

CHAPTER 1

The “True” Unconscious

Girard to Freud

The threefold articulation of mimesis, violence, and the unconscious provides this study with an obvious starting point for a genealogical investigation into the vicissitudes of the catharsis and contagious hypotheses on (new) media violence. The French theorist, anthropologist, and literary critic René Girard is, in fact, one of the most important contemporary thinkers who, after a period of relative marginalization at the twilight of the twentieth century, is currently returning to the forefront of the theoretical scene at the dawn of the twenty-first century. His analyses of the relation between mimetic desire, ritual violence, and scapegoating mechanisms that look back to the sacrificial origins of culture still tend to be marginalized in critical theory.¹ And yet, in cultural practice, Girard’s mimetic hypothesis provides a broad interdisciplinary framework to account for the increasing threats of violent escalations that plague contemporary societies, encouraging a growing number of theorists, philosophers, and social scientists to reflect further on the contagious powers of violence to generate irrational sameness in place of rational differences.

Despite growing recognition in the humanities, Girard’s work is rarely mentioned in discussions on (new) media violence. Understandably so, since

Girard did not himself directly engage with the relation between media and violence, leaving this connection for other theorists of mimesis to pursue. At the same time, Girard's mimetic theory has not been deprived of cultural recognitions, leading Michel Serres to proclaim him as the "new Darwin of human sciences"—an emphatic designation that does not reflect a consensus on the scientific status of Girard's work but speaks to his growing acceptance within and beyond the academy.² This return of attention to Girard's thought is well deserved. Although I will be careful not to mechanically map his theory to the problematic that follows—if only because I have a theory of mimesis of my own—Girard's diagnostic of violence from the angle of catharsis and contagion remains relevant for the transdisciplinary genealogy that concerns us, and deserves to be taken seriously. It also allows us to further the insight that "debates over the meaning of catharsis . . . mirror the concerns of each age or school of thought,"³ which does not mean that these mirroring effects are deprived of revealing insights into the relation between violence and the unconscious.

Over the past half century, Girard engaged with a wide range of literary, anthropological, psychological, and philosophical traditions in order to analyze how the logic of mimetic desire leads to rivalries that spread mimetically and thus contagiously, from self to others, individuals to communities, generating violent actions and cathartic reactions that are not under the full control of consciousness, yet have the power to affect us unconsciously nonetheless. This is why Girard says that "in imitation there is always a certain degree of unconsciousness involved."⁴ The problematic of the unconscious is thus directly related to Girard's theory of violence, which does not mean that the Girardian concept of the unconscious can be easily identified or has been clearly defined so far. Not only Girard did not develop a theory of the unconscious, but at times he also opts for a dispensation of the hypothesis of the unconscious altogether.⁵ Hence, before we set out to shed new light on Girard's account of violence and the unconscious as a step toward solving the riddle of (new) media violence, a reminder of the general scope of his theory and of the mimetic agonism that brought it into being is in order.

The Girardian Unconscious—a Genealogy

Girard is commonly identified as the thinker who founded mimetic theory, but theories of mimesis, as we shall see, have a much longer history. It would be more accurate to say that Girard's theory is based on a structural configuration grouped under three, related concepts of mimetic desire, rivalry, and violence, and the scapegoat he posits at the foundation of the world.⁶ The threefold structure is not accidental. There is, in fact, a structural triangulation that finds in mimetic desire a *via regia* to the psyche that is driven by ambivalent feelings toward models or mediators. A similar dynamic was diagnosed by Sigmund Freud via an Oedipal model of the unconscious that, at first sight, does not occupy a privileged position in Girard's mimetic theory. Still, our genealogy aims to bring this structural analogy to the fore in order to rethink the foundations of both the catharsis and the affective hypothesis. In my Janus-faced titles, *Violence and the Oedipal/Mimetic Unconscious*, I thus voluntarily echo what I take to be Girard's most influential but also most Freudian book, *Violence and the Sacred*. And I do so with an aim that is double: first, I reveal the Oedipal structural foundations on which the entire edifice of Girard's theoretical foundations, including his cathartic hypothesis, rests. And second, I supplement a still missing, undervalued, yet, in our view, decisive concept—the mimetic unconscious—that lies at the foundation of our theory of *homo mimeticus*. This confrontation will not be simply rivalrous or antagonistic. On the contrary, it will develop in a respectful spirit of mimetic agonism that informs our entire genealogy of catharsis and contagion that follows.

Unlike the much-discussed concept of mimetic desire, which is manifest everywhere in Girard's work and provides the psychological foundation for his account of the ambivalences generated by mimetic rivalry and the scapegoating mechanisms it triggers, the concept of the unconscious tends to remain latent in his system and has so far been little discussed. In order to bring it to the surface, it requires an unusual combination of a bird's eye view that encompasses the overall scope of Girard's theory from a philosophical distance, while at the same time being able to zoom in on its conceptual and affective details as they emerge to confront specific problems—in short, a double sight characteristic not of a passive reader of theory but of an active theorist and creator of concepts.

On the one hand, this Janus-faced genealogical perspective should not treat specific aspects of Girard's theory in isolation but, rather, considers the complex relations between the parts and the whole by taking into account the overall synchronic structure and diachronic development of Girard's system in general—not an easy task, given that this system engages with a variety of disciplines from literary criticism to anthropology to philosophy, to name a few, and goes from the origins of hominization to its apocalyptic destinations. On the other hand, and at the same time, this perspective should consider the genealogical development of a theory of mimesis that, like all theories, builds on influential predecessors but, despite its focus on imitation, or perhaps because of it, does not always say so explicitly yet leaves traces of influences for the genealogist to uncover in order to go further. Hence the importance of taking a degree of healthy epistemological distance from Girard's hermeneutics. This will allow us to uncover that under what initially appear as rivalrous oppositions that emphasize theoretical differences, striking mirroring continuities reveal innovative inversions of rather familiar structures.

If I take the trouble to rehearse a theory that is by now well known in its general outlines and has already generated a number of informed commentaries,⁷ it is with a specific genealogical perspective aimed to foregrounding the mirroring theoretical foundations of Girard's mimetic theory that are still little known. My focus in this chapter is thus less in introducing Girard's theory of violence, but in unearthing the hidden epistemic foundations on which this theory rests. This will allow us to evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of his mimetic theory, as well as of other theories of violence and the unconscious he relies on, in view of furthering a theory of homo mimeticus relevant to the contemporary problem that concerns us in this volume: namely, the problem of (new) media violence and its hypothetical cathartic unconscious effect. It is in fact only if we combine both distant and proximate perspectives that we can bring into focus how Girard's thought on desire and violence is part of a genealogical iceberg whose deep foundations have not been brought to the surface as yet. A closer genealogical look at the foundations of Girard's system will bring us very quickly to the bottom of a transdisciplinary tradition in western thought that attempted to solve the riddle of catharsis central to the Oedipal unconscious (volume 1) while also

pointing to the problem of contagion central to the mimetic unconscious (volume 2).

Girard's take on violence cannot be dissociated from his conception of "mimetic desire," which he initially outlined as a literary critic in his first book, *Deceit, Desire and the Novel* (1961). In his exploration of the relation between self and others in novels by Cervantes, Stendhal, Flaubert, Proust, and Dostoevsky, Girard noticed that underneath the first layer of obvious differentiations and oppositions, the same fundamental structure led romantic protagonists to involuntarily desire what others desire. Not just any others, but admired, exemplary others, what he also calls "models," or "mediators," with whom the protagonist qua subject identifies. The structural consequences of this insight can be summarized in two foundational starting points.

First, the subject desires what the other desires, a formula that, like many other French thinkers, Girard inherited from a characteristically French Hegelian tradition mediated by Alexandre Kojève's lectures on the *Phenomenology of the Spirit*. Dominant in the 1940s and 1950s, Kojève's lectures were concerned with a master/slave dialectic of recognition predicated on what Girard himself calls "a desire for the other's desire."⁸ While Girard stresses the desire for the object perhaps more than the desire for recognition, this master-slave dialectic of desires struggling for pure prestige is also at the origins of his theory of mimetic desire. As Girard belatedly acknowledged: "Many wanted to see me as the successor of Kojève, the great commentator on Hegel," which, despite the flattering genealogy, led to the accusation that "mimetic desire was only a reformulation of the desire for recognition in Hegel's theory" (*BE* 30). And Girard adds, in a confessional spirit that illustrates what I shall later call romantic agonism: "Naturally I fought back like a demon, but I cannot deny that Hegel was in the background" (30). Fighting back, we already see, is an agonistic move that betrays an anxiety of imitative proximity. For the moment suffices to say that Girard's restriction to a dialectic of desire as a starting point to establish the foundations of a theory of mimesis tout court is not accidental. It is part of the Hegelian spirit still predominant in France in the 1960s whose traces can be found in thinkers with elective affinities, from Jean-Paul Sartre to Jacques Lacan to Georges Bataille—a Hegelianism, genealogical lenses will lead us to reconsider.⁹

Second, once this master/slave dialectic of recognition is posited as the foundation of a self-other structural dynamic, the relation between the subject and the admired model becomes increasingly ambivalent. In fact, for Girard, the model not only directs the subject's desire toward an already desired object but inevitably turns into an obstacle or rival on the path of a now contested desired object. The subject, the model, and the object are thus intimately tied in a structural double bind that rests on two related yet distinct ties: namely, an identification with the model (or mimesis) and a desire for the contested object (or "appropriative desire"), which, knotted together, generate a quasi-Oedipal triangular form whose universality we shall have to reevaluate. With this structure in place, a fight to the death for the same "object," which can be a human being, often a woman, is set in motion. Thus, the "subject," the "model," and the "object" are framed within a triangular, rivalrous structure, which will inevitably trigger pathological and potentially violent feelings like jealousy, envy, and resentment characteristic of romantic fictions that provide both the synchronic and diachronic vectors of Girard's mimetic theory. This structuralist theory had, indeed, a strong explicative reach during the linguistic turn; it also calls for a reassessment in light of more recent theoretical turns constitutive of the *re*-turn to mimesis.

Girard infers the structure of violence from literary fictions based on familial dramas; but rather than confining his analysis within the formal boundaries of the text, he makes clear in subsequent books that this violence has a referent in the real world as well and can generate a "crisis of difference" that affects and infects the entire social body. Shifting the focus of attention from rivalries in literary fictions to rivalries in anthropological realities, from aesthetic representations to ritual referents, Girard articulates this mechanism in his second major work, *Violence and the Sacred* (1972). This is also the work where the problematic of violence and the unconscious is most manifestly articulated agonistically, with and against important, and previously unmentioned, genealogical precursors. Let us take a closer look.

