

PENGUIN CLASSICS

RENÉ GIRARD

ALL DESIRE IS A DESIRE FOR BEING

Essential Writings Selected by
Cynthia L. Haven

All Desire Is a Desire for Being

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Conflict

Why do all people, myself no doubt included, have such a remarkable capacity for conflict? Why are our relations with one another so fragile, so easily damaged, so difficult if not impossible to repair?

The nuclear deadlock makes this question the most urgent one today. But it is not a new question. Paradoxically, its present urgency may hide rather than reveal its formidable scope. Let us suppose, for an instant, that America and Russia have succeeded in neatly annihilating one another without harming the rest of the world. Can one seriously believe that, with the two chief Satans gone (as the ayatollah would say), the world would finally be at peace? In the most optimistic hypothesis, there would be a resumption of the nuclear deadlock, with a different set of protagonists.

A political scientist will focus attention on America and Russia, on capitalism and Communism, but there is a broader question. It is so broad, indeed, that it seems abstract, and yet it is undoubtedly very concrete and very real: Why such a human capacity for conflict?

We can see in retrospect that all of human history (and prehistory) has been moving faster and faster toward a technical threshold beyond which the destructive power of weaponry, combined with the human genius for discord, leaves no alternative but the immediate destruction of life on this planet or its precarious continuation in a world permanently poised on the brink of total disaster.

Should we shift the blame to the national state as such, or perhaps to all forms of social organization, as Jean-Jacques Rousseau did? To do so is another recipe for evading the real question.

Can we blame our individual and collective divisiveness on some huge 'system' that manipulates us all for the sake of some obscure

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powers? Some systems are better than others, no doubt, but, except for universal death, we have yet to discover the one that will prevent the human genius for discord from reasserting itself. In my opinion, this genius is rooted in a form of alienation much more comprehensive and universal than anything discovered by Marx, Freud, et al.

Even the most passionate among us never feel they truly are the persons they want to be. To them, the most wonderful being, the only semi-god, is always *someone else* whom they emulate and from whom they borrow their desires, thus ensuring for themselves lives of perpetual strife and rivalry with those they simultaneously hate and admire.

In the old language of religious ethics, the sin of pride was said to be self-defeating. The more self-sufficient and autonomous man tries to be, the more intricate and perverse his foreign entanglements become.

No one, I feel, can study the formidable human capacity for conflict realistically unless he first recognizes that he is a part of the problem and that his worst impulses are inextricably mixed up with his best.

This irreducible personal involvement of the questioner as well as, at the other end, the all-embracing nature of the question, gives to my research a 'philosophical' and even a 'religious' twist that may forever prevent it from becoming 'scientific' in the eyes of the scientist. Does it mean that our scientific culture can ignore this question? Can it really afford to?

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Violence and Foundational Myths in Human Societies

My interest in Christianity is not rooted in the Scriptures or theology. Strange as it may sound, it stems from Darwinism. This evolutionary theory assumes that human culture has evolved from what we call 'animal culture.' Can we develop a plausible genesis of what is not animal in our own culture – this 'supplement' that makes us human?

We can assume that hominization began when mimetic rivalries intensified so much that the animal dominance relationship collapsed. Mankind survived, no doubt, because religious prohibitions emerged early enough to prevent the new species from self-destructing.

But how to explain this emergence? To understand what happened, our only clues are the stories that tell the birth of the cults to which they belong. They are called founding myths or originary myths.

They usually begin with the story of a destructive crisis. In the Oedipus myth, it is a plague, elsewhere a cannibalistic monster. Behind these themes hides what Hobbes calls 'the war of all against all': explosions of rivalry intense enough to destroy communities. The thirst for revenge is concentrated on an increasingly small number of individuals. In the end, the community is united against one, the one I call the scapegoat. The group reconciles around this one victim, at a cost that seems miraculously low.

The problem that rationalist thinkers have vainly sought to solve through the hypothesis of the social contract, the origin of human societies, is thus solved without human intention, when the mimetic crisis is at its height.

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The unconscious nature of the lynching is admirably illustrated

by the phrase of Jesus on the Cross: 'Father, forgive them, they do not know what they do.' This sentence must be interpreted literally. For if the myths recognized the facts, the innocence of the scapegoat would become visible, and violence would lose its cathartic efficacy. The truth shines through if we ask ourselves about the recurring characteristics of mythical heroes.

Many of them are blind like Tiresias, one-eyed like Wotan or, more significantly, referred to as 'men from elsewhere.' The archaic communities were surely quite distant from each other. When a stranger made his appearance, people gathered around him with high hopes. The slightest unexpected gesture on his part could trigger panic, and death.

How are religious prohibitions put in place? We can assume that, in archaic communities, after the cathartic lynching ended the mimetic crisis, a new god emerged. And each time a fight broke out, the communities, remembering the ordeal of past rivalries, prohibited all contact between the people involved in the disorder. Each resumption of violence was interpreted as the expression of the anger of the god and, by virtue of his prestige, prohibitions appeared; prohibitions which slowly turned into a more or less coherent and definitive system.

Over time, the fear these prohibitions inspired probably lessened, and with it the power they had to prevent transgressions. Faced with this danger, archaic communities frantically sought new protection against their own violence. Since they had not forgotten the great catharsis that had saved them from a previous crisis, they must have asked if a new catharsis could be reproduced by replaying the process of the crisis, including the lynching. Many sacrificial rites thus begin with provoked disorders, which anthropologists have rightly defined as 'simulated crises.'

Two things suggest that religion (prohibitions and rituals) is thus the origin and the essence of human culture: we do not find the slightest trace of it in animal cultures; no human culture is totally devoid of it. Two ancient and powerful religions, the Greek and the Hindu, developed an incomplete but profound understanding of archaic systems, in their diversity as well as in their fundamental

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unity – systems that are regularly reborn from their ashes, but fail to eliminate, once and for all, mimetic rivalries. Doesn't an identical process play out in the Gospels, the same lynching leading to the same deification?

