusion of myths is always positive and optimistic. There is always a cultural restoration after the crisis and the scapegoat resolution. The scapegoat provides the systemic closure which allows the social group to function once again, to run its course once more and to remain blind to its systemic closure (the belief that the ones they are scapegoating are actually guilty). After the Christian revelation this is no longer possible. The system cannot be pulled back by any form of pharmacological resolution, and the virus of mimetic violence can spread freely. This is the reason why Jesus says: 'Do not suppose that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I did not come to bring peace, but a sword' (Matthew 10.34). The Cross has destroyed once and for all the cathartic power of the scapegoat mechanism. Consequently, the Gospel does not provide a happy ending to our history. It simply shows us two options (which is exactly what ideologies never provide, freedom of choice): either we imitate Christ, giving up all our mimetic violence, or we run the risk of self-destruction. The apocalyptic feeling is based on that risk.

In a interview in Le Monde *on the recent terrorist events, you said that 'ce qui se joue aujourd'hui est une rivalité mimétique à l'échelle planétaire' (What is being played out today is mimetic rivalry on a planetary scale). What did you mean by this?*

The error is always to reason within categories of 'difference' when the root of all conflicts is rather 'competition', mimetic rivalry between persons, countries, cultures. Competition is the desire to imitate the other in order to obtain the same thing he or she has, by violence if need be. No doubt terrorism is bound to a world 'different' from ours, but what gives rise to terrorism does not lie in that 'difference' that removes it further from us and makes it inconceivable to us. On the contrary, it lies in the desire for convergence and resemblance. Human relations are essentially relations of imitation, of rivalry. What is experienced now is a form of mimetic rivalry on a planetary scale. When I read the first documents of Bin Laden and verified his allusions to the American bombing of Japan, I felt at first that I was in a dimension that transcends Islam, a dimension of the entire planet. Under the label of Islam we find a will to rally and mobilize an entire third world of those frustrated and of victims in their relations of mimetic rivalry with the West. But the towers destroyed had as many foreigners as Americans. But their effectiveness, the sophistication of the means they employed, the knowledge that they had of the United States and their training, were not the authors of the attack in a sense at least partly American? Here we are in the middle of mimetic contagion.

Far from turning away from the West, they cannot avoid imitating it and adopting its values, even if they don't avow it, and they are also consumed like us by the desire for individual and collective success. This sentiment is not true of the masses but of the ruling classes. At the level of personal fortune a man like Bin Laden has no need to envy anyone. And there have been many party or faction leaders in this situation. For instance, Mirabeau, at the beginning of the French Revolution, had one foot in one camp and one foot in the other, and what did he do but live out his resentment in even more bitter fashion.

2 Modernity and its discontent

Let's step back, for the time being, in this historical trajectory, for we would like first to discuss the modern constitution of our society from the point of view of the mimetic theory. We have seen that mimetic desire isn't a modern invention. However, there is a change of gear with modernity, related to an increasing process of individualization, which implies a dramatic shift from a social order founded on external mediation to one grounded on internal mediation.

We should be very careful regarding temporal frameworks. From the perspective of the mimetic desire, we could say that modernity emerges in the Renaissance. No one depicts it better than Shakespeare. The reference to mimetic desire is in fact already present in Shakespeare. Mimetic desire in Shakespeare is exactly the same as it is today. He talks about 'suggested desire' in *The Rape of Lucrece,* and he has phrases like 'love by another's eyes'.[8] 'Suggested desire' is the sharpest understanding of mimetic desire one can find in literature. It is more passive though, and I do not think I want to use it myself, because to say 'suggested' is equivalent to suppressing free will. It is like being possessed, not to be responsible for one's own actions.

Regarding the emergence of the modern individual, I should say that it is important not to completely dismiss this as being exclusively an illusion of mimetic desire. This is a very important point. Undoubtedly, from the perspective of the mimetic mechanism, which is also a Christian perspective, there is a real individual. This is the one who goes against the crowd for reasons that aren't rooted in the negative aspects of mimetic desire. He is the one who can resist the crowd. Nietzsche is never more wrong than when he says that Christianity is the religion of the crowd, as opposed to Dionysus, which is seen as the religion of the aristocracy, of a minority. It is exactly the other way around: Dionysus is the crowd and Christianity is the small minority able to resist the crowd. The Christian individual contradicts the crowd; he or she doesn't join the multitude in the scapegoat resolution of the mimetic crisis, and moreover denounces the very scapegoat mechanism as a murder through the declaration of the innocence of the victim.[9]

Most aspects of modern individuality are indeed ambiguous. In the affluent West, we live in a world where there is less and less need and therefore more and more desire. This is both good and bad because mimetic desire can go either way. And the same is true for the modern individual. One has today real possibilities of true autonomy, of individual judgements. However, those possibilities are more commonly sold down the river in favour of false individuality, of negative mimesis. In other words, it is to do with fashion: no one is conventional today, everybody wants to be more original than the next person. The only way modernity can be defined is the universalization of internal mediation, for one doesn't have areas of life that would keep people apart from each other, and that would mean that the construction of our beliefs and identity cannot but have strong mimetic components.

According to you, 'a functional society is one which is dominated by external mediation'.[10] *Is contemporary Western society functional, given that it is dominated by internal mediation?*

A functional society is one whose institutions work without being constantly disrupted by violence. For instance, in traditional Indian society, this is defined through the concept of *dharma,* which basically means the strict separation of castes, and as a result a society in which everybody does what they are ordained to do.[11] Therefore, a functional society according to external mediation is a hierarchical, traditional one. In the West, we have something special: we have outgrown the *dharma* definition of social order and we have a society that can be stable without strict internal hierarchical structure. Of course one must see this from the point of view of the mimetic theory and as the result of a historical process. A type of external mediation still ruled in the Western Middle Ages, and in terms of *dharma,* namely, the social and religious order, the hierarchical order, it could be defined as a functional society. The dissolution of this *dharma* probably took place in the period that extends from the Renaissance to the Enlightenment. As a matter of fact, the Middle Ages cannot be said to be entirely 'traditional' either, since on the one hand, they were chaotic (in a pre-Christian way); and on the other, there was the disintegration of a certain type of order, which probably dominates up to a point in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries and then breaks down. Above all, there was the constant threat of scarcity of goods, a decisive factor in bringing about mimetic crises. Nowadays there is a stability which is no longer based on *dharma,* and which must inevitably be based on the Judaeo-Christian principle of the individual who dominates his/her own violent impulses.

It seems that modern society has devised other forms of dharma that help to keep violence at bay. Stefano Tomelleri, using Durkheim's concept of social distance, sees the division of labour as a means of coping with mimetic rivalry through the creation of social distance.[12] *This is also reminiscent of Jeremy Bentham's* Panopticon, *which is a tool to control human behaviour, preventing any form of horizontal communication, meaning any mimetic activity, through an external source of control.*[13] *In both cases the aim is the eradication of violence. How could you envisage a contemporary social order that, although acknowledging the constant presence of violence, tries to cope with it?*

The division of labour, unlike the caste system, leaves room for the individual, at least in principle. The market may force one to make some

choices instead of others, but it is not proper to speak about capitalism, as the Marxists did, in terms of rigidity of social stratification. The division of labour has experienced important changes in the recent years, and I am not sure that I can give a definite explanation to account for this phenomenon. Certainly the organization of labour is particularly relevant for the stability of North American society. When people refer to the so-called 'American dream', they certainly exaggerate and overestimate its nature, but it is not entirely deceptive either. If one looks at the *nouveaux riches* of Silicon Valley, it is true that many of them are really self-made men, and a good percentage are immigrants, mostly from India or China.

So, I am not sure I would agree completely that division of labour keeps mimetic rivalry under control, but at the same time it is a very complex subject. There is unquestionably more social mobility in the United States than in Europe. However, we live in a world in which social mobility, although experiencing phases of inhibition and local rigidity, is constantly increasing. Structural injustice, although still present, has been gradually ironed out by Christian ethics, and the market itself asks for a wider circulation of 'human capital'.

Are you implying that today it is social mobility that helps society in coping with mimetic rivalry?

It certainly is. The United States never relapsed into totalitarian contractions because of – among other reasons – its social fluidity, its extensive mobility both in geographical and in social terms. The modern Western economy is the first civilization that has learned to use mimetic rivalry positively. It is known as economic competition. It is true that it gets out of control sometimes, but normally businessmen who compete do not shoot each other (although sometimes they shoot themselves). Why are we able to use mimetic competition positively? Because we trust that we can keep competition from becoming violent. Capitalistic competition would be impossible were it not restrained by moral rules, which ultimately come from Christianity.

Would it be useful to provide a historical account of the mimetic competition in different contexts?

It is very difficult to establish when mimetic competition started as a viable source of both wealth and order, and how it developed. During the late Middle Ages in Europe, mimetic competition was already much more widespread than in previous societies, because of the emergence of the merchant class, the craftsmen and the free cities. Mimetic competition is an

inverted pyramid with a very small apex, and it is getting wider all the time. To give just one example of the historical change of gear which occurred in Europe: in the seventeenth century, when Louis XIV ran out of money, he was forced to invite a Jewish financier to Versailles. The King had to court him because he needed money! He could not simply take it without violating certain rules, which could not be disregarded with impunity. Therefore, in spite of his tremendous power, Louis XIV was already the prisoner of an economic system that was evolving independently from absolute monarchy.