Both synchronic and diachronic vectors of analysis are simultaneously at play in Girard's account of the birth of culture out of a violent sacrificial and collective murder that is not under the control of consciousness and is, in this sense, unconscious. This does not mean that human violence, for Girard, is biologically innate and part of an instinct of survival, as Konrad Lorenz argues in *On Aggression* (1963).¹⁰ On the contrary, rather than being a

cause of aggressive behavior, Girard considers violence a mimetic effect of the appropriative structure of human desires. Summing up what is presented as an anthropological narrative of lost origins in terms of the diachronic vector of his theory, while at the same time pursuing the structuralist hypothesis that mimetic desire leads to violence in line with his synchronic vector of analysis, Girard now ties both diachronic and synchronic threads in a gordian knot that centers on what he enigmatically calls the "true 'unconscious.'" As he puts it in *Violence and the Sacred*, as a consequence of the violent rivalry generated by mimetic desire, a crisis of difference occurs whereby

the more frenzied the mimetic process becomes, caught up in the confusion [*tourbillon*] of constantly changing forms, the more unwilling men are to recognize that they have made an obstacle of the model and a model of the obstacle. Here we encounter a true "unconscious" [*le véritable inconscient est là*], and one that can obviously assume many forms. (*VS* 189)

This is a rather schematic account of a complex, dynamic, and wide-ranging theory that articulates the centrality of violence in the emergence of culture; and yet genealogical lenses brought us very quickly to the spiraling center of Girard's theoretical system. They also allow us to zoom in on this "confusion"—or as the French says, "vortex" (*tourbillon*)—and begin to identify the structural channels through which violent affects are made to flow. We have, in fact, not only reached the foundational mimetic principle, that, for Girard, generates rivalry, frenzy, violence, and eventually a purgative catharsis that is central to his account of the origins of culture; we are also in a position to see that the enigmatic and rather unspecified concept of an "unconscious" Girard considers "true" latently informs his structural dynamic, providing his hermeneutics with an invisible spiraling center that is nowhere and everywhere—if only because it is around this center that the *tourbillon* of frenzied affects, be they bad or good, contagious or cathartic, turns and, by extension, in-forms (gives a structural form to) the entirety of Girard's mimetic theory.

The French text is specific: Girard's conception of what he calls the "true 'unconscious'" is topographically located at the center of this "vortex," and is thus fluid, protean, and manifests itself in "many forms." And yet, from a genealogical distance that hovers far above Girard's theory of violence and the unconscious, we can confirm that its latent, albeit barely visible, foundations

rest on a privileged form. That is, a triangular form that turns around a subject, a model, and a contested object that is not without resemblance with an alternative, perhaps not “true” but certainly dominant and influential theory of the unconscious that has become synonymous with the discovery of the unconscious tout court. This theory will play a pivotal role in developing the catharsis hypothesis, which Girard encourages us to revisit from the angle of mimesis: namely, psychoanalysis.

Of course, we should be careful in establishing our genealogical affiliation, for the continuities between mimetic theory and psychoanalysis are far from clear-cut. Consistently in his work, Girard is severely critical toward the father of psychoanalysis—so critical that he dismisses the Freudian concept of the “unconscious” as “unwieldy and dubious” (*VS* 176). Girard even hastens to add that when it comes to the unconscious, “Freud is of little use as a guide over this terrain” (189), thereby implying that he is entering uncharted psychological terrain. Thus, Girard pits a “true” unconscious contra a “dubious” unconscious, and, more generally, his mimetic hypothesis contra Freud’s Oedipal hypothesis. This distancing critical move is particularly visible in a chapter devoted to “Freud and the Oedipus Complex” in *Violence and the Sacred*, from which I have just quoted. It deserves a closer consideration given the agonistic confrontation with Freud it entails, precisely on the relation between violence and the unconscious.

Girard with or contra Freud?

As the specification that this is a “true” unconscious already suggests,¹¹ Girard’s rediscovery of the unconscious implies an intellectual confrontation with the father of psychoanalysis that is not deprived of mirroring effects. As he convincingly shows via a close reading of key texts on group psychology and metapsychology, Freud oscillates between the primacy of mimesis (identification) on the one hand, and the primacy of desire (object cathexis) on the other, a pendular movement that is revealed in what Girard calls Freud’s “slip of the pen” (*VS* 172) and ultimately always leads the latter to opt for the primacy of desire and to “banish mimesis from his later work” (173). What motivates this Freudian ban? And how should we interpret this Freudian

slip? Let us distinguish between the reasons of the ban, and the language Girard convokes to diagnose it.

In the philosophical tradition, mimesis was traditionally banished because of the irrational power of mimetic pathos to trouble the metaphysical ideal of the human psyche, or soul. This critique applies first and foremost to Plato's metaphysics and the rationalism and idealism that led to the ban of mimesis at the dawn of philosophy we shall consider in detail in volume 2. But why apply the Platonic allusion to this ban to Freud, given the latter's battle contra rationalist philosophers to account for humans' irrational and unconscious tendencies? Surely, the father of psychoanalysis, unlike the father of philosophy, cannot be critiqued for positing an ideal of rational consciousness at the center of what is, after all, a theory of the unconscious?

And yet this is precisely what Girard suggests. At the end of his rather detailed and penetrating analysis of Freud's Oedipal theory, Girard unmasks a rationalist exclusion of mimesis as constitutive of Freud's metapsychology. Not unlike Plato's metaphysics, Freud's metapsychology, according to Girard, rests on a traditional "philosophy of consciousness" (*VS* 176) that makes the psychoanalytical concept of the unconscious dubious in the first place. In fact, in Girard's interpretation, Freud's assumption that the Oedipal child automatically desires the maternal object without the mediation of a paternal model is predicated on an Oedipal subject that does not need to be told what to desire but, like a "traditional philosophical subject" (182)—after all, Oedipus is a solver of riddles—already has a "conscious knowledge" (177) of both his/her incestuous desire and violent parricidal intentions.¹² Thus, in an inversion of perspectives on the case of Oedipus, Girard specifies: "The incest wish, the patricide wish, do not belong to the child but spring from the mind of the adult, the model" (175). As Girard ironically concludes his diagnostic of psychoanalysis, ultimately, the theory of the Oedipus complex might actually set up a mirror to the psychoanalyst's own incestuous/parricidal desire, be it real or theoretical. For Girard, the child, not unlike the scapegoat, is "innocent" (174). The Oedipal/patricidal wish is unconsciously projected by the father. At one remove, both desires (for the mother and the death of the father) might be projected by the father of psychoanalysis himself who wishes to establish an Oedipal theory of the unconscious. Thus, the father of psychoanalysis is thoroughly psychoanalyzed. And in the process of the

analysis, the Oedipal unconscious turns out to rest on the projection of a rationalist conception of consciousness.

Mimetic theory sets up an unflattering mirror to psychoanalytical, Oedipal desires. We can thus better understand why, in later works, Girard reiterates his “distrust” of the concept of “*the* unconscious” for the “ontological essentialism” (*EC* 86) it entails. It is, in fact, the very hypothesis of the unconscious Girard calls into question, for the primacy of mimesis over desire challenges the “repressive hypothesis” and thus “does away with the unconscious” (*VS* 183). Fair enough. It would, however, have been more accurate to say that Girard aims to do away with the Freudian unconscious. This does not mean that alternative conceptions of the unconscious do not remain central to account for the logic of mimetic violence. Girard, for one, at times prefers the pre-Freudian conception of “lack of consciousness” (*EC* 86) or nonconscious, which is collective rather than individual, based on a mimetic/hypnotic hypothesis I shall return to, rather than on the repressive hypothesis we are interrogating here.¹³ For the moment, let us retain that because of Freud’s quasi-Platonic ban of mimesis from his metapsychology, Girard considers that the father of psychoanalysis “failed” to apprehend the mimetic logic of desire that paves the way for a more faithful account of the relation between desire, violence, and the unconscious central to our genealogy. While Freud relies on the concept of ambivalence, which he routinely convokes to account for the double bind that ties the Oedipal subject’s identificatory/rivalrous relation to the model, Girard considers this ambivalence as a symptom of a “latent conflict” dormant in Freud’s theory of the unconscious, which required Girard’s interpretation in order to manifest itself. This, at least, is what emerges if we limit our analysis to the manifest content of Girard’s critique of the Freudian unconscious.

But genealogy is not only attentive to the content of a theory; it also considers its formal language. And it does so, not to discover a latent meaning but to highlight manifest rhetorical strategies that bring new theories of the unconscious into being. In fact, attention to Girard’s rhetorical moves indicates a fundamental ambivalence in his own evaluation of Freud. That is, ambivalences, or wavering oscillations, that indicate a double movement toward/away from the father of psychoanalysis. Such ambivalences are worth attending to for they reveal important genealogical traces in Girard’s own theorization of violence and the unconscious. For instance, Girard admits

Freud comes "*very close* to apprehending it [the logic of mimetic desire]" (*VS* 169; my emphasis) in his account of the male child's Oedipal triangulation of desire for the mother (or object cathexis) and mimesis (or identification) with the father, yet he also stresses that Freud ultimately "failed" to do so (169). Thus, Girard feels the need "to *continue* along the paths abandoned by him [Freud]" in order to "*discover where he* [Freud] *might have gone* had he chosen to be guided" (173; my emphasis) by the thread of mimesis in his explorations of the labyrinth of the unconscious.

A critique that explicitly sets up a distance to an opponent/model leads to a continuation implying a proximity. Or, to put it in a language both theorists share, by identifying with Freud, taking his place along the path he abandoned, he, Girard, sets out to find out where he, Freud, might have gone. If psychoanalysis paved the way for the path, then, mimetic theory is the extension that will allow Girard to discover a "'true' unconscious" Freud both failed to theorize and paved the way for. Girard even mimics psychoanalytical parlance ("latent conflicts," "suppressing mimesis," "slips of the pen," etc.) in order to reinterpret the Oedipus complex *contra* Freud, while at the same time furthering Freudian insights. If ambivalence may be too vague a concept to account for Girard's double reading with/*contra* Freud, the Nietzschean concept of "pathos of distance" provides a philosophical alternative. Its oxymoronic tension describes a double movement of attraction and repulsion in which the need for distance and differentiation is actually symptomatic that a mimetic pathos and similarity already connects the subject to the theoretical model.

Girard is the first to acknowledge this double movement, if not explicitly, at least rhetorically so. Thus, from the very opening lines he recognizes "both similarities and differences" between his account of mimetic desire and Freud's Oedipus complex, acknowledging that the two theories are "at once similar and quite different" (*VS* 174). To be more precise we should rather say that they are presented as different because they are quite similar.

Difference as the effect of sameness will indeed be constitutive of agonistic relations we shall explore in theories of violence and the unconscious that follow. Girard's mimetic relation to Freud provides the blueprint. From his avowal that mimesis "plays an important role in Freud's work" to his specification that it is "not important enough," from the recognition that Freud

came “very close” and yet he “failed,” from the insight that he is “too precious to be left to the psychoanalysis” (*VS* 178) to the decision to pursue the “path abandoned by him” (173) to other strikingly ambivalent evaluations, such a contradictory pathos of distance indicates to a theorist of mimesis not blinded by the superficial primacy of difference qua originality, that a deep genealogical connection is actually at play—the connection and pathos being stronger in direct proportion to the need of theoretical differentiation and distance. The “differences” Girard emphasizes between his theory and the Oedipus complex are perhaps an indication that the “similarities” are actually more important—a lesson that is, after all, constitutive of mimetic theory. Precisely if we adopt Girardian lenses, when a subject is caught in a mirroring relation, rivalrous differentiation is what often ensues. Although the claim applies to the imitative subject Girard theorizes, there is no reason to confine the diagnostic within the boundaries of the text, for mimetic theory also applies to subjects outside the text, perhaps stretching to include, at one remove, Girard’s own conflictual relation to his own theoretical models. If “mimetism is a source of continual conflict” and “inevitably leads to rivalry” (169), as Girard reminds us at the opening of his most Freudian chapter and tirelessly repeats in all his works, perhaps this insight applies to theoretical rivalries as well, especially when it comes to a concept as contested as the unconscious.