This is a fact that most Christians have not dared to explore further, fearing that the admission of these obvious resemblances would bring down the edifice of their faith. They were wrong, because a close comparison between the Gospels and mythology would turn to the advantage of Christianity. Myths take the scapegoating of the single victim very seriously. They think the victims really are guilty. On the contrary, the Gospels believe in the total innocence of Jesus and proclaim it.

Whereas in myth the victims are believed to have committed the crimes of which they are accused, in biblical and Christian tradition this verdict is often overturned. Many Bible stories condemn the crowd and rehabilitate the victim. As for the Psalms, they give snapshots of a lynching: a horrified narrator observes a band of individuals who try to surround him to kill him. Christ's situation recalls the many prophets who, after being idolized by the crowds, suddenly became their victims.

While archaic myths align with the crowd, and encourage their readers to do the same, the greatest texts of the Bible reverse the process, siding with the scapegoats in situations which, in the pagan world, would have led to the creation of a new myth. The Passion of Christ is a decisive illustration of this reversal.

The Bible therefore effects a radical departure from mythology: in the Old Testament, and even more spectacularly in the Gospels, the supremacy of the crowd, which dates back to the origins of humanity, is finally overthrown.

Translated by Cynthia L. Haven

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Is Oedipus Innocent?

In the 1960s, René Girard became intrigued by Oedipus, the doomed Theban king – a passion he would share with anthropologist Mark Anspach. It was a fortunate collaboration: Girard later wrote a preface for Anspach's Œdipe mimétique *(Paris: Éditions de L'Herne, 2010), a book which also included a conversation between Girard and Anspach. Both texts appear in English for the first time in this volume.*

The Indispensable Victim in *Oedipus the King*

The Oedipus that Mark Anspach gives us is not the Oedipus of the famous complex but the one the complex conceals. It is an Oedipus caught as we are in the blinding symmetries of mimetic desire.*

Unlike our needs, which make themselves felt in our body without any help from third parties, our desires have an irreducible social dimension. Behind our desires lurks a mediator or model who most often goes unrecognized by others, including the person doing the imitating. As a general rule, we desire what those around us desire. Our models can be real or imaginary, collective or individual. We imitate the desires of those we admire. We want to 'become like them', to spirit away their very being.

* Girard's opening discussion has been condensed and his praise for Anspach's book omitted.

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Desire is not mimetic only in mediocre individuals, those whom the existentialists, following Heidegger, branded as inauthentic, but in everybody without exception, even in those who appear the most authentic in our own eyes, namely ourselves.

The more the modern world becomes spiritually if not materially egalitarian, the more the distance shrinks between mimetic models and their imitators. We are consequently free to desire the same object as our model and that is what we almost always do, without stopping to reflect upon the conflicts that we provoke. In what is known as the modern era, mimetic rivalries heighten and proliferate to such an extent that they modify the nature of existence.

To be sure, there is something positive in the intensification of mimesis: the competition that it fuels is inseparable from the extraordinary energy of our world and its enormous strides forward in science and technology. But the negative aspects increase concurrently. Violence is ever better armed, its destructive power growing to the point that it threatens humanity's very survival.

As a rule, mimetic competition makes people unhappy. One of the first to perceive this was Stendhal, one of the five novelists studied in my first book. Within a highly mimetic world, the only objects we desire intensely are those that a rival prevents us from possessing. And the converse is also true: we quickly lose interest in objects that nobody wishes to take from us. This dual phenomenon frequently suffices to render our lives hellish.

In the French title of my first book,* *Mensonge romantique et vérité romanesque*, the first part of the opposition, the 'romantic lie', designates the illusion under which we all labor that our desires are spontaneous, in other words that we are the sole authors and owners of our desires – an illusion that has its greatest hold over us precisely at those moments when it is furthest from the truth.

The second part of the opposition, 'novelistic truth', refers to the capacity of certain writers, novelists above all, to identify mimesis not only in others, where it is always easy to detect, but in themselves.

* This book was translated into English under the title *Deceit, Desire and the Novel*.

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Nobody possesses this capacity from the start. It must be acquired at great cost, and novelistic masterpieces show us how it is acquired.

In *Oedipus the King* a reversal takes place that is more or less analogous to the reversal by which a novelist moves from the romantic lie to novelistic truth. In the face of the plague epidemic, Oedipus, who believes himself to be above suspicion, suspects everybody around him, until finally his anguished arrogance turns back against himself and he is 'hoist by his own petard'.

In an archaic community like the Thebes of the tragedy, an epidemic immediately suggests the wrath of the plague god, in this case Apollo, incensed by some crime left unpunished. Oedipus has every reason to believe himself innocent. Was it not he who, in the past, saved the city from an ordeal comparable to the one that he must now confront? Sophocles' Oedipus embodies the same crumbling of arrogance we see in the passage from the romantic lie to novelistic truth. In both cases, beyond the humiliation, the experience proves to be fruitful. To the novelist it brings the novel, to the mythic hero it brings the wisdom that triumphs in Sophocles' later tragedy *Oedipus at Colonus*.

The analysis of the hostile interaction between Oedipus and Tiresias is essential. Their relationship is manifestly a mimetic rivalry, one that produces an ever more violent symmetry between the two seers who perpetually imitate one another, their hatred redoubling with each exchange. The two men are already alike at the start and even more so at the finish. It is, one might surmise, to complete the resemblance with his blind rival that Oedipus gouges out his own eyes . . . We see the beginning of an analogous process with Creon. The more these characters seek to differentiate themselves, the more they come to resemble each other.