Don't you think that it is also important to stress the role of a secular ethics, based on the development of legal institutions, as well as on the functioning of economics in capitalism, intrinsically related to advancements in technology? These factors keep mimetic rivalry under control. They play the role of the katechon, *as a force which may both 'hold back, delay' and 'encompass, contain', as you pointed out in* I See Satan.[14]

Paul Dumouchel claims that in terms of institutional control, the judicial system, for instance, can always control marginal and sporadic violence, but is powerless if violence spreads beyond certain limits. Therefore, legal institution *per se* has a limited range of power in preventing collective violence.[15] Nonetheless, in principle I agree with your point. We live in a world where certain fields function according to objective laws, even in the human realm, and these laws prevent mimetic escalations, as in the case of economic competition and the free market economy. It is also true that this mimetic competition produces high doses of resentment, that might be socially 'stored' and could become harmful at some point. Technology as well – as I wrote in my foreword to *L'Enfer des choses* – certainly helps in channelling mimetic competition and violence.[16] It is not bound by any mimetic laws, and it plays a crucial role in our life, in that it diminishes the impact of mimetic impulses. However, it is true that it also increases the power of possible harmful actions of aggression and violence.

In modern life, we certainly have islands of stability, each one functioning according to its own *dharma,* and they are extremely important for our modern way of living. Indeed, people are deeply afraid of losing these centres of stability, not because they can protect us from the negative effects of mimetic behaviour, but mainly for egoistic and material concerns. This might sound dreadful from a moral standpoint, but nevertheless, this is an enormously important factor in the stability of our world: 'Private vices, public benefits', as Mandeville said.[17]

3 The market as the sacred

The free market seems to be a point of convergence towards a historical account of the mimetic mechanism. It is a sophisticated system, which copes with acquisitive mimesis, as it tries to reverse the effects of bad mimesis by producing economic wealth through free competition. Nevertheless, recalling Serres' argument, Quirinus is the god to whom we sacrifice more and more victims. Econometrics is the calculation of the tolerable number of sacrifices in a given market.[18] *Could we say that economy and market are founded on the principle of exclusion? In other words, whoever is not inside the market is banned, sacrificed, so to speak.*

I think this formulation is excessive. On this issue, I agree with Eric Gans who thinks that globalization is primarily an economic development that produces wealth and helps in stabilizing society, and has no central agency: it's a self-organizing system.[19] Without diminishing the role and the impact of economy *per se,* for me globalization is mainly the abolition not only of sacrifice, properly speaking, but also of the entire sacrificial order: it is the encompassing spread of Christian ethics and epistemology in relation to every sphere of human activity. Economy itself, as it has developed, would be impossible without the Christian framework. This reality, however, is so complex that scholars who try to analyse it reach radically different conclusions regarding its viability. In order to have a comparative framework, one should compare our world with a given moment in the past, when modern forces had not yet taken over. However, this is a difficult task, because we do not have enough information about societies that were not extensively influenced by the market.

It seems that you aren't so pessimistic about the ruthlessness of free market and neoliberal thinking as are many intellectuals nowadays.

I think that words such as optimism or pessimism should be avoided. Aspects of stability in our world are certainly present, but at the same time we cannot exclude factors of instability – some of which may not even be known. Maybe we are doing ecological damage that will be fatal in the near future, but we do not know precisely where, how and to what extent.[20] Maybe other things we are worried about aren't so serious. There are many unknown factors. We are still in uncharted territory. I am not claiming that our world is not unstable, and, above all, I am not saying at all that ours is an ideal world! I think it is a very fragile one and still very unjust, but it has elements of stability that replace the external mediation once provided

by the sacred order. But I am not sure I can analyse properly the whole dynamics of this immensely complex system. That is also why in order to unfold the mimetic theory in all its possible consequences, we would need an interdisciplinary team of researchers – no man could do it by himself.

Do let us insist, however, on the fact that the market appears as a system which produces a 'tolerable' amount of victims.

But it also saves more victims than any previous historical moment ever did! One cannot balance these accounts, and balance them against what? We do not have a clear model to compare with.[21] It is the first time in world history that a society cannot be compared with any other since ours is the first to encompass the whole planet. It is fascinating to see how every period and every culture has seen itself as unique. Now we certainly are unique and we cannot doubt our uniqueness. Never before has there been a globalized culture such as we have today. Moreover, we know when the whole thing began: with the great discoveries in the fifteenth century.[22] So we really are unique and we are the first culture to deny its uniqueness out of the desire not to offend dead cultures! It is bizarre, but we cannot be compared with any other civilization, except the most recent stages of our own civilization.[23]

Let me be clear on this score, as I try to answer your question. However cruel, brutal or illogical any comparison of this kind may sound, I don't think we can fully equate the victims of a system as complex as the global market with the deliberate slaughtering of a human being by other human beings involved in sacrificial rituals. The market is not a technical apparatus devised to kill people in the same way as the gas chambers were in the Nazi camps. As I say, the *katechon* of these systems still relies on false transcendence, and they are inevitably bound to produce injustice and violence, but we live in a world where the Satanic power of the mimetic mechanism is unleashed, so we have to take into account that this system is also protecting us, albeit temporarily, from the explosion of even greater violence. As a matter of fact, if it is true that inequality is growing between First and Third World countries, this is bound to become explosive. At some point they may try to turn the tables, and we already have clear signals that something of the sort is happening today. We certainly must have a compassionate adjustment of free market society, and we have to criticize its injustice on the basis of Christian ethics, but we also have to understand this process within the long-term temporality of human history.

What I want to make clear is that I am not an advocate of globalization or the so-called new international order. I am just trying to see the complexity

of the contemporary situation without reducing it either to an irresponsible celebration or to a complete condemnation. As an intellectual, I feel the obligation to meet the complexity of our circumstances with an equally complex reflection. That is what I am trying to accomplish.

Could you then comment on the passage in the Gospel in which Jesus expels the merchants from the temple (Mark 11.15–16). How do you see the relationship between those two spheres through scriptural exegesis?
The expulsion of the merchants from the temple is more an anti-sacrificial gesture than an economic one. People who were going to the temple had one purpose in mind: sacrifice. They had to buy animals to fulfil that purpose. If someone were rich, he would sacrifice a large animal, whereas a poor person would sacrifice a small creature like a pigeon. Jesus' violent reaction was against the use of the temple of God as a place of sacrifice. In that sense, it may have been an anti-sacrificial gesture, later reinterpreted in a context where sacrifice did not exist any more. This is Robert Hamerton-Kelly's interpretation in his book about Mark,[24] and I agree with him.

Calasso recalls that the religious space, the temple, was the space from which the system of exchange emerged, starting with the substitution of victims. Economics was born within a sacred space, so to speak.[25] *Could we say that, in this process of exchange, the economic realm has eventually replaced religion as a new form of totality?*
Yes, you could say that. In our society religion has been completely subsumed by economics, but precisely because economics springs from a religious matrix. It is nothing but the secularized form of religious ritual. We know that the most ancient coins were found in the proximity of temples and sacred spaces, precisely in order to exchange animals and for the purpose of sacrifice. Trade was really an offering to the foreigner, in order to placate the foreign god, who was seen as a possible threat. Then, in exchange, the one who received gifts returned them with new offerings. That is the most likely origin of exchange. Indeed, I have no doubts that exchange has a religious origin. Even etymologically the word *money* is related to the goddess Juno Moneta and her temple, in whose proximity coins were minted.[26] It is also known that the Roman basilica was a business place, which the Christians turned into a religious space. They did not want to move into pagan temples. Rather, they took a civil place that was normally used for business purposes. I think that, ultimately, there is no conflict between economic life and religion, and the dialectical contraposition between the two is excessively

emphasized. There is no doubt that Christianity, in the early Middle Ages, was against usury and economic greed. Given the frequent scarcity that surrounded medieval people, they had to devise instruments of controlling mimetic violence. However, one should refer to Paul's attitude, when he says: 'We were not idle when we were with you, nor did we eat anyone's food without paying for it. On the contrary, we worked night and day, labouring and toiling so that we would not be a burden to any of you' (2 Thessalonians 3.7–9).[27] This is important in terms of Christianity and economics, namely, the relevance of self-sufficiency. It might sound naive from the point of view of social and economic theory, but I think that the scriptures have more truth in them than people normally are willing to accept.

4 The weak subject

Guy Debord wrote that 'the spectacle is the material reconstruction of the religious illusion' brought down to earth.[28] *Could we consider the expansion of the mass-media system, and the ideological use of it, as a* 'katechetic' *instrument as well?*

Of course, because it is based on a false form of transcendence, and therefore it has a containing power, but it is an unstable one. The conformism and the ethical agnosticism induced by media such as television could also produce forms of mimetic polarization at the mass level, making people more prone to be swayed by mimetic dynamics, inducing the much-feared populism in Western democracies.

Do you agree, however, that movies, TV and advertising draw heavily on mimetic principle, therefore increasing our awareness on this score?

Yes and no, because the majority of Hollywood or TV productions are very much based on the false romantic notion of the autonomy of the individual and the authenticity of his/her own desire. Of course there are exceptions, like the popular sit-com *Seinfeld,* which uses mimetic mechanisms constantly and depicts its characters as puppets of mimetic desire. I do not like the fact that *Seinfeld* constantly makes fun of high culture, which is nothing but mimetic snobbery, but it is a very clever and powerful show. It is also the only show which can afford to make fun of political correctness and can talk about important current phenomena such as the anorexia and bulimia epidemic, which clearly have strong mimetic components.[29] From a moral point of view, it is a hellish description of our contemporary world, but at the

same time, it shows a tremendous amount of talent and there are powerful insights regarding our mimetic situations.

Seinfeld *is a show that gets closer to the mimetic mechanism than most, and indeed is also hugely successful. How do you explain that?*
In order to be successful an artist must come as close as he can to some important social truth without inciting painful self-criticism in the spectators. This is what this show did. People do not have to understand fully in order to appreciate. They must not understand. They identify themselves with what these characters do because they do it too. They recognize something that is very common and very true, but they cannot define it. Probably the contemporaries of Shakespeare appreciated his portrayal of human relations in the same way we enjoy *Seinfeld,* without really understanding his perspicaciousness regarding mimetic interaction. I must say that there is more social reality in *Seinfeld* than in most academic sociology.