That said, we do not need to posit a latent Oedipal conflict at the heart of Girard’s theory to account for this ambivalent double bind. Although mimesis plays a central role in relations with intellectual models, and a form of external mediation is certainly at play in Girard’s relation to the father of psychoanalysis, strictly speaking, this is not a classical instance of what Girard would call “mimetic rivalry.” Sure, an identification exists between subject and model (Girard’s identification with Freud, the pursuit of his path, the discovery of latent conflicts, interpretations of slips of the pen, etc.); and yet this mimesis does not simply lead to rivalry, let alone physical violence—though a form of rhetorical violence is certainly animating Girard’s diagnostic. Nor does it lead to affective symptoms that can be considered pathological—though Girard is the first to admit that the great writers of mimesis can write so well about affects like jealousy, resentment, and vanity because they experienced them in their lives first. At one remove, this may apply to theorists of jealousy as well.¹⁴ Rather, and for us

more important, this mimetic relation with an intellectual model is generative of positive theoretical results that generate what I call *patho-logies*, in the specific sense that the affect or pathos of a mimetic identification with an exemplary precursor can be put to productive theoretical use to bring forth a new thought or logos on mimesis.

And this is where the concept of mimetic agonism enters the theoretical scene to cast light on the genealogy of violence and the unconscious constitutive of homo mimeticus.

Mimetic Agonism

I already alluded to the agonistic relation between advocates of the catharsis hypothesis and those of the affective hypothesis, an agonism constitutive of the mirroring structure of this Janus-faced study. Let me now go further by specifying the paradoxical movement that animates what I call the mimetic agonism generative of mirroring inversions of perspectives in the first place. Mimetic agonism is a form of intellectual and creative contest I first identified in Nietzsche's relation to his models, or educators, that appear at first sight to be simply opponents, antagonists, or rivals, yet, on a closer genealogical investigation, turn out to provide the very conceptual and theoretical tools to establish an opposition in the first place—in a creative, productive, yet still imitative way.¹⁵ As we shall see, the mirroring inversions of perspectives that entangle main advocates of the catharsis and affective hypothesis benefit a great deal from an insight into the dynamic of mimetic agonism. As Johan Huizinga rightly identified in *Homo Ludens* (1938), the agon is a constitutive element of the all too human fascination for play and games.¹⁶ We shall see this applies to intellectual games and contests as well. If Huizinga set out to map the agonistic element in the practices of *homo ludens*, we argue that mimetic agonism is central to the theorization of homo mimeticus. Both are not deprived of playful and creative elements.

This agonistic confrontation is thus not simply rivalrous, reactive, or violent. On the contrary, it is competitive, active, and productive of knowledge for it is intended to push thought further—by pushing against the shoulders of influential predecessors. For instance, the "mysterious antagonism" Nietzsche identifies in his agonistic relation to his former model, Richard

Wagner, early in his career, becomes particularly visible when the problematic of mimesis is at play. As Nietzsche puts it in the fourth of his *Untimely Meditations* (1873) dedicated to Wagner: “By apparently succumbing to Wagner’s overflowing nature, he who reflects upon it has in fact participated in its energy and has thus as it were *through him* acquired power *against him*.”¹⁷ What follows furthers a reevaluation of the centrality of agonism by highlighting Nietzsche’s debt to his colleague at Basel, the historian Jacob Burckhardt, and by emphasizing the importance of mimetic agonism for mimetic theory more generally. What applies to Nietzsche’s relation to Wagner early in his career, in fact, applies to his other models qua antagonists as well, throughout his career. Be it with respect to Wagner, Schopenhauer, or Plato, in his agonistic intellectual skirmishes, Nietzsche is not simply writing against, or contra, his former intellectual models qua educators; nor is he passively mimicking them. Rather, he writes in an agonistic identification *with and against* them by creatively appropriating the predecessors’ thoughts to propose new, not fully original, yet nonetheless future-oriented thoughts affirmed in a Homeric spirit of contestation and love of honor, or *philotima*. In our language, mimetic agonism provides the affective and conceptual perspectives—the pathos and the logos—that turn romantic pathologies internal to mimetic rivalry (jealousy, resentment, violence, etc.) into a modernist patho-*logy*, a mimetic patho-*logy* that makes our theory of mimesis new by pushing with and against influential precursors. Since this method is internal to our genealogical reevaluation of both the cathartic and the affective hypotheses that posit a mirroring agonism that divides/unites this double study, let us consider the genealogy of mimetic agonism in more detail.

The mimetic dynamic of the agon is not without resemblances with other agonistic confrontations with influential predecessors that culminated in Romanticism during the first half of the nineteenth century. Yet it should not be too hastily conflated with them, for the ancient foundations of the agon and the romantic source of anxieties rest on a rather different ethos, are driven by a different power, and promote different conceptions of creation. If mimetic agonism bears a family resemblance with what Harold Bloom, on the shoulders of Freud, calls “anxiety of influence,” we shall confirm time and again that the logic of mimetic agonism is not predicated on a metapsychology based on “repression,” “*Nachträglichkeit*,” and a romantic anxiety of originality that leads to creative but rather partial “misreadings” of influential

predecessors.¹⁸ Rather, as the concept of agon suggests, its origins are of classical rather than romantic inspiration. They go back to what Nietzsche's colleague at Basel, the cultural historian Jacob Burckhardt, in his lectures on *The Greeks and Greek Civilization* (1898–1902) called the "agonal age" constitutive of the archaic, Homeric period.¹⁹ If the origins of the mimetic agon are ancient, modern thinkers like Nietzsche reenacted the agon, contest, or *Wettkampf* for the modern period.²⁰ Mimetic agonism provides an alternative to romantic rivalries and anxieties predicated on the myth of originality that did not have such a tight grip on the Greek agonal age and perhaps should not have a grip on our hypermimetic age either.

Let us recall that the Greek agon originates in the physical agonism of the Olympic games. An exemplary dramatization of this agonistic spirit in games was already at play in Homer's *Odyssey* in his journey home (*nostos*). Specifically, in the famous section in Book 8 on "The Phaeacian Games," as Ulysses is provoked to a challenge by Laodamas in "any forms of sport," Odysseus replies: "Why are you trying to provoke me with your challenges, you and your friends. I am too sick at heart to think of games. I have been through many bitter and exhausting experiences, and all I seek now is my passage home."²¹ But he is insulted by another (Euryalus) who claims: "One can see you are no athlete" (*O* 8.163–64, 111). Odysseus, usually calm, is provoked to anger and accepts the agon: "I'll try my hand at the sports. For your words have stung me and put me on my mettle" (8.184–85, 111). He picks up "the biggest discus of all, a huge weight, more massive by far than the Phaeacians normally used. With one swing he launched it from his mighty hand, and the stone hummed on its course" (8.187–90, 111–12). Athena, pretending to be one of the crowd, readily announces: "None of the Phaeacians will make as good a throw, let alone a better" (8.197–98, 112). It is interesting that an accusation that could have led to a violent escalation finds in the alternative space of the games a set of rules, techniques, and skills that allow the agonist to channel an aggressive pathos into a crafted physical gesture driven by the desire to overcome the offender. A base, even rivalrous, challenge can thus, in a specifically delineated space that contains the agon, give rise to the power to excel—at least if the agonistic nature is a noble, trained, and heroic one.

Beyond sports but driven by the same spirit, the agon also plays a crucial role in the development of an ambitious, noble, and creative culture that affirms a type of individualism characteristic of Greek culture that,

Burckhardt specifies, does not rely on “personal manifestations of ‘genius’” and made a “lasting imprint on Greek attitudes” (*GGC* 161). As Burckhardt puts it: “The aim [of the agon] was now to develop the body to the highest perfection of beauty, a purpose for which each individual had to submit to a methodical discipline just as severe as training in the arts, denying himself any personal manifestation of ‘genius’” (161). The mimetic agonist should thus not be conflated with the romantic genius based on the myth of divine inspiration; it is rather based on a rigorous training that is immanent in nature instead. Stretching from gymnastic to *in-form* (give form to) aesthetic/intellectual contests or competitions internal to drama, but also law, politics, and philosophy, the agon played a decisive role in developing a “competitive spirit” that was restricted to males but could nonetheless be partially shared in the Greek polis. As Burckhardt continues: “the agon was a motive power known to no other people—the general leavening element that, given the essential conditions of freedom, proved capable of working upon the will and the potentialities of every individual” (162)—including, of course, creative individuals cultivating artistic crafts, which, as Henry Staten recently stressed, the Greeks understood under the general rubric of “*techne*.”²² From music to painting, sculpture to drama (in its comic and tragic manifestations), and poetry more generally, Burckhardt claims, with passion and philological insight, that “the art of poetry develops under the determining influence of the agon” (182). This agonistic spirit, as we shall see, concerns the development of our theory of *homo mimeticus* as well, which we further under the influence of an ancient but still operative agon.

Important for our argument, this agon is constitutive of the quarrel between philosophy and literature as well, on which the debate on catharsis and contagion—and, more generally, media violence—has its roots. Already Pseudo-Longinus in *On the Sublime* (ca. first century A.D.) located an agonistic dynamic at the heart of the ancient quarrel between Plato and Homer. He pointed out, for instance, that the father of philosophy “from the great Homeric source drew to himself innumerable tributary streams,” which Pseudo-Longinus describes according to the paradoxical structure of the mimetic agon.²³ Pseudo-Longinus is specific in his account that agonism entails a double movement with/against the opponent; it is worth quoting for it informs the movement of our genealogy as well. He continues:

And it seems to me that there would not have been so fine a bloom of perfection on Plato's philosophical doctrines, and that he would not in many cases have found his way to poetical subject matter and modes of expression, unless he had with all his heart and mind struggled with Homer for the primacy, entering the list like a young champion matched against the man whom all admire, and showing perhaps too much love of contention and breaking a lance with him as it were, but deriving some profit from the contest none the less.²⁴

Since the birth of mimetic theory in Plato's thought, then, there is value in breaking a lance or two with worthy predecessors, be they on the side of art or thought, pathos or logos—or, as often, an interplay of both. To put it in Nietzschean parlance, Plato developed philosophy through and against Homer. The stakes of the agon are thus high. It is the very identity of philosophy itself that emerges from a mimetic agonism with literature in general and the dramatizations of violence it entails in particular.

Now, if Burckhardt located the agon at the heart of ancient Greek culture, Nietzsche reloaded it for modernist European culture, planting the seeds for modernist theories of mimesis to come.²⁵ He did so in an unpublished, youthful text titled "Homer's Contest [*Wettkampf*]" (1872), where, on the shoulders of Burckhardt, but via a philological investigation of his own already underway, Nietzsche stepped back to the Greek sources of the agon, which, he agreed with his Basel colleague and friend, eventually go all the way back to Hesiod and especially Homer.²⁶ Drawing on a distinction first made in Hesiod's *Theogony* (eighth to seventh century B.C.) between two manifestations of the goddess Eris, or strife, with "completely separate dispositions," Nietzsche introduced a philological distinction that is at least double and reaches into the present. In fact, it looks back to two conceptions of contest central to classical antiquity; but for genealogists this move maps two alternative paths for modern (romantic/modernist) contests that pave the way for two competing mimetic theories for the present and future.