All the structural traits of mimetic conflicts are pushed to the extreme. The more the violence grows, the less it resolves. Tiresias or Creon could assume the role of the guilty party just as easily as Oedipus. The scales long remain equally balanced before they finally tilt against Oedipus, and if it is Oedipus who furnishes the indispensable victim, it is not because he deserves it more than the other

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two – it is for a reason which, I believe, Sophocles suspects but does not mention.

Far from being the most significant elements, the accusation of patricide and incest, the tale of the Corinthian 'messenger', all this is too stereotypical to really carry any weight. Contrary to what Freud thinks, nothing in myths is more banal than patricide and incest. There must be something else behind the final decision, and that can only be an irresistible impulse of the crowd. It is the crowd that decides, which is to say mimesis itself; it settles on the king but could just as well have settled on one of the other two men who manage to escape completely unscathed.

The crowd is even more crazily mimetic than the individuals who compose it. The decision can only flow from mimetic impulse, from an irresistible movement of collective violence. Certain textual clues suggest that Sophocles indeed sees things this way. Why then does he not say so explicitly? The tragic author is not free to say what he wants. The meaning of myths is fixed once and for all and he must not modify it.

By suddenly snowballing against Oedipus, mimesis transforms the impossibility of deciding into a unanimous decision at the expense of a single victim, the king. The crowd decides but does not realize it has done so. This decision, which arises spontaneously, is convenient for everyone – with the exception of the victim, of course.

In sum, what I see behind myths is a spontaneous phenomenon that is not unknown to us today. We refer to it by borrowing the term 'scapegoat' from the Hebrew ritual of Yom Kippur. Originally reserved for the ritual victim, the same term is now used for any innocent victim selected by a troubled community to deliver it from its anxiety at little cost.

The modern meaning is not unrelated to the ritual one, but it designates a spontaneous phenomenon. Mimesis intensifies within a group in crisis and, when it reaches a paroxysm, it stops dividing those it contaminates and becomes cumulative, snowballing against a member of the community such as Oedipus. The scapegoat ends up being unanimously expelled or lynched, at which point the violence comes to a halt. Ultimately appearing responsible for both the

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eruption of violence and its interruption, the scapegoat is perceived first as a fearsome threat and then as a source of succor. The archaic idea of the divine is rooted, I believe, in speculations inspired by this phenomenon.

I have been much reproached for turning from literary criticism to a subject as worn-out and wearisome as archaic religion. My critics have ascribed to me the ambition of building a system 'in the nineteenth-century sense'. This is not what I set out to do at all. In reality, my objective was always to go as far as I could in the exploration of mimetic desire and nothing more. I cannot help it if this exploration progressively led me first to mimetic crises and then to victimage mechanisms and sacrificial rituals – and thus to a definition of human cultures and religions as so many efforts to discipline mimetic rivalries and keep them from destroying the whole community. The only exception is the Biblical and Christian tradition and the modern world which sprang from it, and which alone sought to abolish blood sacrifices.

Far from being encyclopedic like the systems constructed by Hegel, Marx, and other nineteenth-century thinkers, my thesis deconstructs human culture, in a sense more radical than that of linguistic deconstructions. The violent structures of human societies are what it takes apart, scapegoating phenomena are what it reveals. After operating spontaneously throughout human history because they were not understood, these phenomena are more and more easily seen through in our world and consequently less and less effective.

That is not the only or even the most important discovery made by mimetic theory. The most important in my opinion is the fact that we are not the first to undertake this deconstruction, the fact that we are always already preceded in this path by the Hebrew Bible and the Gospels.

Modern anthropology has tried to prove that the Biblical religions, Judaism and Christianity, are very similar to all the others. There is a seemingly solid argument in favor of this position. Just like mythology, the Bible and Gospels are full of scapegoats, of victimary phenomena that begin with the murder of Abel by Cain and keep recurring until the crucifixion of Jesus, the most visible and explicit of all.

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This is perfectly true but in no way settles the question of the relationship between mythology and the Bible. What anthropologists, philosophers and other scholars failed to notice is that the Bible and the Gospels do not treat scapegoats in the same way that myths do.

Never do myths cast doubt on the guilt of their victims. We see that in the case of Oedipus, for example. The same goes for all the other 'crimes' of the same kind supposedly committed by the victims of a thousand other myths. Such myths are thus the voice of religious and cultural systems founded on the unanimous belief in the guilt of an ultimately divinized victim. Archaic religious systems are never anything else.

All these mythical systems work less and less well in our day or no longer work at all because, by revealing the innocence of the Suffering Servant or of Jesus, the great Biblical dramas and the Passion of the Christ not only reveal the innocence of the victims whose innocence they proclaim directly, but, indirectly, they also proclaim the innocence of all the anonymous victims falsely condemned and massacred in archaic religions and all human cultures in general.

Translated by Mark Anspach

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A Crisis, a Plague, a Culprit: On the Innocence of Oedipus

Mark Anspach: Everyone thinks they know who Oedipus is: he's the fellow who killed his father and married his mother. You, René Girard, you say: not so fast! Oedipus is the fellow who is *accused* of killing his father and marrying his mother . . .

René Girard: He is accused of doing it, but he is only a scapegoat. You have to take into account the context of the accusation: there is a crisis, there is a plague in Thebes, they are looking for a culprit.

MA: They are trying to identify the murderer guilty of causing the plague, which does not bode well. From our point of view, it is hardly rational to ask what *criminal* caused the epidemic. The question is already poorly framed.

RG: Of course, that's the wrong question – it can only set off a witch hunt. But this wrong question was asked every time a plague raged in the West. We see exactly the same phenomenon occur in the Middle Ages, for example. The problem was that nobody knew how to fight a plague effectively, while they knew perfectly well how to pin the responsibility on a victim chosen more or less arbitrarily. In a crisis, the crowd is ready to incriminate anyone.

MA: Oedipus is not really just anyone, he is the ruler of Thebes.