Don't you think that there are some anti-democratic implications in your theory, considering that the majority of people tend to act mimetically and to aggregate quite often for victimary reasons?
No. To be really for democracy means seeing the dangers of democracy. Tocqueville is quite sophisticated on this score and most of what he said is still true. He pointed out the dangers of democracy with striking intellectual clarity. If one covers up those dangers, society becomes like the Soviet Union, whose favourite system was a single house, a totally powerful mob of representatives that would be completely swayed by mimetic imbalance. To be democratic is to look for a division of powers, bicameralism, checks and balances, etc. It is important to see the dangers of mass societies and to try to counter them as effectively as possible. Mimetic theory is a real contribution to this understanding.

Elena Pulcini in L'individuo senza passioni *(*The Passionless Individual*), suggests that democratic individualism, as described by Tocqueville, is the result of a historical process that, on the one hand, accumulates acquisitive behaviour, and, on the other, manages not to produce open conflicts, such as the ones described by Hobbes and Smith. At the same time, contemporary democracy is dominated by conformism, which is produced by the 'passion for equality', and which engenders apathy and indifference instead of conflict. The so-called homo democraticus is weak, socially indifferent and pathologically narcissistic.*[30]
I agree with that, although this vision is a little too dark. I think that a contemporary description of the phenomenology of mimetic desire should

dialecticize the duality between mimetic conflict and an abatement of mimetic desire. This is also Jean-Michel Oughourlian's interpretation; namely, contemporary individuals aren't strong enough to have mimetic desire. They aren't passionate about anything. This is something I used to believe could never happen, but now I am more open to it. Consumption society, which was 'invented' partially to cope with mimetic aggressive behaviour, has eventually created these socially indifferent human beings unable to communicate with each other and mainly concerned with what is strictly accountable in their life, in the sense of self-interest. This is a radical form of nihilism, although this solipsism is self-defeating and self-exhausting: people would get tired with the pointlessness of this attitude.

As a matter of fact, Pulcini, following a recent trend of philosophical and theoretical literature on the notion of the gift,[31] *speaks of the emergence of the so-called* homo reciprocus, *in which the act of generosity, of* dépense*, in Bataillean terms, will be at the centre of a new form of symbolic and social activity.*

I think we have to be extremely careful in using this kind of terminology. The notion of *dépense* in Bataille stems from an anthropological basis which is clearly orgiastic and dionysiac, and therefore very violent. The expulsion of the *accursed share* he talks about is nothing but a form of victimary mechanism.[32] In *Vision of Excess* Bataille is obsessed with sacrificial rituals and sacrificial mutilation and he interprets them as the expulsion of an excess of energy, as a liberation of vital impulses. He doesn't realize that the tearing out of a tooth in New Guinea, or the ablation of one's finger in Blackfoot Indians' rituals (and circumcision as well), are nothing but metonymic residues of the victimary mechanism of self-immolation which are also present in many rites of passage.[33] *Dépense* is fundamentally a sacrificial gesture.

Moreover, the notion of *gift,* as everybody knows, is extremely ambiguous, because of the *reciprocity* it implies: any form of mimetic reciprocity may trigger negative effects.[34] The paroxysm of gift-giving is clear in the phenomenon of the *potlatch* as described by Marcel Mauss,[35] which is nothing but a ritualized form of mimetic rivalry on the social scale: what is important is not the object that you offer, but the humiliation that you want to inflict on the rival tribe – and, similarly to any other situation of the paroxysm of the doubles, the object is ultimately destroyed. When Christ says 'if someone strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also' (Matthew 5.39) he is not advocating any form of masochistic quietism, but the danger of bad reciprocity, of any escalation of bad mimesis. I think we should move towards an ethics of generosity, but going beyond the notion of gift.

Are you implying that the Gospel is advocating the end of reciprocity?
No. Only the bad side of it, because it is very easy in human relationships to glide from the positive to the negative side of reciprocity. Every human relationship has an element of reciprocity, we cannot jump out of that. That's why the master–slave relationship is inhuman because it tries to do away with reciprocity. A good relationship cannot be anything but reciprocal. This reciprocity should be spontaneous. If there is an obligation, it means that we are approaching bad reciprocity.

5 The *kenosis* of God

In recent years, Gianni Vattimo has shown a particular interest in your work. He has read your theory on Heidegger, relating the dissolution of metaphysics to the death of God.[36] *In his account, there would be a similarity between the idea of the incarnation as* kenosis *of God and the vocation of weakening of Being. Do you think there could be any proximity between your approach and the philosophy of the late Heidegger? Could we relate the idea of weakening of Being to your conclusion regarding Christianity and modern times?*
The texts that interest me most in Heidegger are the ones written immediately after *Sein und Zeit*. I am really concerned with his essays on 'the Greek beginning', his *Introduction to Metaphysics* and the texts on Hölderlin.[37] Even though Heidegger in many ways is a thinker with whom I do not identify, the idea about the loss of Being, the forgetting of Being, and the forgetting of forgetting is essential to the modern age. This idea seems to me to be related to the role of the victimary mechanism, and I would agree with Vattimo who says that it represents the death of God in the sense of the end of the sacred.

I think Vattimo offers considerable insight. Nonetheless, in my view, he puts forward too optimistic an interpretation of a situation fraught with ambiguity. The so-called *kenosis* of God is not linear and progressive as Heideggerians seem to imagine. Vattimo is using a conceptual framework and a kind of formulation which is purely confined to a philosophical understanding of Christianity. He simply equates the weakening of Being as the *kenosis* of God to the dissolution of ontological categories, whereas my point of view stems from Christian anthropology, which not only accounts for this kenotic process of God, meant as the end of the sacred order, but also discloses the danger of this very process. The end of ontologically grounded ideologies does not necessarily mean that we have done away with violence and with the risk of unleashing satanic elements.

This is the reason why one has to see this process from the mimetic perspective and in Christian apocalyptic terms, in the sense that the more there is an opening in a world where ritual is dead, the more dangerous this world becomes. It has both positive aspects, in the sense that there is less sacrifice, and negative aspects, in that there is an unleashing of mimetic rivalry. As I said, we live in a world where we take care of victims in a way no other society or historical time ever did, but we are also in a world that kills more people than ever, so we have the feeling that both the 'good' and the 'bad' are increasing all the time. If we have a theory of culture, it has to account for this extraordinary ambivalence of our society. I think that, at a certain moment, Vattimo comes close to this. In *Belief,* he uses Max Weber's formula of the disenchantment of the world due to secularization, saying that this 'disenchantment has also produced a radical disenchantment with the idea of disenchantment itself'.[38] I agree with him: Max Weber went only halfway in the discovery of this paradoxical process. Ours is a world in which there is a paradox created by the co-presence of great improvement and a great deal of disintegration, and many other paradoxes that become more fascinating as they keep on intensifying.

Vattimo also proposed that the theory of secularization is the authentic destiny of Christianity. He sees hermeneutics as a product of the process of secularization.[39]

That is probably true, but at the same time he doesn't seem to see how far back it goes. In fact, Auerbach's work would be relevant to this discussion too. A figural interpretation is not hermeneutical, at least in the usual sense of the word, but it prepares the ground for it. The crucial point is that the medieval tradition of the figural interpretation is centred on the image of Christ and his passion, it is *centred on the victim.* Vattimo is very different from Heidegger, and he clearly understands the importance and the centrality of Christian belief in defining the destiny of Western culture and civilization, and in fact at the end he dwells on the notion of *agape* as the result of the anti-metaphysical revolution of Christianity.[40] However, it seems to me that there is a problem in his religious perspective because he does not place enough emphasis on the Cross. As I recently wrote, he sees only interpretations in human history and no facts.[41] He aligns himself with the post-Nietzschean tradition in claiming the nonviability of any historical 'truth' and confining the novelty of Christianity to a purely discursive level. For him Christianity is mainly a textual experience, which we only believe in because somebody whom we trust and love told us to do so.[42] Although this is a concept which is quite close to the idea of 'positive internal mediation', as proposed by Fornari, there

is no grounding, no point of departure in this long chain of good imitation; or at least it is a loose one: the book, that, according to a strict hermeneutical approach, can be subject to any possible interpretation.

Paul says that the only things he knows are Jesus Christ and him crucified (1 Corinthians 2.2), and this seems to me to be an indirect answer to Vattimo: one can deconstruct any form of mythical or ideological 'truth', but not the Cross, the actual death of the Son of God. That is the centre around which our culture rotates and from which it has evolved. Why should the world have changed if that event did not convey a radical and fundamental anthropological truth to the human being? God provided the text, but also the hermeneutical key with which to read it: the Cross. The two cannot be separated.

In spite of the anthropological and philosophical importance of the Bible, in the last two centuries there is a clear process of 'abandoning' its reading. How can we account for it?

More books than ever are published on the Bible, and yet what you say is true. The Bible is less present in our daily culture than ever before in our history. One has to see this phenomenon in a Nietzschean–Heideggerian light: as 'the withdrawal of God'. As a matter of fact, I think that Heidegger's formula, 'the withdrawal of God', is actually anti-Nietzschean, because the idea of the death of God is still too Christian for Heidegger, who seems constantly to move away from any reference to Christianity. After all, the God that dies is Christ, and if God truly dies, the idea of resurrection cannot be far behind. This is what occurs in the already mentioned aphorism 125 of *The Gay Science*. The death of God and the question of how we are going to make up for that death lead Nietzsche to formulate the idea of the foundational murder. The Heideggerian idea of the withdrawal of the gods is an effort to deny the primacy of the biblical God, which still lies behind the Nietzschean formula. Heidegger's formula means that religion is withdrawing everywhere and not merely the Christian God. This is true, but why is it happening? Because the old pagan sacrificial order is disappearing thanks to Christianity! It is ironic: Christianity seems to be dying together with the religions it extinguishes, because, in sacrificial terms, it is perceived as one mythical religion among others. Christianity is not only one of the destroyed religions but it is the destroyer of *all* religions. The death of God is a Christian phenomenon. In its modern sense, *atheism is a Christian invention.* There is no atheism in the ancient world. The only exception I can think of is Epicureanism, but it is limited and its denial of the gods is not aggressive. Epicureanism does not deny God against anything or anyone: it doesn't have that strong negative quality of modern atheism.