A genealogy of the agon confronts us with a crossroads that is ancient in mythic origins yet still contemporary in its theoretical value. On the one hand, Nietzsche identifies a divine Eris that "encourages bad war and strife—cruelty!" on the basis of a life-negating ethos that is located among the gods

and generates “resentment” as well as “envy” (HC 3). This is a path central to romantic anxieties of originality that rest on the myth of the individual genius and is constitutive of what Girard calls “mimetic rivalry.”²⁷ On the other side, Burckhardt had already noticed that the good Eris “was the first to be born,” is planted in “the very roots of the earth,” and “awakens even the indolent and unskilled to industry.”²⁸ Echoing these very same lines, Nietzsche confirms that Zeus placed the other Eris in the “root of the earth,” considers it “good for humankind,” and “drives even the unskilled man to work” in view of “provok[ing] human beings to action” (HC 3). The crucial point, both Burckhardt and Nietzsche agree, is that this agonistic contest leads “not to the action of fights of annihilation but rather to the action of *contests*” (3)—that is, affirmative confrontations driven by a “noble victory without enmity” (*GGC* 166). Nietzsche was quick to sense that there is significant genealogical potential in recuperating this Greek agon for the modern(ist) creative sensibility his untimely work projected into future sensibilities as well. It is this second, more immanent, affirmative, and aspirationally noble path that informs the agon our theory aims to pursue in the present period.²⁹ I group this contest under the rubric of *mimetic agonism*, out of which a new theory of homo mimeticus is born.

Mimetic agonism is thus of modernist inspiration and looks ahead to a theory of mimesis for the future; yet its foundations rest on an ancient quarrel between philosophy and poetry that is constitutive of our genealogy of violence and the unconscious. As Nietzsche continues, confirming the agonistic view already internal to Pseudo-Longinus: “We do not understand the strength of Xenophanes’ and later Plato’s attack on the national hero of poetry [Homer] if we do not also think of the monstrous desire at the roots of these attacks to assume the place of the overthrown and inherit his fame” (HC 4). This ancient desire may be monstrous, but it does not lead to violence contra a mimetic double, as Girard postulates. On the contrary, Nietzsche makes clear the productive nature of this agonistic contest as he concludes with a telling Olympic but ultimately human image: “Every great Hellene passes on the torch of the contest; every great virtue sets afire new greatness” (4). There is thus a heroic chain of virtuous figures that set up contagious continuities between Olympic heroes of the past in a Promethean spirit of generosity that not only is simply vertical and transcendental but also, following the example

of the Titan, brings new greatness into this world to be passed on horizontally and temporally, across the ages. And making clear that the Greek agon is itself in an agonistic confrontation against the romantic "exclusivity of genius," Nietzsche specifies what he considers the "crux" of the "play of powers" constitutive of the Homeric *Wettkampf*: namely that mimetic agonism "is hostile to the 'exclusivity' of genius in the modern sense, but . . . presupposes that in a natural order of things, there are always *several* geniuses, who incite each other to reciprocal action as they keep each other within the limits of measure" (5). Romanticism contra modernism, exclusive genius versus inclusive creators, mimetic rivalry contra mimetic agonism: this is, in a nutshell, the genuine antagonism constitutive of the contemporary theory of mimesis we advocate.

Given the Greek, Olympic origins of this agon, the goal is not to escalate intellectual confrontations to the point of rivalry that would unconsciously reproduce in practice the type of contagious violence we aim to understand in our theory of mimesis. On the contrary, as our genealogy makes clear, there is indeed a reciprocal dynamic internal to the contest that keeps the violence of pathos from escalating, endowing the powers of mimetic agonism with a distanced measure, or limit, necessary to affirming new thoughts in a nonviolent spirit of creative affirmation with and against worthy competitors qua precursors.³⁰ If we take hold of the paradoxical double movement of opposition and continuity, pathos and distance, imitation and contestation internal to a mimetic agonism with a plurality of figures scattered across different territories, periods, and traditions, we shall see that this torch reaches, via influential intellectual champions that traverse the history of western thought, into the present. In fact, this mimetic agon cannot be peeled off from the ancient quarrel between philosophy and poetry (or mimesis); we shall see that it is also located at the heart of the quarrel over the cathartic and contagious (or affective) hypothesis and the competing theories of the (Oedipal or mimetic) unconscious they gave birth to as well. Hence the need to step all the way back to an ancient quarrel over mimesis to take the necessary run up, so to speak, to leap ahead to modern and contemporary contests internal to the mimetic turn, or re-turn.

In sum, the logic of mimetic agonism is not predicated on a repressive hypothesis anxiously concerned with romantic claims of originality that

continue to animate the simple logic of rivalry. Nor is it strategically selective in its misreadings that continue to rely on Oedipal father figures generative of anxieties of influence. Rather, it entails an agonistic writing with and against an influential predecessor that, in the fair spirit of an intellectual duel that ties contenders to the same rules of the game, confronts, head-on, the models' theories. It does so by going to these theories' conceptual heart, in a spirit of competitive but also generous and affirmative creation geared toward deepening understanding via the double perspectives of critical *logos* and mimetic *pathos*. Contradictory evaluations, or ambivalent intellectual tensions with predecessors, as Karl Jaspers also noted, are indeed constitutive of what he calls "understanding," which for him also entails both cognitive and emotional evaluations internal to *patho-logies*. As Jaspers puts it, also with Nietzsche as a case study: "Understanding can be linked equally with contrary value-judgments (thus Nietzsche continued to understand Socrates [and Plato as well] but sometimes he evaluated him positively, sometimes negatively)."³¹ The same could be said with respect to Plato's evaluation of Homer, Aristotle's evaluation of Plato, and so on, in a long intellectual chain of intellectual heroes who pass on the torch of knowledge, reaching into the present. Our genealogy of the agon, then, both confirms Jaspers's point and goes further in the diagnostic of this agonistic understanding with and against the other. What is at play in mimetic agonism is in fact a positive assimilation of an influential predecessor's thought, or *logos*, which relies on the productive interplay of both affect and reason, *pathos* and *logos*. If the *pathos* is essential for the initial assimilation, it also provides the power necessary to turn a negative affective evaluation (bad *Eris*) into a productive conceptual affirmation (good *Eris*). Thus, the pathology of mimetic rivalry turns in the *patho-logy* of mimetic agonism.

From this genealogical detour that will inform my reevaluation of quarrels over the catharsis and affective hypothesis involving key figures in the history of western aesthetics from antiquity to the present, it should be clear that I call this paradoxical dynamic "mimetic agonism" for at least three reasons: first, to indicate that no matter how violently opposed thoughts may appear in antagonistic theories considered by passive readers from the outside, there lurks always, below the surface, a degree of productive imitation at play from the inside of agonistic confrontations—a point Nietzsche

will confirm in his understanding of contest via the reciprocal dynamic of agonism as a duel; second, the emphasis on mimesis indicates that the agon originates in exemplary models worthy of imitation first encountered in the Olympic games and subsequently at play in aesthetic contests that had a theatrical agon as a privileged stage in the ancient period—a stage on which both contagion and catharsis will continue to play a key role as well; and third, the “mimetic” before the “agonism” stresses that this dynamic is intimately tied but not limited to ancient aesthetic evaluations but, rather, continues to inform the moderns as well, stretching to animate theoretical and creative conflicts between romantic and modernist theories in the contemporary period—including theoretical conflicts on the cathartic and contagious effects of violent aesthetic spectacles that operate on competing models of the unconscious. Mimetic agonism, in other words, will guide the fundamental reevaluation of all the theories of catharsis and contagion that will follow.

As this genealogy intends to make clear, theories do not come down from the sky of transcendental ideas, already formed, like Athena out of Zeus’s head. On the contrary, they originate from the bottom up, from highly competitive intellectual figures who carry the torch of thought into the present by running on their own legs to pass it down to subsequent generations of thinkers. If we consider a theory, concept, or aesthetic form not as a self-contained, autonomous, and unitary entity modeled on an original idea, or transcendental form, but, rather, trace the genealogical process of conceptual emergence and genealogical transmission whereby this form comes into being via immanent, often agonistic, and sometimes dramatic confrontations with previous models, then we reach an understanding of a theory, concept, or work of art from the inside.

This type of understanding is characteristic of the active theorist and creator rather than the passive reader or faithful disciple. In this book, then, concepts shall not simply be inherited from the past idealist tradition concerned with an adequation (*homoiosis*) or identity between being and thought. Rather, they need to be created from the bottom up with an eye to solving new problems that emerge from a world caught up in a process of becoming. As Nietzsche also puts it in a fragment of *The Will to Power* that paves the ways for a definition of philosophy that has gained traction

in recent years: philosophers “must no longer accept concepts as a gift, nor merely purify and polish them, but first *make* and *create* them” (409; 220). The task of philosophy, for Nietzsche, consists thus in creating concepts, as Gilles Deleuze will later echo, rendering this untimely Nietzschean insight popular for young generations of philosophers via the practice of mimetic agonism we have just outlined.

What we must add is that this agonistic principle applies to mimetic theorists as well—unsurprisingly so, given the avowed focus on mimesis. Such an agonistic stance is indeed the unavowed perspective Girard adopts toward Freud’s theory of the unconscious; it shall also be the avowed perspective we adopt on both Girard’s and Freud’s theories of the unconscious. Attention to the patho-*logies* that emerge from agonistic confrontations allows us to see that despite the differentiating moves, or rather because of them, at the fundamental structural level the theoretical analogies between Girard and Freud in-*form* the general economy of his mimetic theory. And yet, traces of a romantic anxiety of influence responsible for Girard’s disavowal of Freudian influences leads me to qualify this agon via the concept of romantic agonism.

Romantic Agonism

The similar strategies at play in the dynamic of theoretical agonism should not erase the different critical practices it leads to and the different spirits that animate them. Girard allows us to bring some of these differences into focus. Once we take hold of the paradoxical dynamic of the agon, it is clear that Girard’s theory of the “true unconscious” is at least partially implicated in the unconscious principles he critiques in Freud as implicitly false. I call this strategy of differentiation “romantic agonism” for it is still haunted by romantic anxieties of influence that lead Girard, if not to repress, at least to repeatedly disavow the proximity to psychoanalysis, despite the obvious continuities with his mimetic theory.

For instance, given the focus on triangular relations based on desire, rivalry, and ambivalent psychic relations with models, it is striking but also revealing of romantic agonism, that Freud is not mentioned once in Girard’s first book, *Deceit, Desire and the Novel* (1961).³² This agonism is thus romantic

(*romantique*) rather than novelistic (*romanesque*) in Girard's specific sense for it is based on a desire of originality Girard unmasks in his mimetic theory, yet still haunts, phantom-like, his thought in practice. I use the term "romantic" in this specific sense to account, in a mirroring genealogical move, for what I take to be Girard's romantic anxiety of influence. In addition to the rhetorical moves I already noted, if we zoom out from this modernist quarrel over the primacy of mimesis over desire, it is difficult not to see that Girard's emphasis on desire as the essence of subjectivity, his reliance on a triangular form that distinguishes between two distinct emotional ties (desire and identification), his emphasis on the "rivalry" and "double bind" that emerge from this familial triangulation that in turn inaugurates what he calls, mimicking Freud, a "royal road to violence [*voie royale de la violence*]" (VS 8) and opens the door to the "true 'unconscious'"—to list but the most manifest Freudian principles internal to Girard's mimetic theory—can be read as an agonistic extension, mirroring inversion, and romantic rearticulation of a triangular (Oedipal) unconscious initially promoted by the father of psychoanalysis.