RG: He is the ruler, but since he saved the city, there is no good reason *a priori* to suspect him of bringing about its downfall. Oedipus is a foreigner when he arrives in the city. Basically, he happens to be there by chance. And if the story of his origins is wrong . . .

MA: That is, if he is not really the son of Laius and Jocasta . . .

RG: Then he's anyone.

MA: In my writing, I underscore the relative fragility of the hypothesis which makes Oedipus the son of the king and queen of Thebes.

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Obviously, Sophocles does not give us proof of his innocence, but he is careful not to provide irrefutable proof of his guilt. A reasonable doubt remains. We cannot be sure of the incest, the parricide, or even the regicide. At the outset, let us recall, Oedipus is trying to find out who killed his predecessor on the throne of Thebes, and even there I believe the answer is far from clear. But ultimately, all these questions are secondary to the real issue: the cause of the plague. Now, even if Oedipus were an incestuous and parricidal son, even if he had killed his predecessor on the throne, he still would not be the cause of the plague.

RG: He would still be a scapegoat.

MA: By saying, 'Oedipus is a scapegoat,' you are stating something very simple, even obvious, but which no one dared to say so clearly before. You could be compared to the little boy, if I may, from the tale 'The Emperor's New Clothes.' Everyone knows that the crimes of which Oedipus is accused could not cause a plague, but you are the first to proclaim: 'The Emperor is naked, these accusations are preposterous.' When it comes to the Oedipus myth, or other canonical myths, we are reluctant to state certain obvious things. It's as if we let our critical mind slumber.

RG: Yes, the critical mind gives way to the literary tradition. This could serve as an introduction to reexamining a great many attitudes towards literary texts. Certain texts, whatever the source of their prestige, come to serve as models. And, from that moment on, all questioning stops.

MA: In a sense, you place yourself in the same literary tradition – without ceasing to question it – because you developed your anthropological hypotheses starting from an in-depth rereading of *Oedipus the King*. In the 1960s, you devoted a series of articles to Sophocles's play. Those texts mark the transition from the theory of desire proposed in *Deceit, Desire and the Novel* to the theory of religion outlined in *Violence and the Sacred*, a book where the reinterpretation of both the Greek tragedy and the Freudian complex play an important role. It may be useful from a pedagogical standpoint to take an example that everyone knows, but isn't there the risk of reinforcing the idea that the myth of Oedipus enjoys a privileged status?

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RG: The risk certainly exists. If I were to write again, I would try a different approach. One must avoid allusions to a sacralized Oedipus whose status is taken for granted when it ultimately rests only on Freud's dubious constructions, however relevant they may be from a certain point of view.

MA: Since you have devoted so much attention to Oedipus and the debate with Freud, some have suggested that the father of psychoanalysis was a sort of model or mimetic rival for you . . .

RG: That is considerably overstated. Freud was not really a model for me, much less an oppressive one. I never sought to break free of Freud, never having had a 'Freudian' period, either. I arrived at my approach to Freud a little at a time. I always went back and forth while reading him: I would admire certain things and then at other points say to myself 'what nonsense!' when it came to the properly psychoanalytic part. But Freud's textual analyses, for example in the beginning of *Totem and Taboo*, are always brilliant. *Moses and Monotheism* is, I think, Freud's best book. It's really full of insight.

MA: Let us come back to the psychoanalytic part of Freud's work. For him the libido is the driving force of the system; for you it is rather the propensity to imitate. You obviously recognize the importance of sexuality, but it is not sexuality that shapes human relationships in your theory. I wonder if you would go so far as to deny the existence of infantile sexuality, which is so decisive for the Freudian conception of the Oedipus complex?

RG: No, I wouldn't deny its existence, but I would probably say that it starts a little later than Freud says.

MA: Freud does tend to ferret out sexual impulses just about everywhere.

RG: He talks, for example, about the homosexual desire of little boys for their father. I think that is complete nonsense.

MA: The problem is that Freud doesn't know what to do with the positive side of emulation, the admiration that accompanies rivalry. You have your own version of the Oedipal triangle where imitation of the father precedes desire for the mother. The operation of the mechanism, its dynamics, is different with you, but the outward schema resembles Freud's.

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RG: Freud brings together all the elements of the mimetic triangle, he comes very close. I would say he ends up with a mimetic triangle that he doesn't want to make a triangle of. The separate elements do not really form a coherent whole.

MA: You did not rely at all on the Oedipus complex to construct the mimetic triangle. You developed your theory of desire in *Deceit, Desire and the Novel* without considering the figure of Oedipus. It was not until later, when you began your study of mythology, that you took on the Oedipus myth.

RG: Yes. If I were to start over, I would insist more categorically the Oedipus story is just one myth among many.

MA: You could have begun with a completely different myth, an exotic myth that holds no special significance for the Western reader, and then show its affinities with the Oedipus myth at a later stage. Indeed, that is precisely what you do in *Violent Origins*, where you analyze a myth which, at first glance, has nothing to do with the Oedipus myth, that of Milomaki.

RG: It's a myth of the Yahuna Indians of Amazonia.

MA: The hero of the myth is a little boy, a stranger who arrives in the group and arouses admiration at first in virtue of his wonderful singing. People come from far and wide to listen to him. But afterwards, things take a turn for the worse . . .

RG: Because, once they are back home again, the people who had listened to him eat fish, get sick, and die. The others put the blame on the hapless Milomaki and kill him.

MA: The curious thing is that the narrative makes the connection between the illness and eating fish. For us, that would suffice as an explanation: we would say that the fish must have gone bad. But for the community behind the myth, some *person* had to be held responsible. And who else but this foreigner who stands out from the crowd, even if, like Oedipus, he had been received with favor upon his arrival? In both myths, then, a newcomer is arbitrarily blamed for a fatal illness afflicting the community. Although there is no incest in the case of Milomaki, would you put this Amazonian myth in the same category as the myth of Oedipus?

