REVIEW ARTICLE

CULTURAL CRIMINOLOGY: THE WORK OF RENÉ GIRARD

PAUL DUMOUCHEL (ed.), *Violence and Truth: On the Work of René Girard*, London: The Athlone Press 1988 [1985]. 266pp., Index. £35.00.

RENÉ GIRARD, *Job the Victim of his People*, London: The Athlone Press 1988 [1985]. 168pp., Index. £32.00.

RENÉ GIRARD, *Things Hidden Since the Foundation of the World*, London: The Athlone Press 1987 [1978]. 447pp., Bibliography, Index. £35.00.

RENÉ GIRARD, *'To Double Business Bound': Essays on Literature, Mimesis and Anthropology*, London: The Athlone Press 1988 [1978]. xvi, 229pp. £35.00

RENÉ GIRARD, *The Scapegoat*, London: The Athlone Press 1986 [1982]. 212pp., Index. £32.00.

RENÉ GIRARD, *Violence and the Sacred*, London: The Athlone Press 1988 [1972]. 318pp., Bibliography, Index. £14.95.

René Girard is the most disquieting of contemporary cultural theorists. For twenty-five years he has been developing a hypothesis which aims not merely to reveal the structural dynamic of all societies, but to uncover the substance of all mythologies and recapture the moral vitality of the world's greatest literature. This venture has been undertaken with complete disdain for almost every critical presupposition of modern scholarship: it is explicitly didactic, unashamedly anachronistic, impenitently ethnocentric and conducted with an apocalyptic sense of its own finality. Although Girard stands aloof from current academic debates, he does not claim originality. His project attempts to give more systematic expression to ideas found in the Gospels and reflected in the works of Sophocles, Shakespeare, Cervantes and Dostoevsky. Yet this is not a literary endeavour: the only adjective that Girard believes to fit his hypothesis is 'scientific'. It is a science of peculiar potency: 'Men will finally be liberated by means of this knowledge, which will help them first to demystify the quasi-mythologies of

our own history and then, before long, to demolish all the myths of our universe' (*Scapegoat*, p. 108).

It is impossible to read Girard without feeling a sense of embarrassment. His ambitions are so grandiose and quixotic that it is disconcerting to be invited to share them. Even temporary sympathetic engagement is only begrudgingly given to an author whose claims are, on his own admission, 'scandalously out of proportion with the general temper of the times' and whose literary background constitutes 'the worst possible recommendation' for his research (*'To Double Business Bound'*, p. 200). It is difficult to dispel the uncomfortable sensation that the Girardian project is liable to be a débâcle painful even to witness.

The tone of Girard's writing serves to undermine rather than enhance the reader's confidence. There is an endearing innocence about an author who can acknowledge that 'Freud's comments on Greek tragedy are undoubtedly the most profound of all modern pronouncements on the subject', when he has stated in the previous paragraph that his own approach 'incorporates all Freud's observations' and 'also takes into account those elements that escaped his ... attention' (*Violence and the Sacred*, pp. 204-5). There is a repugnant childishness about an author whose ethnographic insights take the form of pronouncements such as: 'The African peoples close their eyes to nothing; in fact, they keep them wide open' (ibid., p. 105), or 'Western civilization ... has enjoyed until this day a mysterious immunity from the most virulent forms of violence' (ibid., p. 33).

It is not as though Girard's writing is opaque or his meaning ambiguous. It is just unselfconscious to the point of self-exposure. For example, on the opening page of *Violence and the Sacred* he accuses Hubert and Mauss of circular reasoning and then demonstrates that his own logic is rather dubious by arguing that 'if sacrifice resembles criminal violence, we may say that there is, inversely, hardly any form of violence that cannot be described in terms of sacrifice' (p. 1). Arguments such as this are probably not intended to be purely deductive, yet the absence of empirical evidence suggests that Girard's conclusions are supposed to be self-evidently true. He spares himself the tedium of providing anything other than the most perfunctory scholarly apparatus. In his most substantial work - diffidently entitled *Things Hidden Since the Foundation of the World* - there is less than one reference every three pages. Instead, Girard subjects himself to the scrutiny of two interlocutors. This procedure is perhaps meant to convey the impression that some kind of critically informed discussion is taking place. If so, it would be more convincing if the other participants restrained themselves from proclaiming their belief that Girard's theory allows mankind to see 'the alpha and omega of human culture' (*Things Hidden*, p. 63) and brought to the master's attention some of the possible objections to his hypothesis.