"Be like me and don't be like me," the father figure implicitly suggests to the Oedipal child, says Freud in *The Ego and the Id* (1923).³³ And out of this "double bind," as Girard calls it, echoing Gregory Bateson, emerges a romantic agonism that may be too anxious to affirm its originality, yet has patho-logical value nonetheless in the sense that it generates a theory of unconscious desires, rivalries, and violence with a notable theoretical reach and explicative power. Among other things, this theory accounts for the logic of mimetic rivalries that generate affects like jealousy, resentment, vanity, and snobbery, in the modern period, pathological affects that find their original representations in Romantic novels, but cast a shadow on the contemporary world as well; it offers a daring anthropological hypothesis of the origins of culture, religion, and civilization based on a sacrificial murder that Girard hypothetically posits at the heart of the sacred and is subsequently reproduced in rituals across the world and, at one additional remove, in fictional re-presentations—not simply presenting again but rendering present—of sacrificial violence from antiquity to modernity; and, last but not least, it outlines an account of myth in terms of "an unconscious process [*processus non conscient*]" (VS 136) that, despite attempts to elude the concept of the unconscious, is not as inimical to Freud's metapsychology as Girard sometimes would like readers to

believe. After all, at other times, Girard is ready to concede this proximity to the father of psychoanalysis, as he claims, for instance, that “Freud saw infinitely more in Oedipus than all Rationalist combined, beginning with Aristotle.”³⁴ Notice, however, that a modern model (Freud) is agonistically set against the ancient model (Aristotle) in order to set up a distance from the figure who, as we shall see, set the very foundations for the so-called cathartic method. Notice also that this statement appears in an essay titled “Tiresias and the Critic” that places Oedipus as what Girard calls “the first western hero of Knowledge.”³⁵ The unconscious, catharsis, Oedipus; Girard, Freud, Aristotle—are these alignments simple genealogical coincidences? Perhaps. Still, we shall have to reevaluate the paradigmatic choice of the case of Oedipus central to western poetics (Aristotle) in a modernist theory of the unconscious rooted in a cathartic method (Freud) that serves as a step for the development of the “true ‘unconscious’” (Girard).

For the moment, one point should be clear: as Girard looks back to past ritual, violent, and tragic cultures that find in Oedipus the paradigmatic hero of “Western knowledge,” he does so not only on the shoulders of Freud and other, more ancient precursors, but also in order to look ahead to the present unconscious pathologies of our modern, individualistic, capitalist cultures. That is, cultures in which rivalries, as Girard’s late work suggests, threaten to “escalate to extremes” (*BE* 18) in an increasingly precarious world plagued by natural catastrophes, terroristic wars, volatile markets, and pandemic crises. Girard’s mimetic theory, while rarely discussed in empirical studies on media violence, should be an integral part of it for it helps account for the contagious dynamic of violence more broadly, including nuclear escalations that, since the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022, cast a visible shadow on the present and future as well.

Now, if we step back genealogically to reflect critically on the genesis of theories of mimesis that cast light on the catharsis/affective hypotheses connecting violence to the unconscious, we notice that historical vicissitudes that may appear contingent play a crucial role in the development of trans-historical theories. For instance, highly volatile markets based on the logic of social differentiation provide a historical context in which Girard’s theory of violence originated and eventually—not without struggles and marginalizations—culminated. Girard is, in fact, the first to admit that in the so-called sciences of man (a gender biased translation of *sciences humaines*

or humanities, which now includes nonhumans as well), the "subject" of inquiry is fully implicated in the "object" of investigation along genealogical lines that introduce what he calls "a 'subjective element'"³⁶ in the theory.

Let me thus offer two contextual stories, or examples, taken from the alpha and omega of Girard's career, as a subjective intermezzo in our genealogical investigation of violence and the unconscious.

Two Mimetic Stories

Alpha Story: Johns Hopkins University, Baltimore, 1966 (dawn of Girard's theoretical career). A few years after the publication of his first book, *Deceit, Desire and the Novel* (1961), whose reliance on "structural models" to account for the "structural geometry"³⁷ of triangular desire was rather explicit, Girard played a key role in promoting a groundbreaking event that shook the foundations not only of his career but of the humanities in general, in the United States first, and, at one remove, in Europe and around the world as well. Working as a French expatriate in Baltimore, Maryland, Girard, along with Richard Macksey and Eugenio Donato, organized an academic conference, or symposium, whose explicit goal was to introduce an emerging theoretical method in the United States that was already informing the humanities and social sciences in Europe. This method was known as "structuralism."³⁸ Famously titled "The Languages of Criticism and the Sciences of Man," the symposium was held at Johns Hopkins University in 1966, where Girard was teaching at the time; it was hosted by "The Humanities Center," newly founded, and thus still unknown. Both Macksey and Donato were attentive to recent developments in France in philosophy and the social sciences more broadly. Their theoretical knowledge was supplemented by Girard's French connections in practice—which might have made a difference. The conference attracted major representatives of structuralism from the Parisian intellectual scene, including fields as diverse as semiology (Roland Barthes), classics (Jean-Pierre Vernant), philosophy (Jean Hyppolyte), literary theory (Tzvetan Todorov), and psychoanalysis (Jacques Lacan), among other distinguished representatives of related fields. Still, despite the presence of these luminary figures, the real star turned out to be different than expected. A young, relatively marginal,

and at the time still largely unknown philosopher of Algerian origins was belatedly added to the program. He ended up stealing the show. His name, you will have guessed, was Jacques Derrida.

Mainly due to the controversy Derrida's paper generated during the symposium, later redubbed "The Structuralist Controversy," the conference turned out to be an immense success. Depicted as the "French Invasion of America,"³⁹ Girard drew again on an Oedipal image of Freudian inspiration to convey his mimetic/agonistic stance toward it: if Freud in 1919 compared his psychoanalytical conquest of America to the plague, Girard equally depicted the 1966 conference as "the plague [*la peste*]," as he said: "When Freud came to the USA, he said, as he approached New York: 'I'm bringing the plague to them'; but he was wrong. Americans digested and Americanized psychoanalysis easily and quickly. But in 1966 we really brought the plague with Lacan and deconstructionism, at least to the universities!"⁴⁰ Belatedly we can see that the diagnostic might not be as clear-cut. In fact, the deconstructive "virus" had stopped reproducing within the U.S. academic host by the end of the twentieth century and was quickly assimilated into antithetical academic turns.

However, a glance at popular culture continues to reveal the centrality of Oedipal phantasies—from *Psycho* to *Back to the Future*, *Blue Velvet* to *Freud's Last Session*, among many other films—indicating that the psychoanalytical "plague" continues to be disseminated within U.S. culture, shaping, by extension, the world imagination at large—a point I shall return to. Either way, the symposium reached, indeed, the status of a mythic, perhaps founding "event," whose influence spread contagiously, from the Humanities Center to the Comparative Literature Departments of some of the most influential North American campuses (Yale, Stanford, Berkeley, to name a few); it infiltrated the humanities in the United States more generally; and eventually, with a spatial/temporal *différance*, it boomeranged back to Europe as well.

And yet the symposium did not promote structuralism, as initially planned. Quite the contrary; it cast such a shadow on the structuralist method that it never fully reached the North American shores. Derrida, in fact, launched a seminal critique of Lévi-Strauss's structural anthropology that set the stage for a new critical method of reading philosophical and literary texts against the grain (later called "deconstruction"), which went viral in the United States and across the world during the so-called linguistic turn.

Hence, this event propelled new generations of North American scholars not necessarily familiar with structuralism, let alone the long tradition in continental philosophy and the social sciences it draws from, into the age of what was grouped under the rubric of "poststructuralism." In the field of literary studies (Girard's home field), the conference inaugurated a period of intense involvement with literary theory, also known as "French theory" or, more simply, "theory." Despite its heterogeneous nature, theory in the decades following the symposium still tended to share structuralist concerns with the linguistic sign, while at the same time stressing the play of signifiers rather than signifieds (let alone referents), linguistic texts more than material contexts, writerly differences over mimetic sameness—all signatures of the so-called linguistic turn that during the 1970s and 1980s changed not only the field in theory but also academic markets in practice.⁴¹

Girard's position with respect to this turn was paradoxical. And this paradox arguably set in motion a romantic agonism that will orient his subsequent theoretical developments. As the senior scholar of the trio and a Frenchman at that, Girard not only contributed to the organization of the conference; he was, in many ways, at the center of this seismic event that shook the foundations of literary and cultural theory, establishing linguistic differences at the forefront of a primarily French theoretical scene. And yet Girard also soon realized that this scene was not *his* scene, after all. Thus, he remained somewhat at the margins of the symposium, his name ultimately not appearing on the cover of the conference's proceedings, titled *The Structuralist Controversy: The Languages of Criticism and the Sciences of Man* (1970). Girard was, in fact, out of sync with the main linguistic orientation of deconstruction and the "linguistic turn" more generally. In fact, he never fully let go of structuralism and of the synchronic claims about desire, violence, and sacrifice at play not only in linguistic texts and signs but also in psychic, social, and anthropological referents. Girard went as far as developing a diachronic theory of sameness rooted in a referential crisis that erases differences. He called it "crisis of difference" or "mimetic crisis," perhaps to indicate that mimesis can put not only individual differences but also theories of difference in crisis. In any case, his "economy of violence" (*VS* 7) will remain set in a silent, often neglected but nonetheless deeply engaged agonistic confrontation with a theory of linguistic difference he opposes via the paradoxical moves characteristic of romantic agonism.⁴² While not explicitly

manifest, this mimetic *différend* oriented Girard's subsequent career, which mostly unfolded in the shadow of poststructuralism, before receiving the due recognition of prestigious institutions, both in the United States (Stanford University) and France (the Académie Française).

This trajectory leads us to our second, more anecdotal, but intimately related, perhaps even mirroring, contextual story. This time it is not set at the alpha but at the omega of Girard's academic trajectory.

Omega Story: San Francisco, 2007 (coronation of Girard's U.S. career). Nearly half a century after the Structuralist Controversy, and many books later, I had the privilege of meeting Girard at a major international conference in San Francisco. The linguistic turn was already well in its twilight by then, and after a series of important books that had remained at the margins of theory, Girard was finally granted the "Award for Lifetime Scholarly Achievement," which gave him the academic recognition he deserved. Lost in the labyrinth of panels at what was one of my first international conferences, and one of Girard's last, I managed to miss the evening ceremony. Still, I spotted Girard's name in a panel devoted to his work the following day, which I made a point to highlight and attend. With the benefit of hindsight, it provided the most valuable insight of that conference.

Girard's talk led him to look back, genealogically, to one of his early literary sources of inspiration: namely, Stendhal's *The Red and the Black*, which had provided a key starting point for his theory of mimetic desire at the dawn of his career. After he finished his talk, I walked up to the front desk, mimicking the confident attitude of more senior scholars I had noted while lost in corridors. This time, I was driven by a goal, or *telos*: I wanted to ask Girard a question I did not get to ask during the Q&A and that had been on my mind for quite some time. After thanking him for both his talk and the pioneering work in mimetic theory and establishing a few genealogical connections via (French) theorists we both knew personally, I took advantage of a basic anthropological phenomenon familiar to all foreigners abroad: that a shared language and background quickens connections and justifies going quickly to the heart of the matter. And so I asked Girard, off the bat: "Vous avez parlé de Stendhal, mais si vous devriez recommencer maintenant . . . ?" Translated, it would go along these lines: "You spoke of Stendhal, but would you start mimetic theory all over again now, what would be your main focus of analysis?" This rather direct personal question caught his attention. So, I

pressed on: "*Je veux dire . . .* which contemporary medium, or milieu, do you think best reveals the logic of mimetic desire and rivalry these days?"