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RG: Yes, it is arbitrary to regard the Oedipus myth as absolutely a case apart.

MA: It's as if we classify myths by the accusations they contain. If the hero is accused of incest or parricide, people say that it is an Oedipal myth. If he is blamed for food poisoning, one might call it a Milomakian myth! But that means taking the content of such accusations at face value.

RG: The circumstances in which the victim is condemned vary, but not the functioning of the mechanism. It is the unanimous belief in the victim's guilt, whatever the nature of the accusations against him, that allows the group to regain its unity. In retrospect, the victim will also be endowed with positive qualities, being perceived as responsible not only for the crisis, but for its resolution.

MA: In this context, we should recall how the myth of Milomaki ends. He is burned alive, and then a magnificent tree grows from his ashes: the first palm tree of a species whose wood will be used to make flutes. The music of these flutes replicates the marvelous song of the deceased.

RG: There you have it – collective murder produces a beneficial effect! The victim emerges transfigured, he becomes an object of worship, like Oedipus after his expulsion from Thebes.

MA: In 2009, we witnessed the posthumous transfiguration of an individual who became famous for his marvelous singing when he was little, like Milomaki, but was later accused, if not of incest like Oedipus, then of pedophilia, a rather equivalent crime: I am thinking of Michael Jackson, who, without being the object of a collective murder, was certainly a victim of his own celebrity. It was quite striking to see this fallen idol, on the verge of bankruptcy, turn into a focus of worship across the planet when he died. It was almost as though people were grateful to him for having offered, through his very death, a solemn occasion for everyone to unite around him.

RG: It does look like a phenomenon of that kind. In Oedipus's case, his metamorphosis into a positive god is suggested by the fact that he becomes a religious hero in Colonus. It is an innovation of Sophocles, who was born in Colonus, to say that this city welcomes Oedipus in his exile. He is hailed there as a star; it's a bit like the arrival of a first-rate football team in a city that did not have one!

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MA: *Oedipus at Colonus* is Sophocles's final work, performed only after his death: his last testament, if you will. In this play, Oedipus defends himself and complains that he was mistreated. In short, he presents himself as a victim.

RG: Oedipus's self-defense is somewhat reminiscent of Job's. But the refusal of the persecutors' perspective is incomplete in Oedipus. The real hero of victimary knowledge is Job. By persisting in telling the truth, namely that he did nothing to deserve his misfortunes, Job effects a small epistemological revolution. Sophocles falls short of this revolution even if he sometimes departs from a purely mythological viewpoint.

MA: You brought up Job; for my part, I would like to offer you a somewhat novel comparison between the Oedipus myth and another biblical story: the destruction of Sodom. In the case of the plague in Thebes, the divine punishment strikes all the city's inhabitants indifferently due to the presence of just one man held to be guilty. Seen in this light, the people of Thebes are innocent victims, too, but the fact that they must suffer for the supposed crime of a single individual doesn't seem to shock anyone. In the case of Sodom, on the other hand, Abraham demands that God spare the innocent inhabitants. The Lord agrees that the presence of only ten righteous individuals will cause Him to restrain His wrath. In the end, Sodom is destroyed all the same, for not even ten righteous persons can be found there; there is only one, Lot, a stranger in the city. However, the angels of God take it upon themselves to save this stranger with his family, and when he hesitates to leave, he is taken by the hand and escorted out by force. In a word, he is *expelled*, but the expulsion of Lot has the opposite meaning to that of Oedipus; it aims to save a man who has done no wrong, to avoid making him an innocent victim.

RG: The biblical text is indeed characterized by a constant concern to distinguish the innocent from the guilty. That boils down to a concern to avoid scapegoating. The same concern is absent from mythical texts. This difference seems essential to me. In the Judeo-Christian universe, the expulsion of scapegoats does not disappear, but it no longer gives rise to myths like that of Oedipus.

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Translated by Mark Anspach and Cynthia L. Haven

The Founding Murder in the Philosophy of Nietzsche

I stand revealed by these days of debate* as a man of few ideas, so simple in their principle that perhaps they amount to no more than a single idea. It would in that case qualify as an 'idée fixe'. The suggestion has been made . . .

It is well known that critics 'project' their own pet ideas onto the texts they claim to be criticizing. They exhibit their 'discoveries' triumphantly and rhapsodize over their relevance without ever suspecting that they have retrieved unaltered the very thing they fed the machine in the first place to ensure its functioning.

I understand all too well, then, the wariness that the 'surrogate system' inspires. Confronted with the breadth and perfection of what I call its power of *ratissage*, of sweeping up everything around it, I sometimes cannot help wondering about it myself . . . I am sure you divine my meaning . . . Send any masterpiece you like my way, literary, cultural or religious, and it will be quite a miracle if I do not come back to you, a month or a year later, with my mimetic desire, my sacrificial crisis and above all – give the Devil his due – that bloody atrocity with which I am infatuated, the primordial, founding act of violence: the collective murder of the deity.

Forgive me this spell of melancholy. All around me, everything is 'renewing' itself and I, too, dream of renewing myself. But I never succeed. Where might one find *something else* to talk about? What text might grant access to *something else*?

An idea comes to me: Nietzsche. I must have recourse to Nietzsche.

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* René Girard's talk was given at an international symposium in Cerisy, France, in 1983. We have omitted some introductory text.

People have been talking about him constantly for a hundred years and nobody ever detects in his work the slightest collective violence, the faintest trace of a founding murder. Maybe he will cure me of my monomania. This is one philosopher who always has fashion on his side. Between 1930 and 1950 he had a few bad moments, but, thanks to our valiant critics, he always extricates himself admirably. Here he is among us once again, all freshened up and reinvigorated. Yesterday's somber thinker has been replaced by a merry '68-style dissident; this is the playful, insouciant and frisky Nietzsche whom neither Lou Salomé nor Cosima would recognize.