Also irritating is Girard's apparent unwillingness to modify, or even qualify, his statements in the light of subsequent research His most recent books are just as dogmatic as the earlier ones. Girard and his interlocutors are convinced that men are 'ritually

eaten so that their power is absorbed' (ibid., p. 83). What do they make of the questions regarding this type of causal reasoning raised by Needham's article on *klpu* (Needham 1976)? Have they since had doubts, following Arens, that cannibalism was as widespread as early ethnographers believed (Arens 1979)? We do not know, because Girard does not appear to have taken the opportunity to augment his anthropological reading between the book's first publication in France in 1978 and the revised English version of 1988. This is not entirely unexpected, for Girard's sources are neither numerous nor recent: Frazer, Evans-Pritchard and Lévi-Strauss are the only anthropological authors with whom he shows any familiarity. Even with them, Girard is apt to disregard unpalatable information. In *Violence and the Sacred*, he cites the sacrifice of cattle by the Nuer as evidence for his contention that 'all victims, even the animal ones, bear a certain resemblance to the object they replace' (p. 11). But while an ox may bear a certain resemblance to the man for whom Girard believes it to be a substitute, can the same be said of the cucumber that sometimes replaces the ox (Evans-Pritchard 1956: 42)?

Girard is accustomed to criticism of his work. His response to it is characteristic:

> There is always an outcry, especially in such a troubled time as ours, against powerful evidence, but such quibbling is not in the least important intellectually. To go even further, it is possible that the revolt against the type of evidence I have described may grow in strength and we may once more be faced with the legions of Nuremberg or their equivalent (*Scapegoat*, p. 96).

Anthropologists will presumably be amongst the recruits to the armies of obscurantism. According to Girard 'the sciences of man have been dogmatic and philosophical for so long that they have lost sight of what scientific knowledge is really about' (*'To Double Business Bound'*, p. 214). Ethnologists in particular are guilty of 'minimizing, if not actually justifying', the enormities perpetrated by the societies they study (*Scapegoat*, p. 62).

Girard's reservations about the discipline make the indifference shown to his work by anthropologists less than surprising. Although *Violence and the Sacred* was first published in France in 1972, it has had little impact in Britain, even upon the discussion of topics with which it is centrally concerned. In *From Violence to Blessing*, Maurice Bloch notes that although *Violence and the Sacred* bears a 'superficial similarity' to some of his own work, its conclusions are, for some unspecified reason, 'unwarranted' (Bloch 1986: 198). The collections *The Anthropology of Violence* (Riches 1986) and *The Anthropology of Evil* (Parkin 1985) contain only incidental references to Girard. At present, the hypothesis that aims to demystify all mythologies features as no more than one of the host of unwanted references that any comprehensive literature search is liable to uncover. Will this situation change? Should it change?

The publication of almost all of Girard's work - some of it newly translated - by the Athlone Press provides an opportunity to reassess the matter. *Violence and the Sacred* is now available in paperback. *Things Hidden Since the Foundation of the World* covers much of the same ground as *Violence and the Sacred* but in the form of a dialogue with two psychiatrists. *'To Double Business Bound': Essays on Literature, Mimesis and Anthropology* and *Job the Victim of his People* are also now available, while *The Scapegoat* provides the best introduction to Girard's thought. In addition, there is a collection of essays, *Violence and Truth*, edited by Paul Dumouchel, in which Girard's followers apply his hypothesis to a variety of questions in theology, economic theory, history and literature.

Girard's argument is fundamentally the same in every book, and, indeed, on almost every page. His techniques of persuasion are unsophisticated: ceaseless repetition, earnest entreaty and hysterical denunciation are his rhetorical tools. But their effectiveness should not be underestimated, and the theory emerges as internally coherent, provocative and, if nothing else, original. Girard's hypothesis can be summarised as follows.

1) Social order is secured by difference. When socially differentiated, human beings suffer from a form of ontological insecurity that leads them to suspect that others may, by virtue of difference, enjoy some superior state of being. The practice of imitation is an attempt to deal with this insecurity. Imitation of another involves sharing the same desires. This results in a mimetic rivalry, because the satisfaction of a single desire is impossible for all who share it. Individuals may come to see others solely as obstacles to the realization of their desires. The outcome is uncontrollable violence in which all social differences are eradicated.

