

Encounters with René Girard

What it meant to meet a great thinker

In a short essay, William Golding describes his encounter with Einstein. They are both standing on a foot bridge in a public park. It overlooks a pond. After a moment's pause, Einstein points to the water below, slowly pronounces, "Feesh," and walks away. My encounters with René Girard were much richer than that, but they did share in common the recognition of the real world, whether the particular subject was a fish, a fetish, or a collective victim. It was this recognition of the real world that I had been missing as a graduate student in English, submerged as I was beneath the murky waters of floating signifiers, cultural constructs, psychological projections, structural oppositions, hegemonies, and aporia.

Many of my contemporaries would claim that those waters are the only stuff that life is made of, that when we talk about reality we only talk about talking about reality. But I was interested in someone who cared about the relations between the text and the world, who believed that the text could help us understand the world, and the world the text. Back in the 1980s in the humanities, the level of skepticism toward such an enterprise was high and the likelihood of finding a first-rate theorist who embraced that conviction was unlikely, until.... Until one day in the library I was reading Jonathan Culler's *On Deconstruction: Theory and Criticism after Structuralism*. He describes the variety of writers who qualify as theorists, including in his list something like,

"...and one of them, René Girard, is a kind of Christian."
That qualified statement caught my attention.

Not much later, in 1989, René came to the University of Colorado (Boulder campus), to take part in a conference entitled "The Limits of Theory." His talk was held in Old Main, one of the oldest buildings on the campus, at one time ostensibly a place of prayer, for that is where chapel services were held. Recently, Old Main had been renovated beautifully, including the chapel, where René discussed "Theory and its Terrors."

Spellbound, I luxuriated in the presence of this fearless speaker who was willing to challenge the current critical trends from a historical point of view, arguing that the rejection of content was a way to carve out a new, fundable discipline in literature. The rejection of content was begun by the formalists and the new critics, and now had reached its apex under post-structuralism and deconstruction. The need for a (paying) profession among literary scholars was answered in part by the development of a new intellectual fashion at every turn. René recalled how he had heard a graduate student dismiss the claims of Derrida, argue with second-generation deconstructionists, and establish her position as being among the third-generation deconstructionists (who "don't read Derrida anymore"). This particular university was, in René's words, a revolving door of literary theory.

The talk, "Theory and its Terrors," correlated these intellectual trends with institutional necessities, showing the

need for literature studies to establish a unique domain of knowledge that could not be challenged or usurped by competing, and often better funded, disciplines. René cited a requirement of a certain university that those who intended to obtain tenure in literature must have published not one, but two books, and that these books should be revolutionary in their significance—meaning that the young scholars must first revolutionize their discipline and then re-revolutionize it with a second book if they were to secure an academic living. No wonder the scholarly writing in the 1980s was becoming so arcane, shuddering beneath a demand for originality that could be obtained only by constant verbal acrobats and sleights of logic.

One comment that did not make it to the printed version of René's talk was, "I'd rather read one good book than write ten bad ones"—or at least I do not think it was published. But the point behind that statement emerges in the printed version, and that point is that we live in a milieu where scholars are spending more time publishing books than reading them, with the result of denying the respect the best of the books deserve. As I listened, I thought it was high time that someone shined a light on the mechanisms that were driving our lives in the graduate schools. Characteristically, René confessed that he, himself, was guilty of this focus on publishing, finding himself unable to give some of the best authors their due.

A year or two later I was teaching Shakespeare at the University of Colorado, and found Girard's essay "Hamlet's Dull Revenge" as exciting as his talk on theory and its

terrors. The Shakespeare essay seemed scandalous, in ways: that a critic in the late 80s could look at the text, look at the nuclear climate toward the end of the cold war, and write about them both with equal passion.

René was to speak at the 1991 national convention of the Modern Language Association (MLA) in San Francisco. It was then that I first saw his wife, Martha, who, as soon as he concluded his talk, came down to his side to tend to him, inasmuch as he was fighting off a serious cold that day. She also may have been functioning as a body guard, protecting him from unwanted audience members. The next day I overheard some people referring to René's talk, and one fellow said plainly, "Girard came out of the closet yesterday as a Nazi." (Or was it, "Girard came out yesterday as a closet Nazi"?) A Nazi, I thought. One of those Nazis who speaks up for the victim continuously. Well, it was not the last time I heard René fully misconstrued. Good thing he didn't also heal on the Sabbath or he may never have made it into the 21st century.

Also attending that MLA convention was Cesáreo Bandera, a former colleague of Girard's who applied mimetic theory to Cervantes and Calderón, among other writers. Prior to attending the convention, I contacted Cesáreo and he agreed to allow me to give him a chapter from my dissertation on anti-theatrical biases in Elizabethan theater as they reflected mimetic desire. Kindly, in his hotel room at the convention, Cesáreo received (and later replied to) the paper. When I met him, more significantly, he invited me to attend the newly started Colloquium on Violence and

Religion (COV&R), the international society dedicated to the study of the mimetic hypothesis.