The disappearance of religion is a Christian phenomenon *par excellence*. Of course, and let me clarify that I am referring to *the disappearance of religion in so far as we see religion aligned with a sacrificial order.* This process is going to continue and it is spreading all around the globe. I was talking with a specialist of Sanskrit, and he agreed with me that this process is probably also present in Indian history. It is much slower, but it is accelerating. The withdrawal of *all gods* is the first transreligious phenomenon. Like fundamentalism, it is a transreligious phenomenon which is taking place before our eyes, and we just do not seem to realize that it is the Bible which is responsible.

Are you suggesting that, in spite of appearances, the world is becoming more and more Christian?
Yes. This fact makes the phenomenon much more paradoxical, because it is much easier to recover biblical principles if one doesn't know they are biblical. On this score, modern nihilism shows its weak side. When our intellectuals, after the Second World War, and later with the collapse of the Soviet bloc in Eastern Europe, thought we were through with absolutes, they were simply wrong. Because the victimary principle or the defence of victims has become holy: *it is the absolute.* One will never see anyone attacking it. They do not even have to mention it. So we can say we are all believers in the innocence of the victims, which is at the core of Christianity. Nietzsche aimed at a deconstruction of Christianity, which he understood correctly as the defence of victims. Our modern nihilists want to deconstruct everything, *except* the defence of victims which they espouse. Thus, they are a very special kind of nihilist: they deny everything *but* the defence of the victim. In other words, they could not be more Christian than they are, against Christianity of course, but their self-contradiction is becoming obvious. One has only to see the acrobatic intellectualism of postmodern thinkers who try to pave the way to the idea of historical relativism and to save the historical truth of the Holocaust.

Of course, very often Christian principles are prevailing in a caricaturist form, whereby the defence of the victim entails new persecutions! One can persecute today only in the name of being against persecution. One can only persecute persecutors. You have to prove that your opponent is a persecutor in order to justify your own desire to persecute.

Could we then say that, in this surreptitious form, Christian values are propagated without provoking any skandalon.
Yes and no. The *skandalon* is always around. It is such a complex process, because the modern world is becoming more and more Christian, but also less

and less so, and one should emphasize both aspects. I tried to do this in my reading of Nietzsche, who is the most important philosopher for this question.[43]

How would you answer the criticism that sees the history of the Church as the history of an institution which persecuted people in the name of the Christian 'truth'?

Modern intellectuals tend to confuse the deep meaning of the Gospel with the history of Christianity, which is fundamentally the slow process of coping with the heritage of the sacred mentality and with our mimetic behaviour. Men could not possibly do away with the sacred altogether, dismissing at once the mentality they had lived with for thousands and thousands of years. Moreover, human institutions tend to be conservative and they often become violent for reasons of sheer preservation of power and privilege. The most extraordinary thing is that Jesus knew this from the beginning. If you read the Gospel, everything is already there. Jesus appoints Peter as the founding father of the Church. Peter is the *most mimetic of his disciples,* the apostle who denied Christ not once, but *three times.* In the Gethsemane episode, when a group of armed men come to arrest Jesus, Peter takes his sword and strikes the servant of the high priest, cutting off his ear. 'Put your sword back in its place', Jesus says to him, 'for all who draw the sword will die by the sword' (Matthew 26.52). Again, this is a warning against the mimetic reciprocity of violence. Man has a tendency to relapse into the sacred, prompting violence to defend any idea or principle seen simply as sacred. Christ is aware of this and strongly opposes it. To be against the sacrificial order is to be against any form of violence.

It is also true that the historical process for the growth of this awareness is not linear and it is quite complex. In *I See Satan,* I analysed a text which is the account of a collective stoning, induced by a Pagan guru, Apollonius of Tyana, in order to cure a plague epidemic in Ephesus. This episode is described in the *Life of Apollonius,* written in the third century by Philostratus, a Greek writer from Athens.[44] In the Loeb edition of Philostratus, after that text, there is a script by Eusebius, who was the first great historian of the Church at the time of Constantine. What he doesn't see at all about that miracle of Apollonius is that Christ would not tolerate any stoning. The only time Christ is in contact with the possibility of a stoning – in the episode of the adulterous woman (John 8.3–11) – he prevents it. Eusebius doesn't see at all that it might be wrong to stone somebody. A modern non-Christian would be mad at Christianity precisely for being in favour of stoning, without realizing that, on the contrary, we owe this detestation of stoning to Christianity. It took centuries for the Western world to acquire a Christian sensibility. During the Middle Ages there

was a relationship with violence that remained quite pagan in many ways, and in which the scarcity of goods certainly played a key role. One should also read the Enlightenment in that light, and in particular a writer such as Voltaire. Although sometimes he is very crude, Voltaire is an excellent reader of the Bible *against* the Bible. In the case of the Cain and Abel episode, he points out that the Cain story is an account of the foundation of the first culture, and that culture is the result of a law against murder, which is sanctioned by divine authority. But then he asks an interesting question: what kind of God, what kind of Christian God is he who takes side with Cain, protecting a murderer?[45]

This question posed by Voltaire can only be answered through a biblical reading of founding myths, which tells you that the first collective murder leads to the most severe punishment for murder: seven victims for one. It is, more precisely, a form of protection for the Cainite society. Cain is protected by his murder, and the Bible says this directly. It attributes this punishment to 'God', which is typical of a culture which is still influenced by the sacred, but then the Gospels say: 'Satan'. And one has to compare the two in order to understand fully what Satan means. Satan is the former god or gods. That is why he is represented as a person, while he can be defined, as we have already mentioned, as the unstable structure of human relations in a world still ruled by violence and scapegoating.

Paul calls him the ruler or the king of his world, meaning that the social order of this world has been shaped by the sacred mentality, by the satanic impulses which rule through scape-goating. Then Paul says something interesting: 'None of the rulers of this age [that is the sacrificial order, therefore, Satan] understood it, for if they had, they would not have crucified the Lord of Glory. If the kings of this world had foreseen the consequences they would never have crucified the Lord of Glory' (1 Corinthians 2.8). It is an incredibly powerful sentence that only the mimetic theory can explain. Paul says that the accuser, namely, Satan, is responsible for the sacrificial system, which generates and regenerates itself through the scapegoat mechanism. Satan resorted to it against Christ's revelation without realizing that he himself was providing Christ with the main instrument of the Christian revelation: the four accounts of the Crucifixion. These truthfully represent the same scapegoat mechanism, which is always distorted and misrepresented in myth.

Let me say this differently: Christ's crucifixion means that the victimary mechanism will not longer work, for no one can imagine that the Jesus portrayed in the Gospels might be guilty. Therefore, the mechanism itself is revealed as deceptive as well as fundamental to human culture. This is the paradox that we have to try to understand, and to which my work has been devoted.

How do you see, then, the future – or, in apocalyptic terms, the 'remaining time' – under this view?

It is going to be more of the same increasing complexity, but there will be dialectical turns so astonishing that they are going to take everybody by surprise. There must be things in store. That's why for me it is important to go back to Scripture and to the early Christian texts, because they are so revealing about the nature of the present time. Paul says: 'I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified' (1 Corinthians 2.2). Scholars think this is an anti-intellectual statement, but it is not at all. It means that the Cross is the source of all knowledge of God – which theologians believe – and of man as well – which they do not necessarily understand. Paul understands this. And the idea of Satan overcome by the Cross is an essential one that unfortunately, in Western Christianity, has been suspected of being magical, irrational, and is dismissed as a result. The Cross destroys the power of Satan as 'king of this world', meaning the power to unleash violence through the scapegoat mechanism. Satan is still with us but only as a source of disorder. Indirectly, therefore, because of our inability to live without scapegoats, Christianity is a source of disruption in our world. Christianity constantly suggests that our scapegoats are nothing but innocent victims. Christianity shows that the guilty ones are the murderers of scapegoats, and those who approve of their murderers. Let me conclude by repeating what I have already said. This compassion for the victim is the deeper meaning of Christianity. We will always be mimetic, but we do not have to engage automatically in mimetic rivalries. We do not have to accuse our neighbour; we can learn to forgive him instead.

Notes

1. At the COV&R Conference 2001 in Antwerp, Belgium, 2 June: *The Place of Girard's mimetic Theory in the History of Philosophy.* See R. Girard and G. Vattimo, *Verità o fede debole? Dialogo su cristianesimo e relativismo,* ed. P. Antonello (Massa: Transeuropa, 2006).
2. R. Girard, *I See Satan,* pp. 182–7.
3. Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx,* trans. Peggy Kamuf (New York and London: Routledge, 1994), p. 15.
4. Derrida singles out the 'canon of modern apocalypsis (end of History, end of Men, end of Philosophy, Hegel, Marx, Nietzsche, Heidegger ...)' ibid.
5. Girard, *I See Satan,* pp. 170–1.
6. The term 'Anti-Christ' is present in two of St John's letters: 1 John 2.18–19: 'Dear children, this is the last hour; and as you have heard that the antichrist is

coming, even now many antichrists have come. This is how we know it is the last hour'; and 2 John 7: 'Many deceivers, who do not acknowledge Jesus Christ as coming in the flesh, have gone out into the world. Any such person is the deceiver and the antichrist.' See also 1 John 4.3.

