

## Aristotle, Derrida, Girard

—Christopher S. Morrissey

*The following is an excerpt from Christopher Morrissey's February 27, 2003 lecture at SFU entitled "Human Difference and Religion: Girard, Derrida, and Postmodern Anthropology"*

René Girard's mimetic theory lays the greatest stress on his hypothesis of the scapegoat mechanism as the generative principle of all religion and human culture. While Girard claims a scientific status for his hypothesis, Girard admits he has left the philosophical implications of his hypothesis to others, and this is fertile ground for original research.

To this end, my project is a re-reading of Aristotle in the light of Girard. But my research begins from a more recent starting point: Eric Gans' comparison of Girard and Jacques Derrida. This ongoing comparison has continued in Gans' most recent book, *Signs of Paradox* (1997), but it is perhaps best articulated in Gans' early article "Differences" in *Modern Language Notes* (May 1981), an article which I will draw upon here as I explain the approaches to the problem of human difference made by Derrida, Girard, and Aristotle.

Gans has observed that Derrida's redefinition of human difference as *différance* radicalizes metaphysics. That is, Derrida is still metaphysical in recognizing the problem of the origin of human difference, although Derrida's redefinition of human difference as *différance* denies the possibility of a solution to this problem of origin. Derrida deconstructs philosophy's solutions to essential questions ("what is X?") and concludes that no solution is possible concerning human difference, because language cannot discover its own origin. Derrida thus overlooks the possibility of a *generative* origin.

Girard's proposed solution, however, is that the source of human difference lies in mimetic capacity. From mimesis, rivalry is *generated*, which creates mimetic crises that are only decisively resolved by scapegoating, with the scapegoat being the first significant and sacred object, and historically the inauguration of hominization. Gans observes that Girard's hypothesis is in one sense the same as Derrida's (Girard

While gradual evolution indeed occurred, evolution does not account for the sudden human transition from prehistory to history that religious myth dramatizes. The refinement of the evolutionary hypothesis only offers a more accurate horizontal temporal yardstick, but it does not answer the question of the vertical problem of culturally significant meaning, which Girard, in his breakthrough, argues could be generated by the scapegoat who becomes the first deity, that is, the first locus of significance for the now-human community.

is more anthropological than Derrida, but he is no less metaphysical, albeit in a more radically anthropological way): in a word, says Gans, Girard anthropologizes Derrida's deconstructive notion of *différance*. Derrida's French neologism suggests a diachronic deferral in time, as opposed to only a synchronic difference of presence. In Girard, it corresponds to

the scapegoat's diachronic *deferral* of conflict, and its sacred synchronic *differentiation* of meanings for the community. Both for Girard and Derrida, therefore, human difference is *absolutely arbitrary*: for Derrida, such that no origin can ever be made present, because language always already defers such an origin and offers only supplementary traces; for Girard, such that the scapegoat chosen by any cultural lynch mob is only arbitrarily guilty.

Thus the absolutely arbitrary difference of the human is for both Girard and Derrida problematically metaphysical in nature. For Derrida, it is a difference never chosen because it is never made present (only absence founds presence). For Girard, the motivation for scapegoating is always only relative to a concrete historical situation. Both these hypotheses (Derrida's non-hypothesis and Girard's generative hypothesis) are still too "metaphysical" because, however temporal, they stage this temporality on the *representational* scene of language. That is, for Derrida, difference is "always already" the deferring representation in language; for Girard, difference (however similarly temporal, relative and arbitrary) is nevertheless what first *founds representation*.

Girard's breakthrough is nevertheless less metaphysical and more resolutely anthropological, and it establishes, moreover, a link between religion and science with its generative hypothesis of the sudden origin of language. The generative function of scapegoating in culture potentially offers a scientific explanation of the emergence of human culture and language. While gradual evolution indeed occurred, evolution does not account for the sudden human transition from prehistory to history that religious myth dramatizes. The refinement of the evolutionary hypothesis only offers a more accurate horizontal temporal yardstick, but it does not answer the question of the vertical problem of culturally significant meaning, which Girard, in his



breakthrough, argues could be generated by the scapegoat who becomes the first deity, that is, the first locus of significance for the now-human community.