2) Because mimetic violence destroys difference, it can be stopped only by the reintroduction of difference. This is effected through the selection, often on the basis of some arbitrary distinguishing characteristic, of a scapegoat to whom all the difference-dissolving crimes of the mimetic crisis can be attributed. The scapegoat is separated from the rest of the community and killed with the active consent of all. By disposing of the scapegoat as the embodiment of undifferentiation and the obstacle of all desires, the participants in the mimetic crisis are unanimously reconciled to the differences that distinguish them one from another.

3) The scapegoat mechanism is the foundation of all societies. The scapegoat is perceived to be both the source of disorder and the means of reconciliation, and is thus considered sacred. Entities that are similarly undifferentiated, such as twins, are also treated as taboo. The founding murder is reenacted in the form of ritual sacrifice. Mythology disguises the arbitrary character of the process by investing the scapegoat with supernatural power and reaffirming its guilt. The collective murder of an innocent victim is thus presented as the salvific death of the divine being responsible for the original crisis. All human culture is thus an elaborate mystification of the crime that made it possible.

4) There are, however, a few works, most notably the Christian

gospels, that tell a different story. In these works the scapegoat is portrayed not as a supernatural being capable of causing chaos and effecting its resolution, but as the innocent and impotent victim of a social process. Because of the revelatory demystifying potential of this perspective, Western science has been able to free itself from supernatural explanations of physical and social events. As a result, modern Western society is remarkably free of persecution and is at least potentially able to perceive, for the first time in history, the arbitrary and murderous practices of other cultures for what they are.

When presented in skeletal outline, the radical nature of the theory is only partially apparent. Its capacity to undermine the most cherished perceptions is perhaps best exemplified by Girard's reading of the Oedipus story (in *Violence and the Sacred*, *Scapegoat* and *Job*). Everyone is familiar with the tale of the man who was fated to kill his father and marry his mother. According to Girard we have all been deceived: Oedipus is innocent; he did not kill his father or marry his mother.

This belated rehabilitation of Western civilization's most notorious criminal is based on the belief that the legend presents the scapegoat mechanism in a mythological, and thus distorted, light. The basic structure of events in *Oedipus Rex*, Girard argues is entirely consonant with the pattern of the mechanism: there is a crisis of social and natural order; a man, distinguished as an outsider with a limp, is held to be responsible for the disaster; his crime is the destruction of difference, for he is said to have united in himself the incompatible roles of husband and son; he is expelled from the city, and order is restored. What makes the account mythological is its acceptance of the reality of the Oedipal crimes. The unique achievement of Sophocles is, Girard suggests, that he allows the alternative view to surface in the hero's protestations of innocence.

Two objections present themselves. What is Girard's justification for re-opening the case when he has no new evidence? And is he not confusing myth with history by attempting this procedure at all? Girard's response to these questions is to offer a text that is structurally similar to the Oedipus story and to challenge the reader to retain a sceptical response (*Scapegoat*). The text is Guillaume de Machaut's *Judgement of the King of Navarre*, a long poem which opens with a description of a city afflicted by disaster. The cause of the suffering is revealed to be the wickedness of the Jews. The guilty men are made known to the population. They are massacred and peace and prosperity return. Any modern reader will discern in this story a record of the persecution of the Jews. To do this it is necessary to doubt the reality of only one element of the narrative - the claim that the Jews were poisoning the wells. Although the poem is a fiction, there is no doubt in the contemporary reader's mind that it reflects actual events of a particular historical kind. Why, Girard asks, should the Oedipus myth not be read in the same way?

It is a difficult question to answer. Both narratives include supernatural elements that are automatically disregarded by modern readers. Both attribute to individuals crimes that are, although

not impossible, improbable. Why should it be that in one case understanding should hinge on the assumption that the murder of the Jews is both historical and arbitrary, while in the other it is assumed that the expulsion of Oedipus is mythological and justifiable? Why should it be that the kernel of truth in Guillaume de Machaut's poem is taken to be its demonstration that society is prone to treat the Jews as scapegoats, while the central truth of the Oedipus legend is the reality of the murderous and incestuous desires of the human infant? It may now seem entirely obvious that this is the appropriate reading of the two texts. But, Girard argues, this is not the result of any fundamental dissimilarity in the texts themselves. It is because Western culture has discovered - albeit only recently and after horrific delay - the technique for decoding the mythology of its own persecutions, but is still incapable of discerning similar distortions in the myths of ancient and primitive cultures. Would not many pre-Holocaust Europeans have read Guillaume de Machaut and perceived some timeless truth about the malevolence of the Jews? Would not a contemporary Islamic fundamentalist be liable to do the same? What about a member of a society accustomed to witchcraft? How can we be so confident that we are able to decode the Oedipus myth when the techniques for dealing with the myths of our own culture are so newly acquired and so far from universally acknowledged?