What it meant to remember a great thinker

After attending several COV&R events, hearing and meeting a wide variety of scholars, some of whom disagreed vehemently with each other and at the same time agreed that René's theories were well worth studying—after that I was drawn to another profession in order to support my family. Except for occasional emails with Martha Girard, Bob Hamerton-Kelly, and Gil Bailie, I found COV&R and academia fading into my past, not without some regret, but without much temptation to attempt to re-enter those circles.

Fade as the academic side might, some fundamental expressions of René's theories—the centrality of imitative desire and the non-sacrificial death of Jesus—never left me, even if at times I deliberately ignored them. They had turned my world upside down.

It was especially the mystery of the Passion that kept me wondering, and still does. For between the purely sacrificial interpretation of the crucifixion (God had to make somebody die) and the anthropological interpretation (mobs simply do these things to victims as a matter of course), lies a truth so important, yet so hidden, as to frustrate inquiry. It is a truth whose presence is able to resolve many contradictions that arise out of the unholy yoking of the kingdom of heaven with the kingdoms of the earth.

How many institutions had I encountered that mixed a respect for the teachings of Jesus with an unwritten list of circumstances under which those teachings should be ignored? Only a sacrificial god could require blind obedience (for the nation, the organization, the family), no matter the moral cost or the conflicts with the Sermon on the Mount.

Satirists such as Mark Twain have delineated this hypocrisy, but have not gone behind it. In Twain's "War Prayer" (left unpublished during his life for fear of repercussions), God is first asked to perform atrocities against the enemy, such as "... to tear their soldiers to bloody shreds with our shells..." and "... to wring the hearts of their unoffending widows with unavailing grief..." After being given a long list of bloody chores, God is then "...in the spirit of love..." credited as being "...Him Who is the Source of Love..." Nothing could be more obvious than this hypocrisy once someone has the courage to point it out.

And nothing could better unmask this hypocrisy than the non-sacrificial theology that René expounds. René's contribution is to outline an anthropological determination behind religious killings. Long before Christ, the transference of blame on the victim for the community's ills is followed by the transference of praise to the victim, once the punishment brings about peace and unity. Religious hypocrisy, it appears now, is not the exception, but the rule. It is the engine of religion, to the extent that religion invokes a divinity that must have sacrifice and not mercy. This compulsion to find a victim is the purely human initiative behind the crucifixion.

Because a sacrificial victim is somehow so satisfying to humans, it takes on the aura of a divine event.

The easy thing is to see the fundamental hypocrisy that sacred violence entails. The harder part (for me at least) is coming back to the crucifixion with a non-sacrificial theology that nevertheless shows the importance of the crucifixion. It did everything, and yet it was the last thing God needed. Or, of course, it was the last thing God needed for God. For humans, it was necessary for God to let them have their way, to let their delusions run their full course in a context that would expose the delusions. It was necessary, precisely because it was what they *thought* God needed, and it was important to dispel this confusion, stubborn as it has been to loosen its grip.

For many if not most "Christians" who are accustomed to traditional, sacrificial beliefs about God, embracing a non-sacrificial theology of the death of Jesus seems tantamount to renouncing one's faith altogether. In reality, it is a step of faith, but it feels like a step away. Obviously, the non-sacrificial Passion is a truth that still makes me wrestle, as Jacob might wrestle with an angel. I tell it, "you are powerful, you may make me limp, but you must bless me." Slowly, the blessing comes, not in the form of *understanding* so much as in the form of *trust*. Whatever God *is*, God is *not* that caricature, not that semi-violent being who condemns violence on one hand and commands it on the other. Rational, scriptural space is opened in the most incontrovertible way for God to be a pure light without a shadow of darkness or a secret agenda.

What will last

The kingdom of God on earth, as the Gospels portray it, may seem a long way off when we read the daily news. But the kingdom of God in heaven may be right around the corner. We all, the older we get, experience time accelerating. The passage of a year to someone 89 has the proportionate value of the passage of a month when he was about 7 years old. The clock *seems* to click off the seconds at a regular pace, but we know that the next year, the next decade, and our eventual exit from this life are imminent. I feel it so. I feel it for myself, and for others.

I truly hope that René can know that whatever score his life's work achieves in the academic scales—and I do not think it will ever be forgotten—that his work has its value in broader ways that will never be noticed among the wise of this world. In the early days, after my family had visited the Girards in Palo Alto, René became famous to my young children as "the man with the lemon trees." Later, when we'd notice some unwelcome desire among us, my oldest daughter might say, "wow, that was mimetic." A few years ago, I started buying a salad dressing (that later became popular), labeled "Girard's." And now, it is not unusual when I prepare a salad for dinner for me to say, "I think I'll put a little René Girard on this, ok?" This is, of course, an esoteric truth, one for which I will always remain grateful.