7. F. Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1992), p. 312.
8. See Girard, *A Theatre of Envy,* pp. 121–31.
9. For an extended discussion of Nietzsche's philosophy in the light of mimetic theory, see R. Girard, 'Dionysus versus the Crucified', *MLN* 92 (1977): 1161–85; 'Nietzsche and Contradiction', *Stanford Italian Review,* 1–2 (1986): 53–65.
10. R. Girard, 'Interview', in R.J. Golsan, (ed.), *René Girard and Myth: An Introduction* (New York: Garland 1993), p. 153, n. 4.
11. *Dharma* designates the traditional notion of natural and institutional order in India, and in the Hindu tradition defines the individual obligation with respect to caste, social custom, civil law and sacred law, in opposition to mimetic undifferentiation.
12. See Stefano Tomelleri, *René Girard: La matrice sociale della violenza* (Milan: FrancoAngeli, 1996), p. 42. The reference is to E. Durkheim, *The Division of Labor in Society,* trans. George Simpson (Glencoe, IL: The Free Press, 1960).
13. J. Bentham, *The Panopticon* is in *The Works of Jeremy Bentham,* Vol. 4, ed. John Bowing (Edinburgh: Tait, 1838–43).
14. Girard, *I See Satan,* p. 186. The word *katechon* is mentioned in 2 Thessalonians 2.6–7. The Greek verb is a compound word coming from *kata* (down) and *echo* (to have or to hold), hence the meaning 'to hold down or to restrain'. The *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* defines *katech* as follows: 'to prevent an evil person or power from breaking out'. The twofold meaning of the verb has been emphasized by Jean-Pierre Dupuy in a discussion held at the 1994 COV&R meeting in Wiesbaden: 'Theology and/or Secular Thinking: Discussion on Political Philosophy, Economy, and Sociology'. In particular see W. Palaver, 'Hobbes and the Katechon: The Secularization of Sacrificial Christianity', *Contagion,* 2, (1995): 57–74. For an extended discussion on this notion, see Girard, *Celui qui le scandale arrive,* pp. 148–50.
15. Ibid., p. 200.
16. R. Girard, 'Postface', in M. Deguy and J.-P. Dupuy, *René Girard ou le problème du mal* (Paris: Grasset, 1982), p. 262.
17. Bernard Mandeville, *The Fable of Bees: Or Private Vices, Public Benefits,* ed. F.B. Kaye (Indianapolis, IN: Liberty Fund, 1988).
18. See M. Serres, *Atlas* (Paris: Julliard, 1997), pp. 229–35. In particular p. 230: 'tout praxis est sacrificielle, lorsqu'elle calcule, avec riguer, le meilleur résultat pour la moindre dépense, puisque cette optimisation conduit le geste du sacrifice, religieux, certes, guerrier aussi, technique et productif maintenant'. Robert Calasso shares the same concept: 'The specifically modern sacrifice is an immense industrial undertaking which rejects the name and memory

of sacrifice. One speaks of entire classes as subjects of elimination, or of the inevitable "drop-outs" who are ejected from the machinery of society every day' (Robert Calasso, *La Rovina di Kasch* [Milan: Adelphi, 1983], p. 156). A similar question was also addressed to René Girard in his meeting with the theologians of liberation. See 'Desejo mimético e sistemas auto-reguladores: o sacrificalismo na economia', in H. Assmann, *René Girard com Teologos da libertacaõ: Un dialogo sobre ídolos e sacrificios* (Petropolis: Editora Vozes, 1991), pp. 59–66.

19. See E. Gans, 'Chronicles of Love and Resentment', in *Anthropoetics: The Journal of Generative Anthropology,* www. anthropoetics.ucla.edu
20. For an account of the complexity, confusion and misuse of data behind the current debate on environmental damage, see the recent book by Björn Lomborg, professor of statistics and former member of Greenpeace: *The Skeptical Environmentalist. Measuring the Real State of the World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).
21. In his book *The Blank Slate,* Steven Pinker refers to the work of the archeologist Lawrence Keeley who 'summarized the proportion of male deaths caused by war in a number of societies for which data are available', compared to the actual size of the population. The results give for instance, that the 60 per cent of the male Jivaro and 40 per cent of the Yanomamö were killed in warfare. In spite of two world wars, the Holocaust and several regional wars, the percentage drops to less than 2 per cent in Europe and North America in the twentieth century. See S. Pinker, *The Blank Slate: The Modern Denial of Human Nature* (New York: Viking, 2002), pp. 56–7, and L.H. Keeley, *War Before Civilization: The myth of the peaceful savage* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996).
22. See, for instance, Pedro Augustín Díaz Arenas, *Relaciones Internacionales de Dominacíon* (Bogotá: Universidad Nacional de Colombia, 1998), p. 12.
23. > Some modern social forms are simply not found in prior historical periods – such as the political system of the nation-state, the wholesale dependence of production upon inanimate power sources, or the thoroughgoing commodification of products and wage labour. Others only have a specious continuity with pre-existing social orders. An example is the city. (A. Giddens, *The Consequences of Modernity* [Oxford: Polity Press, 1990], p. 6).
24. Robert Hamerton-Kelly, *The Gospel and the Sacred* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1994), pp. 17–18.
25. Calasso, *The Ruin of Kasch,* p. 165.
26. See Glyn Davies, *A History of Money from Ancient Times to the Present Day* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1996), p. 89.
27. See also 1 Thessalonians 2.9.
28. Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle,* trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (New York: Zone Books, 1995), pp. 17–18.
29. For a mimetic analysis of anorexia and bulimia, see R. Girard, 'Eating Disorders and Mimetic Desire', *Contagion,* 3 (1996): 1–20.

30. Elena Pulcini, *L'Individuo senza passioni. Individualismo moderno e perdita del legame sociale* (Turin: Bollati Boringhieri, 2001), pp. 15–16.
31. See, for instance, Jacques Derrida, *Given Time 1: Counterfeit Money,* trans. Peggy Kamuf (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1992); J.T. Godbout, *L'Esprit du don* (Paris: La Découert, 1992); A.E. Komter (ed.), *The Gift: An Interdisciplinary Perspective* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 1996); Alan D. Schrift (ed.), *The Logic of the Gift. Towards an Ethic of Generosity* (New York and London: Routledge, 1997).
32. G. Bataille, *The Accursed Share,* trans. R. Hurley (New York: Zone, 1988).
33. G. Bataille, *Visions of Excess. Selected Writings, 1927–1939,* ed. and intro. Allan Stoekl (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1985), pp. 61–72.
34. Girard has developed this notion in his lecture 'Le cadeau' presented at the conference 'Le don et les economies symboliques' [The Gift and Symbolic Economies], held at Stanford, 10 May 2001.
35. Marcel Mauss, *The Gift: The Form and Reason for Exchange in Archaic Societies,* trans. W.D. Halls; Foreword Mary Douglas (London: Routledge, 1990).
36. Gianni Vattimo, *Belief,* trans. Luca D'Isanto and David Webb (Oxford: Polity Press, 1999).
37. Martin Heidegger, *Introduction to Metaphysics,* trans. Gregory Fried and Richard Polt (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2000); *Hölderlin and the Essence of Poetry,* trans. Douglas Scott (London: Vision, 1949).
38. Vattimo, *Belief,* p. 29.
39. G. Vattimo, *Beyond Interpretation,* trans. D. Webb (Oxford: Polity Press, 1994), pp. 42–57.
40. See G. Vattimo, *Dopo la cristianità. Per un cristianesimo non religioso* (Milan: Garzanti, 2002), pp. 116–17.
41. R. Girard, 'Non solo interpretazioni: ci sono anche i fatti', in Girard and Vattimo, *Verità o fede debole?* (Massa: Transeuropa, 2006), pp. 75–98.
42. Ibid., p. 11.
43. See R. Girard, 'Nietzsche, la decostruzione, e la moderna preoccupazione per le vittime', *Ars Interpretandi,* 4 (1999): 35–51; 'La preoccupazione moderna per le vittime', *Filosofia a Teologia,* 2 (1999): 223–36.
44. Flavius Philostratus, *The Life of Apollonius of Tyana; The Epistles of Apollonius; and the Treatise of Eusebius* (London: Heinemann, 1912); See Girard, *I See Satan,* pp. 49–61.
45. *The Complete Works of Voltaire,* Vol. 62 (Oxford: The Voltaire Foundation, Taylor Institution, 1987), pp. 466–7.

CHRONOLOGY OF GIRARD'S LIFE

1923 René Girard born in Avignon, on Christmas Day, the second of five children. Father is curator of city's museum and famous Castle of Popes. Girard studies at local lycée.

1940 Receives his baccalaureat.

1943–7 Goes to Paris to study at Ecole des Chartes; specializes in medieval history and paleography. Writes thesis, 'La Vie privée à Avignon dans la seconde moitié du XVme siècle'.

1947 Girard leaves France for United States. Starts PhD in history at University of Indiana, Bloomington; teaches French literature there.

1950 Obtains PhD with dissertation on 'American Opinion on France, 1940–1943'.

1951 Marries Martha McCullough. They have three children: Martin, Daniel and Mary.

1954 Teaches at Duke University and subsequently at Bryn Mawr College.

1957 Girard takes up post of Assistant Professor of French at Johns Hopkins University, Baltimore.

1961 Publishes first book, *Mensonge romantique et vérité romanesque* (*Deceit, Desire and the Novel: Self and Other in Literary Structure,* 1965), which puts forward first sketch of theory of mimetic desire.

1962–3 Promoted to Associate Professor at Johns Hopkins University.

Continues his work on modern European literature. Edits book on Proust: *Proust: A Collection of Critical Essays*; publishes *Dostoïevski, du double à l'unité* (*Resurrection from the Underground: Feodor Dostoevsky,* 1997).

1966 With Richard Macksey and Eugenio Donato, Girard organizes international symposium: 'The Languages of Criticism and the Sciences of Man'. Lucien Goldmann, Roland Barthes, Jacques Derrida, Jacques Lacan and others participate. Conference marks introduction of structuralism to America. Girard develops idea of foundational murder.

1968 Moves to State University of New York, Buffalo, to hold Chair in the Department of English. Beginning of friendship and collaboration with Michel Serres, also of Girard's interest in Shakespeare.

1972–3 Publishes groundbreaking book, *La Violence et le sacré* (*Violence and the Sacred,* 1977), in which he develops idea of scapegoat mechanism. French journal *Esprit* organizes debate and devotes whole issue to Girard.