The significance of Girard's hypothesis emerges only gradually. His suggestion is that awareness of the scapegoat mechanism should be extended to all texts and all cultural practices in which the process is not already perceived to be at work. His assumption is that the mechanism is the foundation of all social order and therefore ubiquitous. He admits that he may be wrong, but invites others to employ his techniques on every available myth, seeking, as a moral duty, to exonerate the innocent and reveal the centrality of crime to every social formation.

Before focusing on the innumerable difficulties raised by such a programme, it is worth remarking on the nature of its appeal. One of the potential attractions of the Girardian project is its moral seriousness. Underlying Girard's perception of contemporary academic life is his frustration with the way in which the humanities and social sciences appear to have made themselves irrelevant by disregarding the moral imperatives that originally informed them. He would like intellectual endeavour to be re-infused with a sense of moral purpose. This in itself is a laudable ambition. But as the supply of prophets of moral regeneration generally exceeds demand, Girard's theory must be assessed primarily on its intellectual merits. These are not insignificant, and are most clearly seen in relation to the work of three earlier thinkers: Nietzsche (to whose critique of Christianity Girard makes a spirited response), Freud and Lévi-Strauss. Girard's reworking of structuralist and Freudian themes is worth examining in more detail.

While Girard accepts that culture is formed by difference, he

does not relegate the undifferentiated to the margins of his enquiry. His underlying question is: 'How is a society possible?' Because he assumes that social systems are differential he is forced to ask the supplementary question: 'How is difference possible?' His answer, perhaps inevitably, is that difference is made possible through the exclusion of the undifferentiated. (The undifferentiated is that which, although distinct, is defined by its identity with something else - a twin, for example - or which implicitly denies the reality of difference by combining or incorporating what is incommensurable.) His project is an attempt to recover an awareness of what has been excluded by examining the means of exclusion. In that respect, Girard is engaged in a deconstructive practice, applying to mythology the techniques that Derrida used to such alarming effect on philosophical and literary texts. The Girardian project is, therefore, like deconstruction, both a continuation and repudiation of the structuralist concern with the closed and differential nature of cultural systems.

Lévi-Strauss himself admits that 'a discrete system is produced by the destruction of certain elements or their removal from the original whole' (Lévi-Strauss 1969: 53). But he makes no real attempt to analyse the process of exclusion. Although he perceives ritual as an attempt to return temporarily to the undifferentiated immediacy of primordial chaos and as an escape from differentiated order, he does not see much significance in the similarity between the pre-differential and the anti-differential. Ritual is but 'a bastardization of thought, brought about by the constraints of life' (Lévi-Strauss 1981: 675). Girard, on the other hand, is able to give an account of ritual which better reflects its fundamental importance to the continuity of social groups. The infringement of otherwise binding taboos re-enacts the breakdown of order in the original mimetic crisis, and sacrifice commemorates the founding murder. The recapitulation of the process serves to renew the differentiated social order, not by temporary negation, but by restaging the events that created it.

Lévi-Strauss is interested in binary opposition. Girard is pre-occupied with triangular relationships. In this respect he is closer to Freud, whose late work, especially *Totem and Taboo* (1919) he finds sympathetic. Concerning the Oedipus complex, there is no such agreement. Girard is, of course, of the opinion that Freud misread the story by accepting the reality of the hero's crimes. But there is also a fundamental discrepancy between the Freudian and Girardian perceptions of the Oedipal triangles. For Freud, desire for the mother is primary and the rivalry between father and son is a consequence of shared desire that may be surmounted by identification with the father. Girard argues that the son's desire for the mother is itself the result of the son's imitation of the father and that both desire and rivalry are mimetic (*Violence and the Sacred*). The Freudian triangle, he points out, is itself reliant upon imitation for its reproduction (*Things Hidden*).

Girard's theory has certain advantages for the comparative study of inter-generational conflict, because it emphasizes that desire is socially constructed. The identity of the rival and the object of desire are not determined by biology and transmuted by

culture but derive from social practice alone. For this reason, Girard's paradigm is the more readily applicable to societies where familial arrangements differ from those envisaged by Freud. Girard's own example is the rivalry between nephew and uncle described by Malinowski in *The Father in Primitive Psychology* (1927). But the notion of mimesis could also be employed to explicate complex patterns of conflict in a patrilineal society. The Tallensi, whose inter-generational disputes Fortes struggled to align with Freudian orthodoxy, might serve as an example (Fortes 1959).