Let me back up. As for Girard, the starting point of my interest in mimesis had been psychological; I was interested in the power of literary, but also cinematic and philosophical texts to help us reflect critically on the present. Hence, I had opted for a PhD in comparative literature with a double focus on modernism and philosophy, read via the transdisciplinary lens of mimesis. Writers like Nietzsche, but also Joseph Conrad, D. H. Lawrence, and Georges Bataille, read in the context of anthropology, crowd psychology, and different schools of dynamic psychology were providing me with distinctly modernist mimetic insights that went beyond Romanticism. I was genuinely impressed by how accurate and far-reaching modernist antennae continued to be, revealing phantoms that cast a shadow on the present as well.

And yet, at the same time, my sense was that the genre of the novel, and traditional print literature more generally, no matter how illuminating, influential, and still widely taught—one of my paradigmatic case studies was Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*—had long ceased to serve as a commonly shared societal medium that could reveal new manifestations of mimesis in the twenty-first century. Working in a Comparative Literature Department, soon to be renamed Department of Comparative Literature, Cinema and Media (now, significantly, only Cinema and Media Studies), emerging new media—cinema and television, but also TV series, computer games, and the first manifestations of social media on the World Wide Web—were already providing alternative starting points for theoretical reflections on the vicissitudes of homo mimeticus in the twenty-first century.

So, the question had been in my mind for a while. Girard's facial expression confirmed that this intuition might not have been too off the mark. He said, "It's a good question." Then he paused for a moment, looked around suspiciously, lowered his tone of voice to indicate, this is *entre nous*, and then, with a sense of French complicity and an anti-institutional spirit we also shared, he whispered with a characteristic cunning smile—half jokingly, but also half seriously—"MLA!"

Academics in literary studies will know what Girard was referring to. Perhaps they will even laugh at the joke and recognize its underlying truth. For those living outside of academia, let me clarify. MLA is the acronym for the Modern Language Association, the most important association for

literary studies in the United States and, arguably, the whole world. Among other things, it organizes an annual conference that serves as an obligatory rite of passage for all international literary critics and theorists. It assembles thousands of academics over a period of three days, traditionally between Christmas and New Year, now rescheduled to early January. MLA had, indeed, organized the very conference in San Francisco that granted Girard the MLA Lifetime Award for Scholarly Achievements I referred to. Given this context, the ironies of his reply are, of course, multiple. For our purpose let us say they are at least double, since the distinguishing feature of the MLA is twofold.

First, this conference serves as the most important annual gathering in literary studies in which thousands of scholars, representative of different and often antagonistic approaches to literature, theory, and now new media, come together and are made to peacefully coexist, ignore, or, most often, challenge their respective positions during three intense and exhausting days that are considered sacred outside the sterile walls of the homogeneous Conventions Centers that host the conference, making every one MLA experience hardly distinguishable from another. If “regular” people are still enjoying the Christmas holiday, for the scholars working inside, the MLA has the characteristic of a ritual, with all the intellectual effervescence such modern rituals entail. Unsurprisingly, then, in an echo of the theoretical controversies I alluded to above, these confrontations never fail to generate intellectual rivalries triggered by a human, all too human, desire for visibility, connections, publications, all of which are driven by an all too mimetic desire for recognition and prestige that culminates in the kind of award Girard obtained. Given that all desires tend to reach for similar objects in a small, selective, and fiercely competitive context, MLA provides indeed the ideal milieu to study the emergence of mimetic desire, jealousy, and rivalry constitutive of the academic world. Girard’s was being ironic, but like all good ironists, he was making a serious point nonetheless.

The second irony is even more revealing. MLA, in fact, organizes at the same time as the conference, the main annual job market for literary scholars who desire to pursue a profession in a field driven by high competition for increasingly scarce, precarious, underpaid, but symbolically coveted jobs. In a strange redoubling, the job interviews take place in hotel rooms located right above the conference venue. An intimate space usually used for private

pleasure during a holiday (often a bed) is thus turned into a space for a public employment or, more often, unemployment. Finalists are thus made to compete twice: for presentations geared toward publication as well as for academic positions. Few desired jobs, hundreds of applicants. Again, one does not need to be a mimetic theorist to predict that rivalries will necessarily ensue.

Now since both the job market and the conference are part of the same event, MLA becomes a melting pot in which PhD students timidly presenting their papers (I belonged to that category), job candidates being interviewed, professors playing the role of employers, critics and theorists of all stripes and persuasion presenting their work, not to speak of exemplary theorists who are awarded prestigious prizes (Girard belonged to that category), find themselves caught in a vortex (*tourbillon*) that should generate critical discourses (logoi) that are different in theory yet often generate a pathos internal to scholarly pathologies that induces a crisis of difference in practice. Participants to this annual event qua rite of passage are driven by a desire for differentiation that leads them to nervously present ten- to twenty-minute papers, frantically attend talks, fake interest in others while highlighting individual originality, on one side; yet, on the other side, also find their individual difference in crisis as they are channeled through crowded corridors, squeezed in packed elevators, invited to sit on beds in hotel rooms, and encouraged to ritualistically clap hands in sync to celebrate papers that either support or challenge their position, not to speak of winners of prizes they were perhaps themselves striving to obtain. In such a milieu, given the structures that underlie it, desire is indeed already mimetic and always threatens to lead to rivalry, jealousy, envy, and resentment, among other romantic passions that, to this day, continue to plague the academia—a cradle for bad Eris. No wonder Girard had to whisper.

Let us now step back from the personal mimetic pathos of these scenes and ask, from a genealogical distance. What lessons can we draw from these two mirroring contextual stories taken from the alpha and omega of Girard's career to cast light on the joint problematic of violence and the unconscious that concerns us? The subjective nature of the sketches does not diminish their relevance to mimetic theory; just as mimetic theory is not irrelevant to account for these stories' structure or plot. The mirroring effects are again double. On the one hand, mimetic theory is particularly apt to account for an intellectual context that is characterized by the presence of eminent models

(academic stars) who, in an extremely competitive field (academia), trigger a desire for an eminently contested object (a job), and the honor or recognition it might lead to (an award), inevitably leading to rivalries for pure intellectual prestige that manifest themselves at symposia like the Structuralist Controversy or at conferences like MLA, precisely along the romantic (individualistic) and rivalrous lines Girard describes. In this sense, his theory sets up an unflattering but revealing mirror to the academic context in which this theory originated in the first place. In our language a mimetic patho-*logy* offers a diagnostic on the unconscious pathos internal to academic pathologies.

But the mirroring reflection cuts both ways and is not deprived of inversions of perspectives. In fact, we could also say that the academic context is not simply external to the theory; it also offers a possibility for a genealogical reflection on what Nietzsche would call the “conditions of emergence” of Girard’s mimetic theory. In this second sense, typically academic mimetic pathologies might reveal formative principles that contributed to the emergence of the patho-*logy* qua mimetic theory itself. This suspicion is internal to the genealogical method as Nietzsche understands it. In fact, what he famously says of philosophy in general is worth bearing in mind in a genealogy of theories of violence and the unconscious in particular. For Nietzsche, in fact, “every great philosophy so far” has been nothing less and nothing more than “a confession on the part of its author and a kind of involuntary and unconscious memoir [*unvermerkter mémoir*].”⁴³ There are no reasons to believe this unconscious principle should not apply to a self-reflective field like mimetic theory, especially since this field is avowedly autobiographical in origins and rooted in philosophies of the unconscious that rest precisely on the interpretation of confessional memoirs. As Benoît Chantre recognizes, “all his [Girard’s] work was founded on a certain idea of autobiography, of which Augustine’s *Confessions* as well as Dante’s *Divine Comedy* served for him as models.”⁴⁴ In addition to dead classical models, I suggest that living contemporary models might also have played a less visible but not less fundamental role in the development of mimetic theory. In fact, this idea of autobiography is also a confessional practice. There is thus a silent autobiographical thread running through the labyrinth of the “true” unconscious, which genealogical lenses allow us to evaluate. From this confessional perspective, in fact, general theories of the unconscious that aspire to be

universal, transhistorical, and fundamentally true might also mirror personal, restricted, and context-dependent unconscious principles that apply first and foremost to the author or, in the wake of the death of the author, to the social structures in which this author develops a theory. A universal theory of the unconscious, in other words, may attempt to reveal the cathartic properties of violent subjects under investigation (objective genitive) that go from sacrificial rituals to aesthetic representations in theory; and yet it may also cast an opaque, oblique, but nonetheless mirroring self-reflective light on the specific unconscious of the investigative subject (subjective genitive) that goes from mimetic desire to violent intellectual rivalry in specialized academic practices.

In light of the two stories taken from the alpha and omega of Girard's career, a genealogical suspicion leads to the following question: could it be that Girard's mimetic theory reflects so well the imitative desires, unconscious rivalries, and intellectual jealousies, resentments, and latent aggressions that plague the academia precisely because this theory was from the very beginning *in-formed* (given form) by those same academic desires, rivalries, and romantic agonistic confrontations with exemplary models? Perhaps those very models that were already at play at the alpha of Girard's career during the Structuralist Controversy conference might have led to a romantic desire for an agonistic differentiation—by developing a theory of sameness predicated on a crisis of difference, for instance. According to this second mirroring hypothesis, mimetic theory brilliantly accounts for academic desires, jealousies, and rivalries that can lead to romantic agonism within the academia but also to contagious violence outside of it. It also mirrors a rather specific, contextual, and thus restricted (rather than universal) dynamic that is typical of academic structures in particular out of which the theory was born. Girard's mimetic theory, in other words, not only sets up a mirror to the rivalrous logic of desire and violence; it also sets up a confessional mirror to its specific intellectual context whose competitive structure promotes mimetic desire in the first place, providing the affective, subjective, but also structural foundations for Girard's theory.⁴⁵

Let us be clear. Such an inversion of perspective is not simply critical or deconstructive; it has a constructive genealogical power as well. True, the specific focus of Girard's account of appropriative desires, ambivalent rivalries with doubles, potentially violent exclusions or marginalizations,

might have led to a romantic desire for originality that erases exemplary influences structuring his theory. The romantic agonism is thus at least partially explained by the context out of which the mimetic theory emerged rather than the other way round. Yet this genealogical observation does not necessarily invalidate the theory. Quite the contrary, due to its extreme competitive nature, academic contexts like the MLA—as Girard himself suggested—serve as microcosms that put up a magnifying mirror to the mimetic and unconscious logic present at the macrosocial level. It is particularly relevant for similar contemporary structural contexts within increasingly competitive and precarious neoliberal societies, which, as Girard recognized, can lead to an “escalation to extremes” in an increasingly precarious world driven by scarcity, overpopulation, territorial wars, and appropriative greed.⁴⁶ The seeds for violent escalations are indeed internal to a number of competitive environments: from the education system (intellectual rivalries) to the profession (career rivalries), from the economy (fragile markets) to mimetic politics (elections), from the threat of nuclear war (escalation) to mass migrations driven by rapid climate change and (new) fascist exclusions (scapegoating), from online vitriol (bullying, shaming) to the proliferation of representations of violence via (new) media that, at several removes from “reality,” deform information, spread conspiracy theories, and represent violent spectacles for an audience to watch and gamers to play.