That is what I need. Without further ado, I turn to a text that should be just what the doctor ordered for my case of religious obsession, aphorism 125 of *The Gay Science.* This is the capital text, it seems, on the subject of the definitive demise of all religion.

I shall begin at the beginning:

> Haven't you heard about the Madman who, having lit a lantern under the noonday sun, ran to the marketplace and cried incessantly, 'I seek God, I seek God!' As many of those who do not believe in God were standing around just then, he provoked much laughter. Why, have we lost him? said one. Did he lose his way like a child? said another. Or is he hiding? Is he afraid of us? Has he gone on a voyage? or emigrated? Thus they shouted and laughed.

This crowd is already modern because it is atheist. But it does not recognize its atheism in the Madman's message and that is why, from the start, it makes fun of him. The orator is 'mad' only from the point of view of the crowd. Foreseeing the misunderstanding, he does his best, curiously, to aggravate it. He provokes his listeners with his strange symbolism of the lantern lit under the noonday sun. By polarizing the many against him the Madman hopes to arouse the curiosity of the rare individuals liable to comprehend him: those who find themselves exposed, like him, to the hostility of mediocre minds.

On one side there is the atheism of the crowd, vulgar atheism, and on the other the presumed atheism of the Madman. The author himself sets the rules for the game of interpretation. He suggests we

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reject the vulgar atheism and embrace another, more distinguished brand which must be carefully defined.

That is how all the interpreters understand this exordium. Unfortunately, they go searching for their distinguished brand of atheism everywhere in the works of Nietzsche save in the aphorism itself. It would be better at least to begin with the latter and switch to other texts only as a last resort. The explicators conscientiously read the first lines, those I have just read you myself, but the next thing you know they are off in a cloud of dust, never to be seen by the aphorism again. Take a look, for example, at *Holzwege*, the celebrated essay by Heidegger. In principle its focus is aphorism 125. In reality the philosopher talks of everything but that.

This is a bad example, and I reject it. I have always been told that the conscientious critic deciphers his text word by word, and that is the example I am going to follow. Let me resume reading at the point where I left off:

The Madman burst into their midst and pierced them with his gaze.

'Whither is God!' he cried. 'I shall tell you. We have killed Him – you and I! All of us are His murderers.'

Alas, alas. . . . There it is, the trap: the collective murder! Exactly what I was dreading. And I have no one to blame but myself. If only I had done what everyone else does. My accursed presumptuousness has sunk me. I wanted to distinguish myself, to escape other critics' routine, and straight away I fell back into my own. Luckily, I warned you. That is my only consolation. Your expressions tell me that your surprise is not total.

You have to admire the sly obstinacy of the *idée fixe*. Nobody ever pulled the collective murder out of this text before. I grab hold of it and, in less time than it takes a psychoanalyst to say 'Oedipus complex', there it is, like the head of John the Baptist on its silver platter. It is no longer a success, it is a fatality. If I tried to extract from the aphorism the thousand and one amazing things our colleagues extract from it, I would fail miserably. The collective murder follows me like my shadow.

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Perhaps the fault lies with the translation. When one does not find what one is looking for in a text in a foreign language, the translator, as a rule, serves as the scapegoat. Why not also when one finds what one is not looking for? Let us examine the original German: *'Wir haben ihn getotet – ihr und ich! Wir alle sind seine Morder.'* The idea of underlining we have killed Him – is not the translator's nor even mine; it is Nietzsche's. And it is Nietzsche who insists on the unanimity of the murder, with a heavy hand that reminds me of my own: *'We have killed Him – you and I! All of us are His murderers!'*

The translation is depressingly faithful. I feel as if I were going mad; maybe I am the Madman himself reincarnated, the one in the aphorism, of whom no one ever speaks. Things had none the less begun well. But my opening moves cannot be trusted. There is a first stage in which I often succeed in concealing what I am up to, in deluding myself if no one else, but after a few lines, infallibly, I fall back into my infernal orbit, the collective murder – my own personal eternal recurrence.

I envy those who do not share my obsession. The murder is spelled out clearly in my oddly distorted vision of the aphorism. It is totally absent from theirs. How do they manage? Their recipe is simple. Never do they quote the formulas Nietzsche uses here: 'we have killed Him', 'all of us are His murderers.' They carefully refrain from doing so. Something much better is at their disposal. They all go about very sweetly repeating, 'God is dead . . . God is dead . . .' without adding anything whatsoever.

It seems quite innocent, but it completely changes the meaning of the text. The formula 'God is dead' has enjoyed and will always enjoy an extraordinary success in our universe. It possesses a virtue so powerful that a thousand successors to Nietzsche – but are they really his successors? – seize on it every day and channel it towards new fields so that they may make a name for themselves among men. This tactic has long yielded spectacular results. Thanks to it, metaphysics is dead. We all kept vigil at its bedside. Next we went into mourning for philosophy as a whole. And since around 1890, once a generation, we are solemnly informed that man himself is dead. Every time, the news causes an enormous sensation. Truth is long dead, and sartorial

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fashion more recently deceased. I have myself said that the death of God is in the process of dying, and doubtless I am now in the process of repeating it. Nobody escapes this obituary itch.

Nietzsche entitled his aphorism 'The Madman,' but one would scarcely suspect it. Intellectual opinion knows it only under its own title: 'God is dead.' If you want to hear 'God is dead, God is dead' repeated in marvelously grave tones, the slightest reference to aphorism 125 will suffice, or even to Nietzsche's work in general . . . It is the Pavlovian reflex of modernity. Nietzsche is taken to be the great prophet of the *natural* death of God.

The formula 'God is dead' figures not only in the text but in the title of a considerable number of essays. I have already mentioned the one that is most in vogue, that of Heidegger. It is entitled, of course, *Nietzsche's Phrase 'God is Dead.'* It caps an immense body of literature that maintains only the most nebulous relationship with the text on which it pretends to be commenting.