Like Freudianism, Girard's theory can be applied to any and every subject. 'Hominization', incest, kingship, initiation and taboo are just some of the topics with which he deals. The universal applicability of the theory is, however, not necessarily an argument in its favour. It is simply a result of the theory's structure. Girard can take any binary relationship and postulate that it depends upon the exclusion of some third element. His theory is, in a sense, no more than a sociological version of the law of the excluded middle: 'a' and 'not-a' are distinct because of the exclusion of 'a and not-a'. Like Bochvar's three-valued logic (Rescher 1969), Girard's hypothesis suggests a system in which the third 'paradoxical' element would infect any compound of which it was a part with its own meaninglessness. Unlike the proponents of polyvalent logic, Girard assumes that such a system would be unworkable. At the core of Girard's project are two assumptions: first, that the principle of bivalence is not (as Lévi-Strauss imagined) an intrinsic feature of the human brain, and secondly, that the principle of bivalence holds in all human societies. Despite the fact that his entire project exploits the tension between these beliefs, Girard does not defend them individually, nor explain his decision to conjoin them.

Although the theory is of universal applicability, the range of evidence to which Girard applies it is narrower than he imagines. He only considers violence that is either competitive or exclusive in motivation. Conjunctive and inclusive forms of violence escape his attention. He has nothing to say about rape (his paradigm of mimetic violence is two men fighting over a woman; the possibility of violence towards the object of desire does not seem to occur to him) or other forms of coercion. At a societal level, he ignores wars of conquest and colonization. Intra-societal violence is his concern; inter-societal conflict, despite its ubiquity, is ignored. This omission is a serious blind spot. Inter-societal aggression is frequently justified by attributing to another society precisely the kind of anti-social practices that are imputed to a scapegoat (Arens 1979). Yet Girard takes such accusations to be evidence of the prevalence of cannibalism and human sacrifice. His ability to decode the mythology of intra-societal violence thus depends, at least in part, upon his uncritical acceptance of the mythology of inter-societal conflict.

Girard himself points to another inconsistency in his project. In an essay on Camus in *'To Double Business Bound'*, he re-opens the case of Mersault, the hero of *L'Etranger*. Mersault might be supposed an archetypal scapegoat - a man unjustly condemned to death on account of his anomalous behaviour at his mother's funeral. Yet

Girard sees him as a juvenile delinquent who receives his just deserts. Camus, he feels, presents his character from a 'warped perspective' in which the 'secretly provocative nature of the murder is never acknowledged and the reprisals of society are presented as unprovoked aggression' (*'To Double Business Bound'*, p. 31). As a reading of the novel this has much to recommend it, but from a Girardian point of view it is problematic. It raises numerous questions to which Girard offers no answers: How are the guilty to be distinguished from the innocent? Are sacrificial victims always innocent, and if not, does it matter?

Girard's distaste for dealing with the difficulties raised by his own ideas should not obscure his exceptional readiness to engage with the work of earlier theorists. It is this which explains his considerable popularity in France - a country in which he has not been resident for forty years - where a survey conducted in 1981 found him to be the fourteenth most influential of contemporary intellectual figures (Lévi-Strauss came first, Dumézil thirty-fourth and Bourdieu thirty-sixth [Bourdieu 1988: 262]). For a generation whose intellectual development has taken place within perimeters staked out by Lévi-Strauss, Freud and Nietzsche, Girard's work must come as an extraordinary liberation. He has turned these boundaries inside out and used them to define a unified theory of his own. As an act of subversion, Girard's project is without parallel. He has created a mirror in which the cultural assumptions of the age appear grotesque and misbegotten. That this reflection may be a distortion is all too evident. What is really disconcerting is the extent to which the image is recognisable and familiar.

For English readers less absorbed in the milieu to which Girard is reacting, the impact of his work is bound to be muted. Even so, the sense of embarrassment experienced on encountering the Girardian project is not wholly inspired by its author's solecisms. Because it offers a complete theoretical perspective independent of conventional academic presuppositions, Girard's work provides a unique vantage point from which to review one's own assumptions. The embarrassment it induces is perhaps also that of self-consciousness.

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