And yet the point of this contextualization is also to avoid unilateral theoretical diagnostics. While certainly dominant and endemic to twentieth and twenty-first centuries’ neoliberal societies, these all too human appropriative desires are far from exhausting the heterogeneous spectrum of imitative behavior. The latter includes desire and violence, but equally informs positive forms of mimesis like learning, sympathy, cooperation, and social cohesion. If the focus of Girard’s theory has consistently been on the pathologies of mimetic violence, it might be at least in part because mimetic theory is the unconscious product of what Nietzsche would call the author’s “personal confessions.” That is, confessions that are personal but also reflect a wider academic context that privileges unconscious forms of violence that may not be physical and thus can be defined in terms of aggression, yet effectively generate mimetic desires, rivalries, and scapegoating mechanisms nonetheless. The powers of mimesis, as we shall continue to confirm, are plural: they tend to go beyond good and evil evaluations; they are not always framed within

triangular, Oedipal structures and their inversions thereof; they transgress ontological distinctions that simply oppose fiction and reality, but also images and bodies, self and others, conscious action and unconscious reaction; and they tend to proliferate in heterogeneous ways that do not easily allow for grand universal and transhistorical explanations, but call for more situated, contextual, genealogical diagnostics attentive to the historicity of theories of violence and the unconscious as well as to their attunement to the intrinsic characteristics of specific genres and (new) media. Now, we have seen that psychoanalysis provides a triangular structure that, despite the romantic agonism, or rather because of it, continues to give form to Girard's account of unconscious pathos split in two emotional ties (desire and identification). We have equally seen that an agonistic academic context provided the right combination of both affective and critical insights, pathos and logos, out of which the mimetic patho(-)logies on violence and the unconscious emerge. After this genealogical detour via the logical and affective sources of Girard's theory of desire and violence that emerged from two contextual stories in the background, we have the necessary distance to return to evaluate the mirroring relation between violence and the unconscious in the foreground.

Restaging the Unconscious

That mimetic desire can lead to rivalries, irrational jealousies, and violent affects is well known, and its main symptoms are visible for all who wish to see them well beyond the walls of academic conferences or psychoanalytical couches. From the family to the nursery, the schoolyard to the office, personal quarrels to academic quarrels, films to video games, reality shows to presidential debates to territorial invasions and beyond, the occasions to be unconsciously caught up in structures of rivalry and violence generated by the appropriative nature of desire in a materialist, consumer-oriented, and increasingly digitized culture driven by greed, radical individualism, and pathological narcissism are, indeed, manifold. Such tendencies are now exponentially amplified by new social media whose pathological effects are multiple and are directly linked to our Janus-faced topic. On the side of violence, the anonymous and impersonal distance of social media like Twitter and Facebook allows for a type of abuse, psychic violence (mobbing, bullying,

shaming), and dissemination of pathos that would have been unthinkable a few decades ago and is currently affecting new media users, especially (but not only) younger generations.⁴⁷ On the side of the unconscious, these new media rely on algorithms that increase human mimetic tendencies dramatically, for they exploit big data to tap into the sedimented history of users' desires that sidestep the romantic logic of the singular model, for users' data history becomes the model to induce new mimetic desires in subjects that are already posthuman.⁴⁸ Thus, algorithms reload the powers of mimesis by increasing exponentially not only the logic of appropriative desire but also the dissemination of models, values, ideologies, and beliefs (true and, more often, false), all of which induce quasi-hypnotic effects for they reinforce preexisting beliefs. Such a hypermimetic circulation of (mis)information taps into the very soul of homo mimeticus. In the process, it inflects the problematic of violence via unconscious mechanisms that require new investigations of the powers of mimesis. If we may not always be inclined to observe such imitative tendencies in ourselves, now that Girard diagnosed the unconscious logic of mimetic desire and these insights are put to use via new media, we can easily spot the violent rivalries they generate in others.

And yet the theoretical origins of this connection between mimesis and desire are less visible and require genealogical lenses that look deeper into the history of philosophy to be brought to the fore. Worthy of mention is Baruch Spinoza's diagnostic of "sad affects" in *Ethics* (1677). Spinoza is an untimely philosopher who is currently informing returns of attention to the contagious power of bodily affects constitutive of the affective turn, which are directly relevant for the re-turn of attention to mimesis as well. For instance, in Book 3 of *Ethics*, titled "On the Origin and Nature of the Emotions," Spinoza offers the following diagnostic that should not go unnoticed by theorists of imitation: "From the mere fact of our conceiving that another person takes delight in a thing we shall ourselves love that thing and desire to take delight therein"; and rooting this mimetic tendency in childhood, but with adults in mind, he adds: "they desire forthwith to imitate whatever they see others doing, and to possess themselves whatever they conceive as delighting others."⁴⁹ Left unidentified, it would be difficult, even for an experienced reader of mimetic theory, not to confuse Spinoza for Girard here. Such a confusion is accentuated by Girard's claim that the "great novelists" he discusses in *Deceit, Desire and the Novel* (1961) have originally

(romantically?) unveiled the appropriative nature of mimetic desire. Stable and unitary origins are indeed precisely what a genealogical method, whose ambition is to unearth the different discourses responsible for the emergence of mimetic theory, questions. Time and again, what are presented as original insights into the laws of imitation often turn out to be voluntary or, as it is probably the case here, involuntary—that is, not conscious, and in this sense *un*-conscious—reformulations of previous theories, mimetic theories that now deserve to be inscribed in our genealogy of precursors of homo mimeticus in order to continue building on them. Again, acknowledging a precursor does not mean that Girard's theory of mimetic desire is any less true. Quite the contrary; it simply confirms the Girardian insight that the lie (*mensonge*) of originality should not be the main concern of a theory devoted to the truth (*verité*) of mimesis.

What applies to desire equally applies to the unconscious that triggers desires and rivalries in the first place. The so-called true unconscious is based on a less visible, more ancient, yet, as we shall confirm, still modern and contemporary theoretical assumption on the therapeutic value of violence, including media violence. Girard, in fact, not only explains the origins of the problem of violence via the triangular structure of mimetic and unconscious desire; he also offers a possible theoretical solution to violence by emphasizing its cathartic and equally unconscious social function. We are thus getting closer to the palpitating heart of our double genealogy of violence and the unconscious. To echo the cinematic study with which we started, for Girard, the problem of contagious violence that since the origins of socialization plagued the city, finds a therapeutic solution in a type of sacrificial violence that keeps the city going.

How does this cure for violence by violence work, if it does work? Girard supplements a catharsis hypothesis that runs deep in western culture, for it goes from tragic plays in classical antiquity to popular films in contemporary media culture. His thesis on catharsis is thus of ancient inspiration. While it is rarely, if ever, discussed in any detail in the growing literature on Girard, it plays a key role in his mimetic theory. His catharsis hypothesis can be summarized as follows: rather than confining the problematic of violence to the interiority of an individual ego caught up in artificial and quite profane fictions, which, for instance, point to future-oriented vices characteristic of digital entertainment, Girard inverts perspectives. Thus, he roots violence

back in the exteriority of collective rituals that serve as a referential, anthropological, and quite sacred function in archaic societies, stretching to inform classical, modern, and contemporary civilizations. And he does so in order to provide nothing less than a hypothesis on the origins of culture tout court. Catharsis is thus the invisible hinge on which Girard's theory of violence turns.

Starting in *Violence and the Sacred* (1972), Girard goes beyond the analysis of the ego that had preoccupied him in his first book to develop an anthropological theory whereby the group violence generated by the unconscious dynamic of mimetic desire is both channeled and discharged against an innocent victim, or "scapegoat" (*pharmakos*). For Girard, the sacrificial killing of the scapegoat is predicated on a collective "misrecognition" (*méconnaissance*) of the injustice, fundamental arbitrariness, and self-reflective unconscious logic this kind of sacrificial violence entails. Purgation, in this sense, rests on an archaic *méconnaissance* of the innocence of the scapegoat that channels the collective violence. The sacrificial victim, in fact, tends to be arbitrarily chosen in the sense that it is often an innocent, marginal, and thus sacrificial figure, whose "bare life" is characteristic of what Giorgio Agamben calls *homo sacer*.⁵⁰ And yet this *méconnaissance* also has a therapeutic effect on the frenzied community caught up in the vortex of unconscious and reciprocal violence.

Why is the French genealogically de rigueur here? Because the concept is genealogically revealing. Girard, in fact, relies on the (Lacanian) concept of *méconnaissance* central to the pre-Oedipal child's identification with his *imago* in the "mirror stage." Psychanalytically oriented readers will recall that Lacan had already spoken of "the *méconnaissances* that constitute the ego, the illusion of autonomy to which it entrusts itself";⁵¹ and he had done so by calling attention to the "mediatization through the desire of the other," which is also "a cultural mediation as exemplified, in the case of sexual objects, by the Oedipus complex."⁵² To be sure, Girard transfers the dynamic of misrecognition from the psychology of the ego to group psychology, from an imaginary imago to a real scapegoat, yet the illusions, misrecognitions, and fundamental Oedipal structures are rather familiar. What is perhaps different in the effort to tilt the (Freudian/Lacanian) conception of a private unconscious toward the collective, sacrificial, and cathartic social sphere is that the latter also rests

on an intersubjective predilection for what Girard often calls "interindividuality" that is linked to "hypnosis" and "suggestion."⁵³ That is, a pre-Freudian tradition of the unconscious that Freud and Lacan disavowed yet finds a common genealogy in what I call the mimetic unconscious. In fact, mimesis—Girard and I at times provisionally agree—is an inter-individual suggestive or hypnotic process that transgresses the boundaries of the ego and finds in figures like Nietzsche major precursors. Such mirroring processes will have to wait for recent discoveries in the neurosciences in order to be confirmed.

And yet, while Girard, at times, prefers the language of *méconnaissance* over the one of the "unconscious" (see *EC* 86), the structural grammar of this language remains in our view too overdetermined by a psychoanalytical interpretation of an Oedipal, triangular, and presumably cathartic fable. Psychoanalysis, as we shall see in the next chapter, is in fact born out of a cathartic method. It is thus no genealogical accident that as violence is channeled in a single direction and discharged against the sacrificial victim, it generates what Girard repeatedly calls "catharsis." As Girard puts it: "In societies where sacrifice is still a living institution it displays [a] cathartic function" (*VS* 99). He adds: "if the sacrificial catharsis actually succeeds in preventing the unlimited propagation of violence, a sort of *infection* is in fact being checked" (30). And he further specifies: "there is every reason to believe that the minor catharsis of the sacrificial act is derived from that major catharsis circumscribed by collective murder" (102). Minor or major, catharsis, while rarely discussed in any detail in the major commentaries on Girard,⁵⁴ plays a central role in the very foundational anthropological dynamic on which his theory of violence and the sacred rest—beginning, middle, and end.

Let us take a closer look at the end, where the influences on Girard's catharsis hypothesis begin to surface, as a huge genealogical iceberg beneath the point of mimetic theory. Girard concludes *Violence and the Sacred* by summing up his view of catharsis in a passage that is worth quoting in full. In fact, it reveals multiple layers of theoretical mediation that have so far remain hidden due to the practice of romantic agonism we are now familiar with, and yet genealogical lenses can help us bring the iceberg of the catharsis hypothesis to the surface. Here is how Girard sums up his hypothesis:

The word *katharsis* refers primarily to the mysterious benefits that accrue to the community [*cit *] upon the death of a human *katharma* or *pharmakos*. The process [*op ration*] is generally seen as a religious purification and takes the form of cleansing [*drainage*] or draining away [* vacuation*] impurities. . . . In addition to its religious sense and its particular meaning in the context of shamanism, the word *katharsis* has a specific use in the medical language. A cathartic medicine is a powerful drug that induces the evacuation of humors or other substances judged to be noxious. The illness and its cure are often seen as one; or at least, the medicine is considered capable of aggravating the symptoms, bringing about a salutary crisis that will lead to recovery. In other words, the crisis is provoked by a supplementary dosage of the affliction [*suppl ment de mal*] resulting in the expulsion of the pathogenetic agents along with itself. The operation is the same as that of the human *katharma*, although in medicine the act of purgation [*principe de la purge*] is not mythic but real.