This famous 'death of God' is not, however, the invention of the commentators. It does need to figure somewhere in aphorism 125. The transfiguring power of my obsession alone will not be enough, I hope, to conjure it away. If I look for it, I will find it in the end.

Let us read what follows . . . Nothing . . . But yes; ten lines further down, there is at last, the sentence so often repeated . . . Even here it is repeated: 'Gott ist tot! Gott bleibt tot!' God is in no danger, thank God, of reviving. This formula is the happiest day of my life. It may yet make of me a critic like any other.

Equipped with this philosophical life-buoy, I resume reading from the delectable 'God is dead . . .!'

> God is dead! God remains dead! And it is we who have killed Him. How shall we, murderers among murderers, comfort ourselves? What was the holiest and most powerful of all that the world has yet possessed has bled to death under our knives. Who will wipe this blood from our hands?

This is most dismaying. The more I try to flee my obsession, the more it pursues me! Renewal, where are you? 'God is dead! God

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remains dead!' It was perfect . . . why couldn't Nietzsche have left it at that?

For a hundred years the best minds turn aphorism 125 round and about in every direction and never do they come upon the horrible bogey that haunts me unceasingly. The second apparition is more sinister than the first. The blood spilling . . . the knife . . . It is all in very bad taste. Nietzsche, decidedly, does it on purpose.

Having written 'God is dead,' Nietzsche returns immediately and overwhelmingly to his idea – or maybe to mine, I no longer know which. One would say that he is seeking to prevent the kind of falsification to which his aphorism has always been subjected. He can guess his readers' desire to escape the murder. Shrewd as they are, they will take advantage of the somewhat too-neutral formula 'God is dead' which the author has imprudently handed them. To forestall this danger, Nietzsche insists once again on the murder. The caricatural, *Grand Guignol* quality of the description contradicts categorically the connotations that the habitual consumers of the aphorism have always conferred on 'God is dead,' its connotations that exclude collective violence.

'God is dead' is not incorrect in its context. In writing this sentence, Nietzsche says nothing that contradicts his message or in any way attenuates it. Of someone who has got himself murdered one can always say, among other things, that he is dead. There is no risk of making a mistake. The passive formula is always accurate. Whether someone who dies is murdered or not, the result is the same. But, death from natural causes being the most common sort, that is quite obviously what is understood when it is said simply that somebody has died without its being specified how.

In the aphorism, 'God is dead' is framed by two thunderous announcements of collective murder. Taken out of context, 'God is dead' slips quietly back into meaning the natural death of God. The murder is dropped as if by an inadvertent gesture which passes without notice. One must admire the efficacy of the maneuver, which is all the more deft for being ignorant of its own cunning. A quotation from Nietzsche is provided which is in appearance accurate and complete but in reality truncated, due solely to the fact that it is

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emphasized separately, made into the title of the aphorism. The 'God is dead' which circulates in this world does not sum up the Madman's words, it grossly falsifies them.

For the philosophy of the Enlightenment, God can only die a natural death. Once the naive period of humanity is behind us religion ceases to be 'credible,' as we say these days. Rationalist optimism is supposed to be long dead, fallen victim in principle to the epidemic triggered by the death of God. In reality, it survives in the very idea of a God who dies of senile exhaustion. This first idea supposes a second: modern atheism is more *reasonable* than its predecessor, religion. For beings who have attained the 'maturity' on which we pride ourselves, such atheism alone is truly 'credible.' Other beliefs are purely medieval, not to say antediluvian.

The 'death of God' maneuver evacuates the Nietzschean idea to return on tiptoe to the easy idea, the banal idea, the *vulgar* idea. Nietzsche is careful not to cross his t's. Part of him fully enjoys being the misunderstood madman. The aphorism lays a kind of trap for us which everyone identifies but falls into all the same: the trap of vulgar atheism.

The real difference between the crowd's atheism and the Madman's thinking is none other than the difference between death and murder.

Through the intermediary of the formula 'God is dead,' all those who start out by making fun of the Madman end up co-opting the aphorism and cutting it down to the size of their own thinking. They claim to distance themselves from the vulgar atheism but then reinstall it serenely in the very text which repudiates it, with a mighty helping hand from the incantatory formula 'God is dead . . . God is dead.'

If the interpreters quote only the first lines of the aphorism that is because, in the rest, there is no longer any question of anything but collective murder. At the first appearance of the latter everyone runs away, like the disciples at the time of the Passion. And the same reasons which render this rout universal render it invisible to those who participate in it. Insist on the murder and you will immediately be taken for a 'madman.' It happens to me all the time . . .

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You see . . . my obsession has triumphed. I have renounced resisting it. You can expect to see the rest of the aphorism blend itself into the rest of my system. You are familiar with all that, and I will spare you my commentary. The theory has its own ideas, and I will let it lead the way all by itself.

What does it demand, this theory, *before* the collective murder? The sacrificial crisis, of course, the abolition of differences. All that figures in the aphorism, but *after* the initial announcement of the murder. The crisis first appears as a consequence of this murder, not as a preliminary condition. That is a small anomaly, and I beg you to excuse it. In any case it is quickly rectified. *After* the sacrificial crisis comes the second announcement, the one I have just read to you, and in relation to this one our sacrificial crisis finds itself back where it belongs, right *before* the murder.

Let me read you the passage which appears between the two announcements, the one I skipped over a moment ago in the hope of arriving at a death that would not be the result of a murder:

> But how have we done this? How were we able to drink up the sea? Who gave us the sponge to blot out the whole horizon? What did we do to unchain the earth from its sun? Where is the planet spinning to now? To what place is its movement carrying us? Far from all suns? Have we not tumbled into a continuous fall? A fall backwards, sideways, forwards, in every direction? Do high and low still exist? Are we not wandering as if across an infinite void? Do we not feel the breath of nothingness upon us? Is it not colder? Is it not night-time unceasingly and more and more night-time? Must we not light our lanterns even in the morning? Do we hear nothing yet of the noise of the gravediggers who have buried God? Do we smell nothing yet of the divine putrefaction?