1975 Returns to teach at Johns Hopkins University.

1978 With assistance of Jean-Michel Oughourlian and Guy Lefort (French psychiatrists), Girard publishes third book, *Des Choses cachées depuis la fondation du monde* (*Things Hidden since the Foundation of the World: Research undertaken in collaboration with J.-M. Oughourlian and G. Lefort,* 1987): a lengthy systematic dialogue in which Girard puts forward mimetic theory in its entirety. Book enjoys commercial success in France.

1980 Moves to Stanford, to take up post of Andrew B. Hammond Chair in French Language, Literature and Civilization. With Jean-Pierre Dupuy, founds and directs Program for Interdisciplinary Research, which organizes several important conferences.

1982–5 Publishes *Le Bouc émissaire* (*The Scapegoat,* 1986) and in 1985 *La Route antique des hommes pervers* (*Job, the Victim of his People,* 1987), in which he begins to develop hermeneutical approach to biblical texts based on premises of mimetic theory.

Receives from Frije University of Amsterdam in 1985 first of several *honoris causa.* (Followed by University of Innsbruck, Austria [1988]; Antwerp [1995]; Padua [2001]; University College London [2006].)

1990 Colloquium on Violence and Religion (COV&R) is founded: international association of scholars dedicated to exploration, criticism and development of Girard's mimetic model of relationship between violence and religion in genesis of culture. COV&R holds annual conferences and publishes annual journal, *Contagion*. Girard is Honorary Chair.

1991 Girard publishes first book in English: *A Theatre of Envy: William Shakespeare*.

1995 Retires from his teaching position at Stanford, devoting himself to conferencing and writing.

1999–2003 Publishes *Je vois Satan tomber comme l'éclair,* (*I See Satan Fall Like Lightning,* 2001); followed by *Celui par qui le scandale arrive*; and *Le Sacrifice*.

2005 Girard elected to the Académie Française (highest rank for French intellectuals). 'Association pour les recherches mimétiques' founded in Paris.

2006 With Italian philosopher Gianni Vattimo, Girard publishes series of dialogues on Christianity and modernity: *Verità o fede debole? Dialogo su cristianesimo e relativismo.*

LIST OF GIRARD'S PUBLICATIONS

Note: Works are given first in English translation, but are in chronological order of original publication.

1961 *Deceit, Desire and the Novel: Self and Other in Literary Structure* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1965).
(*Mensonge romantique et vérité romanesque* [Paris: Grasset]).

1962 *Proust: A Collection of Critical Essays* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall).

1963 *Resurrection from the Underground: Feodor Dostoevsky* (New York: Crossroad, 1997).
(*Dostoïevski, du double à l'unité* [Paris: Plon]).

1972 *Violence and the Sacred* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1977).
(*La Violence et le Sacré* [Paris: Grasset]).

1976 *Critique dans un souterrain* (Lausanne: L'Age d'Homme).

1978 *To Double Business Bound: Essays on Literature, Mimesis, and Anthropology* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press).

1978 *Things Hidden since the Foundation of the World: Research undertaken in collaboration with J.-M. Oughourlian and G. Lefort* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1987).
(*Des Choses cachées depuis la fondation du monde* [Paris: Grasset]).

1982 *The Scapegoat* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986).
(*Le Bouc émissaire* [Paris: Grasset]).

1985 *Job, the Victim of his People* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1987).
(*La Route antique des hommes pervers* [Paris: Grasset]).

1991 *A Theatre of Envy: William Shakespeare* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press).

1994 *Quand ces choses commenceront ... Entretiens avec Michel Treguer* (Paris: Arléa).

1996 *The Girard Reader,* ed. James G. Williams (New York: Crossroad).

1999 *I See Satan Fall Like Lightning* (Maryknoll, MD: Orbis Books, 2001).
(*Je vois Satan tomber comme l'éclair* [Paris: Grasset]).

2001 *Celui par qui le scandale arrive,* ed. Maria Stella Barberi (Paris: Desclée de Brouwer).

2003 *Le Sacrifice* (Paris: Bibliothèque nationale de France).

2004 *Evolution and Conversion. Dialogues on the Origins of Culture,* with Pierpaolo Antonello and João Cezar de Castro Rocha (London: Continuum, 2008). (*Les Origines de la culture. Entretiens avec Pierpaolo Antonello et João Cezar de Castro Rocha* [Paris: Desclée de Brouwer]).

2004 *Oedipus Unbound: Selected Writings on Rivalry and Desire,* ed. Mark R. Anspach (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press).

2006 *Verità o fede debole? Dialogo su cristianesimo e relativismo,* with Gianni Vattimo, ed. Pierpaolo Antonello (Massa: Transeuropa).

INDEX

Abel 46, 53, 156, 162, 186
Abraham 146
Ackerman, Robert 109 n.2
Action française (French Action League) 14, 34 n.1
Adorno, Theodor W. 24
Aeschylus 53
Agni 131
Ainu 84
Alighieri, Dante 23, 37 nn.30, 31, 162
Anaximander 159
Apollonius of Tiana 27–8, 185, 190 n.44
Archilocus 1
Arens, William 111 n.20
Aristotle 43, 44, 80, 94 n.21, 105, 111 n.25
  The Politics 111 n.25
Arrow, Kenneth 31, 39 n.53
Atlan, Henri 61, 68 n.40
Auerbach, Erich 129, 138 nn.34, 35, 150, 164 n.15, 182
  Mimesis. Dargerstellte Wirklichkeit in der abendländischen Literatur (*Mimesis. The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*) 138 n.35, 164 n.15

Baevin, Jan 39
Bainville, Jacques 34
Bally, Charles 36 n.25
Balthazar, Hans Urs von 49
  La gloire et la croix 49
Bandera, Cesareo 23, 32, 37 n.33
Barthes, Roland 23
Bassoff, Bruce 96
Bataille, Georges 180
  Vision of Excess. Selected Writings, 1927–1939 180
Bateson, Gregory 31–2
  Naven 31
Beaufret, Jean 34
Benjamin 145–6
Bentham, Jeremy 172
  Panopticon 172
Berlin, Isaiah 1
Bible 7, 45, 49, 53, 66 n.14, 75, 113–14, 116, 133–4, 136 n.13, 139 n.51, 141, 143–4, 145, 146, 148, 149, 150, 151, 152, 157, 161, 162, 163 n.8, 183–4, 186
Bin Laden, Osama bin Muhammad bin ʻAwad 170
Blackfoot Indians 180
Blackmore, Susan 92
  The Meme Machine 92 n.7
Blake, William 96 n.43
  Songs of Innocence and Experience 96 n.43
Boccaccio, Giovanni 30
Boesch, Christopher 93 n.14
Boff, Leonardo 67 n.32
Boissonat, Jean 29
Boltanski, Luc 111 n.23
Boyer, Pascal 80, 94 n.24, 112 n.31
  The Naturalness of Religious Ideas: A Cognitive Theory of Religion 112 n.31
Brancusi, Constantin 35 n.5
Braque, George 15, 16
Breton, André 36 n.20
Burke, Kenneth 26, 38 n.45
Burkert, Walter 101–2
  Homo Necans: Interpretationen altgriechischen Opferriten und Mythen 110 n.15

Cain 46, 53, 74–5, 116, 156, 162, 186
Calasso, Roberto 1, 54, 158, 177, 188–9 n.18
  La Rovina di Kasch (*The Ruin of Kasch*) 1, 54
Calderón de la Barca, Pedro 23
Calhoun, John B. 82, 94 n.29
Callois, Roger 51, 66 n.23
  Les Jeux et les hommes 51
Camus, Albert 63
  La Chute 63

Canetti, Elias 64, 74
Crowds and Power 74
Castoriadis, Cornelius 104, 105, 123
Cavalli-Sforza, Luca 122
Centre de Recherche en Epistémologie Appliquée (CREA) 31
Cervantes, Miguel de 18–19, 23, 54
Don Quixote 18, 20
Champigny, Robert 20
Chandler, James 135 n.1
Questions of Evidence. Proofs, Practice, and Persuasions across the Disciplines 113, 117, 135 n.1
Clarke, Arthur C. 76
Char, René 15, 34 nn.3, 4
Collingwood, Robin George 117
The Idea of History 117
Colloquium on Violence and Religion (COV&R) 32, 33, 39 n.60, 40 n.68, 65 n.3, 96 n.49, 105, 111 n.27, 153, 165 n.26, 187 n.1, 188 n.14
Comte, Auguste 126
Constantine the Great 185
Copernicus, Nicolaus 125, 137 n.23
Cosmides, Leda 72, 93 n.9
Cyrus the Great 151

Daly, Robert J. 165 n.26
Darwin, Charles 1, 3, 5, 10, 11 n.1, 13, 41, 69–70, 71, 92 n.2, 97, 113, 117, 119–20, 121, 127, 137 n.23, 141, 147, 167, 168
Notebooks 69
The Autobiography of Charles Darwin and Selected Letters 1, 11 n.1, 13, 41, 92 n.2, 97, 113, 141, 167
The Origin of Species 1, 92 n.3, 119
Daudet, Léon 34 n.1
Davidson, Arnold I. 135 n.1, 138 n.40
Questions of Evidence. Proofs, Practice, and Persuasions across the Disciplines 113, 117, 135 n.1, 138 n.40
Dawkins, Richard 3, 9, 10, 56, 71–72
De Gaulle, Charles 14
Deacon, Terrence W. 78–9, 90, 94 n.19
The Symbolic Species. The Co-Evolution of Language and the Brain 78, 94 n.19
Debord, Guy 178
Debray, Regis 44, 84
Deguy, Michel 24
Delcourt, Marie 139 n.53
Derrida, Jacques 23–4, 31, 37 n.36, 65 n.4, 77, 115–16, 130, 133–4, 135–6 n.10, 168, 190 n.31
De la Grammatologie 37 n.36, 135 n.9
La Dissemination (*Dissemination*) 65 n.4
Descartes, René 94 n.23
Dionysus 97, 158–9, 171
Dogrib (myth) 114–15
Donald, Merlin 78–80, 93 n.18
Origins of the Modern Mind: Three Stages in the Evolution of Culture and Cognition 78, 93 n.18
Donato, Eugenio 23–4
Dostoevsky, Feodor 19, 55, 63–4
Crime and Punishment 55
Notes from Underground 64
The Eternal Husband 19
Dreyfus, Alfred 34 n.1, 60, 61
Dubois, Eugene 119
Duke University 191
Dumouchel, Paul 38 n.44, 39 n.59, 57, 164 n.19, 165 n.34, 174
L'Enfer des chases (*René Girard et la logique de l'économie*) 174
Violence et veritè. Autour de René Girard (*Violence and Truth*) 38 n.44
Dunbar, Robin I.M. 81, 94 n.28
Dupuy, Jean-Pierre 3, 31, 39 nn.52, 59, 57–8, 68 n.38, 135
L'Enfer des choses (*René Girard et la logique de l'économie*) 174
Understanding Origins. Contemporary Views on the Origin of Life, Mind and Society 31 n.8, 188 n.14
Durkheim, Emile 5, 26, 71, 99–101, 109 n.4, 143, 172, 188 n.12
Les Formes élémentaires de la vie religieuse, le système totemique en Australie (*The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*) 100, 109 n.10
Règles de la méthode sociologique 109 n.4