The limitations of Girard's theory become clear in light of Gans' comparison of Girard's *différance* with Derrida's. Girard's original event of scapegoating tries to explain the birth of human difference with his breakthrough anthropological hypothesis of generative violence, that is, of violence that generates sacred meaning. But his original event nevertheless conflates three things in its account of the origin of human difference: (1) *the original object* that generates a mimetic crisis (e.g. meat, i.e. a dead animal as a food source); (2) *the victim-as-scapegoat* (e.g. the member of the community lynched at the pinnacle of the crisis, i.e. scapegoated in the rapidly escalating communal aggression over the food); and (3) *the victim-as-signifier-of-the-sacred*.

In Girard's understanding, these three have to be connected in one event. But note that the transition between the first two *defers resolution of conflict* (i.e. if hominids are no longer fighting over the meat, but all beating up on one member of the community, why would the death of that scapegoat stop the continuation

of the violence to another?), whereas the transition between the last two is the *resolution of conflict by deferral* (i.e. the fascination with the scapegoat as a deity is what defers the continuation of the violence, because the deified scapegoat is the signifier of a restoration of peace and order after the aggressive discharge of tensions on a scapegoat). Empirically, the yoking of these three events, while harmonious with Girard's exegesis of texts, especially Biblical ones, is, however, less than parsimonious as a scientific hypothesis. Scientifically speaking, Girard's hypothesis seems to require another swipe of Ockham's razor. But the parsimonious solution is not to separate these three moments according to the common consensus of either contemporary science or contemporary deconstruction: that is, either by dissolving the three moments so far apart that they disappear into the horizontal timeline of evolutionary gradualism, or to dismiss outright the anthropological question by turning Derrida's insight into language's deferral of origins into a still-metaphysical dogma. Similar to Gans, I would venture to refine the Girardian hypothesis the following way: to recognize that the transition from (1) to (2) is still within the physical realm of the animal and its appetitive objects (e.g. animals fighting over food), whereas the transition from

(2) to (3) is metaphysical in the generation of human difference through the recognition of significance. The distinction can be phrased this way: both transitions are transitions of mimesis, but the former as a transition of mimesis understood as *imitation*, and the latter as a transition of mimesis understood as *representation*.

Aristotle's conception of mimesis, as Stephen Halliwell argues in his recent book *The Aesthetics of Mimesis* is underrated and misunderstood, and it can account for both these kinds of mimesis. There is a dual aspect to Aristotelian mimesis that has not yet received adequate recognition. As Aristotle says in the *Poetics*, humans are the most mimetic (*mimetikotaton*: most imitative) among animals, yet they also learn (representationally: *tas matheseis poieitai dia mimeseos*) through mimesis (*Poetics* IV. 1448b4-9). The latter activity, learning, is an activity humans desire by nature and in which they take pleasure (cf. *Metaphysics* I. 980a22: *pantes anthropoi tou eidenai oregontai phusei*). My own research works with Girard's hypothesis to see how the one mimesis could anthropologically be generative of the other mimesis: (animal) imitation as generative of (human) representation. In contrast with evolutionary science, which methodologically assumes that human difference evolved gradually, and in contrast with Derrida, whose *différance* shows the absent origin of human difference in language, the generative hypothesis of Girard achieves a notable breakthrough. Where does human difference come from? It comes from a sudden *event* (neither a metaphysical a-temporal essence nor a deconstructionist non-essence), an event which is the origin of language and thus of all cultural form. In the postmodern era, we are just now learning how to think a hypothesis about this event, and to refine it.

*Christopher Morrissey is a Special Arrangements Ph.D. candidate at SFU*