We are often given *philosophical* commentaries on this text. It can be compared with Pascal. Two quite distinct infinities, the large and the small, still perpetuate the shadow of a fixed point, their point of intersection where man is situated. The spot from which we observe the real remains a kind of center. In our aphorism, even this ghost of a center has disappeared.

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This state of affairs makes our aphorism very similar to myths, to rituals, to Greek tragedy. Everywhere, in 'primitive' texts, the collective murder is associated with the confusion of day and night, of the sky and the earth, of gods, men and animals. Monsters swarm. Everything begins with the abolition of differences, the monstrous twins, the 'evil mixture' of Shakespeare, the mixing of what should be distinguished.

It is indeed the sacrificial crisis described a thousand times, but no longer quite the old carnival masquerade, the inversion of roles and hierarchies during a brief festival period, strictly delimited. The affair appears more serious; all guideposts are gone, in time as well as in space. There is no longer either difference or deferral, no more horizon, no more fixed point anywhere to provide sense or direction. It is on the former God that the *humanization* of the real rested, and what little remains of this is in the process of rotting.

Everything is presented in the form of questions; no affirmation is possible. One is tempted to conclude that it is a version of the crisis that is 'more radical' because it is 'modern' and more modern because it is radical. But perhaps it is simply our own particular version, one we are incapable of relativizing. We cannot yet ritualize it . . . Maybe all we need is the collective murder once more . . .

We have our sacrificial crisis, we have our collective murder . . . To complete the cycle of violence and the sacred, we now need the return to the ritual order. Can one really demand that of an aphorism said to be devoted exclusively to the disappearance of religion in the modern world? It is doubtless asking too much, but you may count on the *idée fixe* to cause everything it needs to spring up around it.

The second description of the murder opens on to a passage that is the opposite of the one which followed the first description – in other words, it is exactly what we are looking for:

> How shall we, murderers among murderers, comfort ourselves? What was the holiest and most powerful of all that the world has yet possessed has bled to death under our knives. Who will wipe this blood from our hands? What lustral water is there to cleanse us? What ceremonies of atonement, what sacred games shall we have to invent?

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How can the lustral water, the ceremonies of atonement and the sacred games be defined, if not as ritual procedures rising out of the collective murder and so hard to distinguish from it to begin with, like the gesture of washing one's hands, that the description of the murder itself must be quoted again to be sure none of them is left out?

The murder is commemorated 'to comfort ourselves,' the drama is replayed to render the memory of the event tolerable by transfiguring it. And suddenly, we have before us a new religion. The destruction of the old religion culminated in the collective murder and the collective murder, through the intermediary of the rites, produces the new religion. Ritual reproduction and religious production are one and the same:

> what sacred games shall we have to invent? Is not the greatness of this deed too great for us? Must we not become gods ourselves to appear worthy of such a deed? There never was a greater deed than this – and whoever is born after us shall belong, by virtue of this same deed, to a history superior to everything that history ever was until then!

Quite obviously, it is a question here of Zarathustra and of the superman, who are in the process of germinating in Nietzsche's thought. If the licensed Nietzscheans tell me that these themes must not be qualified as religious I will bow down low before their wisdom and take their word for it, but I am much too near-sighted, much too limited to the letter to go outside my aphorism. I want to hear nothing but the letter of the aphorism. It furnishes me with the exact word – 'gods' – at the precise moment when the theory of violence and the sacred requires it: 'Must we not become gods ourselves . . . ?'

And that is not the end of it. The following passage brings us another cog in the mechanism of victimization, the paradoxical *misrecognition* (*méconnaissance*) of the murder by the murderers themselves:

> Here the Madman fell silent and examined anew his listeners: they too were silent and watched him without understanding. Finally he hurled his lantern to the ground so that it broke and ceased shining. 'I come too early,' he said then, 'my time has not come yet. This tremendous event is still on its way, still

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wandering – it has not yet reached the ears of man. Lightning and thunder require time, the light of the stars requires time, deeds require time even after they are done, before they can be seen and heard. This deed is still more distant from them than the most distant stars – and yet it is they who have done it!'

The crowd knows nothing of the murder, yet it is itself the perpetrator. The commentators around the aphorism, like the crowd within the aphorism, fall back irresistibly into the attitude they seek to escape: vulgar atheism, that which consists in refusing the murder. The aphorism is therefore itself subject to the very type of misrecognition that the Madman denounces.

The natural death of God is the alibi of the murderers who deny the reality of their murder. How could we have killed the biblical God, they repeat, since He died without help from anyone, in the last stage of senility?

The only text constantly associated with 'the death of God,' the only truly memorable text, is aphorism 125. Other texts exist which genuinely say what the aphorism does not say; it is nevertheless the latter which is made to say it. Nobody is interested in the texts which genuinely speak of the death of God.

There is something surprising in the predilection of our atheists for a text which aims at subverting their own vision. Neither literary nor philosophical criticism can explain this paradox which in truth they do not see, convinced as they are that they respect the aphorism in extracting from it their mealy 'death of God.'

If this strange phenomenon is to be located and understood, it must be seen that the usage made of the aphorism is ritual in the very sense of which Nietzsche has just reminded us. The rite consists in reproducing the collective murder without recognizing the event reproduced. That is exactly the type of relationship which exists between the modern intelligentsia and the aphorism, but at the level of representation rather than of action.

The murder is indispensable to ritual practice as long as it remains unrecognized. To be made sacred, the text must conceal the collective murder in the precise sense of dissimulating it. It remains unrecognized. If you draw attention to it, it will be granted importance only

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