Eibl-Eibesfeldt, Irenäus 82
Ecole des Hautes Etudes, Paris 17
Eliade, Mircea 95 n.38, 116
Myth and Reality 95 n.38

Epicurus 183
Eulenberg, Herbert 68 n.44
Euripides 24, 50, 97
Hyppolytus 50–1
The Bacchae 24, 98
Eusebius of Caesarea 185–6, 190 n.44
Evans-Pritchard, Edward Evan 106
Eve 45, 75

Fiske, Alan P. 80–1, 94 n.24
Flaubert, Gustave 19, 102
Madame Bovary 19
Salammbô 102
Foerster, Heinz von 31, 39 n.53
Fogassi, Leonardo 65 n.8
Ford Foundation 24
Fornari, Giuseppe 65 n.4, 113, 124, 182
Francs-Tireurs et Partisans (FTP) 15
Frank, Thomas 59, 67–8 n.37
Frazer, James George 24, 86, 98–9, 109 n.2, 135 n.2, 153
Freccero, John 23
French Action League 34 n.1
Freud, Sigmund 22, 23, 44, 62–4, 81, 110 n.12, 116, 123, 127–8, 132–4, 137 n.23, 139 nn.47, 48, 147, 149, 152, 164 n.20
Beyond the Pleasure Principle 44
Moses and Monotheism 128, 132, 147
Totem and Taboo. Some Points of Agreement between the Mental Lives of Savages and Neurotics 128, 138 n.33, 147
Frye, Northorp 96
Fukuyama, Francis 169
The End of History and the Last Man 188 n.7

Gallese, Vittorio 3, 65 n.8
Gans, Eric 23, 28, 37 n.32, 88–9, 90, 175
Anthropoietics 37
Originary Thinking. Elements of Generative Anthropology 37 n.32
The End of Culture. Toward a Generative Anthropology 37 n.32
Gardner, Stephen 105–6
Garrels, S.R. 12
Ghandi, Mohandas Karamchard 153
Gide, André Paul Guillaume 159
Ginzburg, Carlo 66 n.19, 130–2, 138 n.40, 139 n.46
Clues, Myths and Historical Methods 130
I Benandanti. Stregoneria e culti agrari tra cinquecento e seicento 139 n.46
Storia notturna. Una decifrazione del sabba (*Ecstasies. Deciphering the Witches' Sabbath*) 66 n.19, 138 n.44
A Theatre of Envy: William Shakespeare 36 n.18, 68 n.41, 137 n.27, 188 n.8
Girard, René
Celui par qui le scandale arrive 30, 159
Des Choses cachées depuis la fondation du monde (*Things Hidden since the Foundation of the World: Researches undertaken in collaboration with J.-M. Oughourlian and G. Lefort*) 2, 5, 7, 28–32, 37 n.39, 51, 61, 69, 70, 72, 75, 81, 84, 120, 141, 150, 154–5, 156
Je vois Satan tomber comme l'éclair (*I See Satan Fall Like Lightning*) 38 n.47, 40 n.61, 45, 66 n.13
La violence et le sacré (*Violence and the Sacred*) 2, 5, 21, 23–5, 28–9, 36 n.22, 36 n.22, 37 n.40, 44, 97, 101, 114, 127, 150, 156, 163 n.14
Le Bouc émissaire (*The Scapegoat*) 114
Mensonge romantique et vérité romanesque (*Deceit, Desire and the Novel: self and other in literary structure*) 8, 10, 19, 21–5, 35 n.8, 97, 125, 129
Quand ces choses commenceront ... Entretiens avec Michel Treguer 33
Goldmann, Lucien 17, 23, 24, 35 n.6
Gonzáles Torres, Yoloth 111 n.19
El Sacrificio humano entre los mexicas 111 n.19
Goodhart, Sandor 56, 148
Sacrificing commentary: Reading the End of Literature 67 n.31
Gopnik, Alison 65
Gospels 7, 9, 46, 60, 61, 64, 97, 118, 121, 129, 137 n.25, 141–2, 147–8, 150–2, 154, 155–6, 157, 161, 186
Goyet, Francis 163 n.14
Greenpeace (International Organization) 189 n.20
Grzimek, Bernhard 74

Habermas, Jürgen 2
Hades 159, 166 n.37
Hamerton-Kelly, Robert 110 n.17, 177
Violent Origins. Ritual Killing and Cultural Formation 110 n.17
Hammond, Andrew B. 192
Harootunian, Harry 135 n.1
Questions of Evidence. Proofs, Practice, and Persuasions across the Disciplines 113, 135 n.1, 138 n.40
Harris, Marvin 91, 96 n.48
Cultural Materialism. The Struggle for a Science of Culture 96 n.48
Haslam, Nick 94 n.24
Heesteman, Jan C. 32
The Inner Conflict of Tradition. Essay on Indian Ritual, Kingship, and Society 40 n.64
Hegel, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich 106, 187 n.4
Heidegger, Martin 15, 33–5, 159, 162, 181–3, 190 n.37
Hölderlin and the Essence of Poetry 190 n.37
Introduction to Metaphysics 181
Sein und Zeit 181
Heinroth, Oskar 74
Heraclitus of Ephesus 34 n.4, 159, 185
Hermes 131
Herod 73
Hinkelammert, Franz 155, 165
Hobbes, Thomas 47, 79, 179, 188 n.14
Hocart, Arthur Maurice 50, 53, 117–19, 130–1, 164 n.25
Kings and Councilors 66 n.21, 136 n.17
Hölderlin, Friedrich 181
Homer 65, 85, 150
Iliad 107
Odyssey 85, 150
Huch, Ricarda 68 n.44

Indiana University, Bloomington 17, 18, 20
Isaac 146

Jackson, Don 39 n.57
Jacob 145
Jacobsen, Jens Peter 68 n.44
Jainism 153, 164 n.22
Jefferson, Thomas 168
Jesus Christ 9, 49, 120, 142, 146, 148–9, 151–6, 159–62, 163 n.8, 165 n.31, 166 n.43, 169, 180, 182–3, 185–7, 188
Jivaro 189
Job 141, 148, 151
Jocasta 144
Johns Hopkins University 17, 22–4, 27, 36 n.25, 37 n.30
Jonas, Hans 156, 165 n.30
Joseph 51, 119, 144–6, 148
Judah 145–6
Juno Moneta (goddess) 177

Kafka, Franz 64, 68 n.44
Kennedy, Donald 31
Kierkegaard, Søren 80
Kubrick, Stanley 76

Lacan, Jacques 23–4
Lagarde, François 20
Lagerlöf, Selma 68 n.44
Laios 144
Lamarck, Jean-Baptiste-Pierre-Antoine de Monet de 71
Latour, Bruno 104, 112 n.36
Lefort, Guy 29–30, 37 n.39
Things Hidden since the Foundation of the World, see Girard
Léger, Fernand 16
Levi-Bruhl, Lucien 71
Lévi-Strauss, Claude 24–6, 38 n.42, 51–2, 100–1, 110 nn.12, 14, 127, 135 n.6
L'homme nu (*The Naked Man. Introduction to a Science of Mythology*) 110 n.13, 14, 127, 135 n.6
Leyhausen, Paul 82, 94 n.29
Livingston, Paisley 12 n.10, 127, 128, 138 n.32
Livy, Titus 27, 116, 130, 133, 136 n.11
The History of Rome 130, 136 n.11
Lorenz, Konrad 72–5
Das sogenannte Böse: zur Naturgeschichte der Agression (*On aggression*) 73, 74
Lomborg, Bjørn 189 n.20
Louis XIV of France 174
Lucian de Samosata 50
Tragodopodagra 50
Lukács, György 17, 35 n.6

Mack, Burton 110 n.17
Mahabharata 32
Macksey, Richard 23

Malinowski, Bronislav 24, 91, 100
Argonauts of the West Pacific. An Account of Native Enterprise and Adventure in the Archipelagos of Melanesian New Guinea 91
Malraux, André 20–1
Malthus, Thomas R. 69
Mambai 102
Man, Paul de 23
Mandeville, Bernard de 174
The Fable of Bee. Or Private Vices, Public Benefits 188 n.17
Manzoni, Alessandro 14
I promessi sposi (*The Betrothed*) 14
Marcion of Sinope 157, 165
Maritain, Jacques 158
Marsyas (myth) 53
Martin, Angus 95 n.40
Marx, Karl 17, 35 n.6, 54–5, 92 n.3, 168, 173, 187 n.4
Matisse, Henri 15–18
Mauriac, François 14, 34 n.2
La Chair et le sang 34 n.2
La Fin de la nuit 34 n.2
La Robe prétexte 34 n.2
Thérèse Desqueyroux 34 n.2
Vie de Jésus 34 n.2
Maurras, Charles 34 n.1
Mauss, Marcel 180
Maussion, Christian de 107, 112 n.33
McKenna, Andrew 23, 37 n.32, 133
Violence and Difference. Girard, Derrida, and Deconstruction 37 n.32
Meltzoff, Andrew N. 64–5 n.2
Merleau-Ponty, Maurice 19
Miller, Daniel 67 n.35
A Theory of Shopping 67 n.35
Monfort, Sylvia 16
Monod, Jacques 6
Moore, M. Keith 64–5 n.2
Moreau, Jeanne 16
Moses 128, 132–3, 146–7, 165 n.30
Mundurucu 83
Murphy, Robert F. 95 n.32

Neuradomski, Josef 32
New Testament
1 Cor. 160, 161, 168, 183, 186, 187
1 Jn 187–8 n.6
1 Tess. 189 n.27
2 Cor. 162 n.2
2 Thess 178, 188 n.14
Acts 62, 142
Jn 86, 107, 142, 148, 160, 164 n.17, 166 n.39, 167, 185
Lk 62, 73, 120, 164 n.17
Mk 54, 129, 138 n.36, 164 n.17, 166 n.44, 177
Mt 159, 161, 164 n.17, 167, 169, 180, 185
Rom. 163 n.8, 166 n.40
Nietzsche, Friedrich 11, 22, 49, 66 n.18, 142, 158–9, 165 n.34, 166 n.36, 171, 182–5, 188 n.9
The Gay Science 158, 183
Nijinski, Vaslav 135 n.7
The Rite of Spring 135
Nobel, Alfred (prize) 31, 34 n.2, 35 n.12, 58

Oedipus 24, 62, 97, 144–5, 149, 163 n.14
Old Testament 7, 46, 108, 114, 143, 147–9, 150, 154, 157, 163 n.8, 165 n.31
1 Kgs (LXX 3 Kgdms) 162 n.2, 165 n.27
1 Sam (LXX 1 Kgdms) 162 n.2
Eph 162 n.6
Exod. 46, 165 n.30
Gen. 53, 75, 116, 119, 144–6, 163 n.8
Isa. 50, 151, 164 n.16
Job 141, 148, 151, 162 n.2
Judg. 138 n.40
Lam. Zech. 164 n.18
Lev. 27, 28, 53
Num. 147
Ps 146, 151, 163 n.13, 164 n.18
Orpheus (myth) 152, 164 n.21
Orleans, André 31
Orwell, George 64
Oughourlian, Jean-Michel 29–30, 37 n.39, 39 n.51, 180
Things Hidden since the Foundation of the World, see Girard
Un Mime nommé desir. Histérie, transe, possession, adorcisme (*The Puppet of Desire. The Psychology of Hysteria, Possession and Hypnosis*) 38 n.49

Palaver, Wolfgang 32, 188 n.14
Parmenides 34 n.4, 65 n.4
Pascal, Blaise 34 n.2

Philostratus, Flavius 28, 185
The Life of Apollonius of Tyana 185
Piaget, Jean 43
Picasso, Pablo 15–16, 18
Pilate, Pontius 73, 147, 151
Pinker, Steven 81, 189 n.21
The Blank Slate. The Modern Denial of Human Nature 189 n.21
Plato 43, 49, 65 n.4, 66 n.16–18, 105, 133, 134
Phaedrus 134, 135 n.10
Republic 43, 49, 65 n.4, 66 n.16
Sophist 65 n.4
Poe, Edgar Allan 133
The Purloined Letter 133
Popper, Karl 7, 117
Potiphar 51, 119, 144
Poulet, George 22, 36 n.29
Prigogine, Ilya 31, 39 n.53
Prometheus (myth) 53
Proust, Marcel 15, 17–19, 63, 64, 97, 109 n.1, 125, 134, 137 n.29–30
A la Recherche du temps perdu (*Remembrance of Things Past*) 137 nn.29–30
Jean Santeuil 64, 125
Pulcini, Elena 179–80
L'individuo senza passioni. Individualismo moderno e perdita del legame sociale 190 n.30
Python (myth) 114

Quinzio, Sergio 156, 165 n.30
La sconfitta di Dio 165 n.30

Racine, Jean 34
Radcliffe-Brown, Alfred Reginald 24, 100
Structure and Function in Primitive Society 100
Ricoeur, Paul 43, 65 n.3
Rizzolati, Giacomo 3, 65 n.8
Robbe-Grillet, Alain 36 n.20
Robertson-Smith, William 24
Romulus and Remus (myth) 130, 136 n.11, 147
Rostopchine, Sophie Feodorovna, Comtesse de Segur 20, 35 n.17
Les Malheurs de Sophie (*Sophie's Misfortunes*) 35 n.17
Rousseau, Jean-Jacques 31, 115, 134
Essay on the Origin of Language 115, 134

Sainte-Beuve, Charles-Augustin 22
Saint-John Perse (Saint-Léger, Alexis) 18, 20, 35 n.12
Salinas, Pedro 22, 36 nn.25, 26
Salomé 54
Salvador, Luc-Laurent 80, 94 n.23, 99, 109 n.5
Sanderson, Stephen 72
Sartre, Jean-Paul 17, 18–19, 20, 156
La Nausée 18
Les Mots 18
L'Etre et le néant 18
Satan 141, 143, 160–2
Saussure, Ferdinand 52
Über Ressentiment und moralisches Werturteil (*Das Ressentiment*) 36 n.27
Scheler, Max 22, 36 n.28
Schwager, Raymund 32, 33–4, 39 n.61–2, 155
Brauchen wir einen Sundenbock? 39 n.61
Scubla, Lucien 31, 55, 67 n.27, 108, 117, 136 n.14, 152, 164 n.19
Serres, Michel 5, 27–8, 38 nn.46, 48, 44, 65 n.9, 69, 86, 108, 117, 130, 133, 175, 188 n.18
Atlas 28
Le Parasite (*The Parasite*) 28
Les Origines de la géométrie 28, 38 n.48
Rome, le livre des fondations (*Rome: The Book of Foundations*) 27
Statues 117
Shakespeare, William 1, 20, 26, 60, 62–4, 68 n.41, 124–6, 137 nn.27, 31, 171, 179
A Midsummer Night's Dream 26, 64, 126, 138 n.31
Julius Caesar 26, 60, 62, 68 n.41
The Rape of Lucrece 171
Sholem, Asch 156, 165 n.30
Simmel, Georg 67 n.35
Singleton, Charles 23, 37 n.30
Smith, Adam 179
Smith, Jonathan Z. 84
Violent Origins. Ritual Killing and Cultural Formation 84
Sober, Elliot 70
Socrates 49
Solomon 153–4
Sophocles 68 n.44, 97, 144, 145, 149, 163 n.10
Oedipus the King 98, 144, 149, 163 nn.8, 14

Spitzer, Leo 22–3, 36 n.25
Spurius Tarpeius 27
St Augustine 44, 65 n.10
Confessions 44, 65 n.10
St John the Baptist 54, 151
St Paul 28, 33, 150, 160, 168, 183, 187
St Peter 62, 129, 147, 151, 161, 185
St Stephen 142
St Thomas Aquinas 106
Stanford University 2, 31, 39 n.52
State University of New York, Buffalo 25
Stendhal (Beyle, Marie-Henri) 19, 21, 36 n.24
Le Rouge et le noir 19
Starobinski, Jean 22
Stravinski, Igor 135 n.7
The Rite of Spring 135 n.7

Tarde, Gabriel 44, 72, 99–100, 109 n.4
Criminalité comparée 109 n.4
Etude de psychologie sociale 109 n.4
Les lois de l'imitation (*The Laws of Imitation*) 72, 100, 109 n.4
Tarpeia 27
Taylor, Charles 111 n.27
Taylor, Elizabeth Rosemond 66
Thévenot, Melchisédech 111 n.23
Tocqueville, Alexis Clérel de 179
Tomelleri, Stefano 135 n.3, 172, 188 n.12
René Girard. La matrice sociale della violenza 135 n.3
Tooby, John 72, 93 n.9
Traube, Elizabeth 102, 110 n.18
Treguer, Michel 33
Tupinamba 83
Turner, Victor 26, 38 n.41
Tyler, Stephen A. 24

Ulysses 85
University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA) 37 n.32
University of Cambridge 36 n.26
University of Paris, *La Sorbonne* 36 n.26, 38 n.49, 109 n.4
University of Pennsylvania 101
University of Seville 36 n.26

Valeri, Valerio 101
Valéry, Paul 21, 36 n.24
Varela, Francisco J. 39 n.52
Understanding Origins. Contemporary Views on the Origin of Life, Mind and Society 39 n.52
Vattimo, Gianni 10, 105, 111, 167, 181–3
Belief 182
Vedas 45, 164 n.23
Brahamas 45
Rig-Veda 4
Venda (myth) 114, 135 n.4
Vernant, Jean-Pierre 139
Verny, Françoise 29–30
Vilar, Jean 16
Vogt, Carl M. 87
Volhard, Edward 87
Voltaire (Arouet, François-Marie) 186, 190 n.45

Waal, Franz de 91
Wadley, Greg 95
Warhol, Andy 66 n.11
Watzlawich, Paul 31–2
Webb, Eugene 106
Weber, Max 68 n.38, 182
Weil, Simone 9, 107, 112 n.35
Attente de Dieu (*Waiting for God*) 107
La Pesanteur et la grâce (*Gravity and Grace*) 112 n.34
Werfel, Franz 68
White, Hayden 116, 136 n.13
Williams, James 116
Wilson, Edward O. 70, 82, 92 n.5, 94 n.29
On Human Nature 92 n.5
Sociobiology: The New Synthesis 92 n.5
World Health Organization 67
World Report on Violence and Health 67

Yamaguchi, Masao 26
Yanomamö 189 n.21

Zervos, Christian 15–16
Zervos, Yvonne 15
Zoroaster 147