The mutations of meaning from the human meaning of *katharma* to the medical *katharsis* are paralleled by those of the human *pharmakos* to the medical *pharmakon*, which signifies at once “poison” and “remedy.” (VS 287–88)

The vortex of unconscious violence, for Girard, is thus not only pathological. If it is collectively channeled against a “scapegoat” (or *pharmakos*), it can also turn into a “remedy” (or *pharmakon*), a *pharmakos/pharmakon* that serves as a “supplement” (*suppl ment*) and purges, via a religious but above all medical interpretation of catharsis understood as a “draining” or “evacuation,” the community of a mimetic violence that would otherwise spread contagiously among the crowd. The thesis is daring but it is not fully original. As the references to the Greek (*katharsis*), the medical language (*drainage,  vacuation*), and the supplementary nature of the scapegoat as poison and cure (*pharmakon*), Girard’s catharsis hypothesis is deeply informed by multiple layers of genealogical mediation that go from antiquity to modernity, modernism to (post) structuralism, stretching to inform Girard’s exemplary contemporaries as well.

The key point, for the moment, is that ritualized violence, for Girard, not only keeps the city going; it gets the city started. Or, better, it keeps the city going because it reenacts a founding murder that got the city, communal living, and, by extension, civilization started in the first place. Traces of this

founding murder, according to Girard, are still visible in aesthetic spectacles, most notably in Greek tragedies, which, as we shall see, play a key role in the genesis of the catharsis hypothesis. For Girard, in fact, humans subsequently represent (present again) this founding murder in tragic spectacles that the moderns tend to consider aesthetic classics to be contemplated from a distance yet, for Girard, are still in touch with the ritual pathos of sacrificial violence and originally occupy a cathartic social function within the ancient city, or polis. This, for Girard, is how religion, law, and aesthetics are actually born: namely, out of a ritual repetition or reproduction of the original sacrificial crisis, or collective murder, which brings about cathartic effects with unifying social functions. Catharsis of contagious violence by mimetic violence: this is, in a nutshell, what Girard's diagnostic of the *pharmakos* qua *pharmakon* suggests.

Girard is talking about the cathartic effects of sacrificial rituals that reproduce the original founding murder he hypothetically posits as a real event at the origins of hominization, in *illo tempore*. Yet, since he sees a mirroring continuity between sacrificial acts in the real world and tragic spectacles in fictional representations—or, rather, infers, via a hermeneutical effort, the (physical) violence of the sacred from the (aesthetic) violence of tragedy—his catharsis hypothesis, in a classical hermeneutical circle, also informs his specific interpretation of the cathartic effects of Greek tragedies, and by extension of aesthetic representations of violence more generally. Influential classicists like Jean-Pierre Vernant who arguably inspired Girard's reading of Greek tragedies in the first place have called attention to this circle and the philological paradox it entails. As Vernant and Pierre Vidal-Naquet put it, addressing what they call Girard's theory of "redemption and salvation": "If tragedy was a direct expression of the 'sacrificial crisis,' how is it that it is historically confined not simply to the Greek city but specifically to fifth-century Athens?"⁵⁵ They explain this paradox via the following philological observation: "As René Girard has made quite plain, it is Greek tragedy that provided him with the model of what he calls the 'sacrificial crisis.' Yet in the fifth-century Greek city, tragic sacrifice was by no means a theoretically acceptable social practice. Such representations were, on the contrary, condemned."⁵⁶ If we extend this philological critique to the catharsis hypothesis, we wonder: what comes first? The cathartic reality of Greek tragedy that informs the hypothesis, or the catharsis hypothesis that informs

the medical interpretation of catharsis in Greek tragedies and, by extension, violence against a scapegoat tout court? Lest we trust authorial intentions the dynamic of romantic agonism taught us to be suspicious of, there is no easy way out from this hermeneutical circle—precisely because it is a circle.

What we can confidently say is that the genealogical detour via Girard's account of the cathartic effects of ritual violence brings us back to the question of the effects of aesthetic violence whereby we started. In the process, it allows us to see what has not been sufficiently stressed so far: namely that Girard is one of the most recent advocates of a medical interpretation of the catharsis hypothesis. This hypothesis has a long and complicated genealogy that entangles medical, ritual, religious, and psychological traditions we shall return to, which, as movies like *Vice* indicate, and continues to inform the contemporary imagination on the effects of (new) media violence, albeit at many removes from Greek tragedy. As Girard puts it, speaking of the “original” medium out of which the catharsis hypothesis is born: “If tragedy was to function as a sort of ritual, something similar to a sacrificial killing had to be concealed in the dramatic and literary use of *katharsis*” (*VS* 291). For Girard, then, catharsis operates on at least three different but related levels: First, it entails a discharge, “purification” or, as he prefers to say—reminding us that “*katharsis* has a specific use in medical language”—an “evacuation of humors [*évacuation d'humeurs*]” or “purgation” (287, 288). Second, this “purgation principle [*principe de la purge*]” (287; trans. modified) is also at play in sacrificial rituals that entail a purgation or purification of intoxicating, Dionysian affects bordering on madness. Third, this mysterious purification qua purgation continues to be “concealed”, at one remove, in Greek tragedies in need of original interpretations. For Girard, in fact, tragedy re-presents (presents again, for the second time) in tragic fictions scenes of sacrificial violence from an aesthetic distance for the audience to see, feel, and perhaps cathartically enjoy.

This is the moment to note that, among contemporary thinkers, Girard is not alone in grounding the origins of tragedy in sacrificial rituals. The French transdisciplinary theorist Georges Bataille, for instance, also recognized that Greek tragedy, and western aesthetics more generally, turns the sacred experience of sacrifice into a “spectacle” that allows spectators to stare at the horror of death via the safe screen of “representation”—a tragic

experience that generates a shared pathos at a distance that does not entail any risks for spectators, and that Bataille provocatively qualifies as "a comedy."⁵⁷ Before Bataille, Nietzsche had already given an account of the birth of tragedy out of an Apollonian representation of a type of ritual/ontological violence that originates in a horrifying experience of "dismemberment;" as we shall see in more detail in volume 2, it finds its ritual source in the body of Dionysus torn to pieces, or "*sparagmos*."⁵⁸ Either way, a modernist tradition in mimetic theory tends to agree that once represented on theatrical scenes via an aesthetic/Apollonian distance, such violent, contagious, and intoxicating sacrificial spectacles serve as classical precursors of modern, perhaps cathartic, and certainly entertaining fictions that, to these days, have not lost their visceral appeal as they are reloaded via new media and games. Far removed from the sacredness of ritual sacrificial practices, our mediatized culture, in fact, continues to re-present, at yet an additional remove, Dionysian spectacles that may not point to a referential violence, yet, once reloaded in the digital age, are likely to produce effects on audiences and users alike, be they therapeutic or pathological. But let us not get ahead of ourselves.

Instead, let us continue to look further back, to ancient thinkers who set the philosophical foundations for the catharsis hypothesis, which theorists of violence like Girard urge us to reconsider from a contemporary perspective. In fact, he reveals important and so far largely unexplored genealogical traces of the most influential proponent of a catharsis hypothesis that gives birth to poetics, traverses key modern representatives of western aesthetics, and, via contemporary media, continues to reach into the present. Toward the end of *Violence and the Sacred*, Girard completes his picture on the meanings of catharsis. Somewhat surprisingly, it is only at the end of this book that Girard acknowledges the precursor that had been informing his catharsis hypothesis from the beginning, as he writes:

If we wish to complete our picture of the various meanings of katharsis we must return, once more, to Greek tragedy. As yet I have made no specific reference to Aristotle's use of the term in his *Poetics*. It scarcely seems necessary to do so at this point, for I have already established that tragedy springs from mythic and ritual forms. As for the function of tragedy, Aristotle has already defined it for us. In describing the tragic effect in terms of katharsis

he asserts that tragedy can and should assume at least some of the functions assigned to ritual in a world where ritual has almost disappeared. (*VS* 290)

So far, Aristotle was not mentioned in Girard's account of catharsis. And at this stage, it seems no longer necessary to do so for it is already clear that tragedy was born out of mythic and ritual forms. Romantic agonism notwithstanding, violent sacrificial rituals may have almost disappeared from social life, yet an ancient poetics carries over their cathartic effects into fictional tragedies, and perhaps theories as well, from antiquity to the present. Aristotle's account of catharsis in *Poetics* is thus the missing piece necessary to "complete the picture [*tableau*]" on the relation between violence and the unconscious Girard begins to sketch in *Violence and the Sacred*. And yet this does not mean that the picture is transparently clear. If only because the Aristotelian notion of katharsis Girard considers "scarcely . . . necessary" to mention at the end of his study on violence, and deftly sidesteps by claiming that "Aristotle failed to penetrate the secret of sacrificial rites" (291), is one of the most controversial, notoriously undefined, and maddeningly elusive concepts in western aesthetics.⁵⁹

Genealogical lenses are now revealing how deep Girard's theory of catharsis and the "true" unconscious it presupposes actually goes. The death of ritual, in his view, brings about the birth of tragedy, in the sense that tragedy re-presents in artistic fictions what rituals previously enacted in real life. The manifestations of violence changed from reality to fiction, and the media that mediates them continue to change as well; still, the effect of violence remains fundamentally the same. We move from an anthropology of violence to an aesthetics of tragedy, from reality to fiction, from rituals to plays, or, as Nietzsche would put it, from Dionysian intoxications to Apollonian representations. In the process, violence finds itself far removed from its bloody ritual referents, indeed; it is rendered less tangible, paler, perhaps even ideal. And yet the cathartic effect remains, in principle if not in degree, fundamentally the same insofar as tragedy, for Girard, "springs" from ritual sacrifice. According to this hypothesis, there is thus a genealogical continuity between aesthetic violence and ritual violence that cuts both ways: on the one hand, anthropological studies on ritual violence, for Girard, offer a key to account for the effects of aesthetic violence; on the other hand, tragic

violence offers an insight into our violent ritual origins. Considered from this Janus-faced perspective, Greek tragedy does not simply represent violence from an aesthetic distance. Rather, tragedy, as an offshoot of sacrifice, retains the originary pathos of violent rituals necessary to bring about what Aristotle had enigmatically called *katharsis*.

Aristotle's *Poetics*, then, while mentioned only in passing at the end of *Violence and the Sacred*, has been informing Girard's catharsis hypothesis from the very beginning. The importance of Aristotle is rarely stressed in Girard studies, perhaps due to a romantic agonism that led the latter to downplay the importance of the father of catharsis theory. Still, Aristotle's exemplary status in western aesthetics in general and of his enigmatic theory of catharsis in particular cannot be underestimated. And this exemplarity is redoubled when it comes to the specific relation between mimesis and catharsis. The *Poetics* is, indeed, the key text or, rather, "manual," Girard follows to build a bridge between real violence in archaic religious rituals on one side, and aesthetic representations of violence in Greek tragedy on the other side. As he acknowledges: "Aristotle's text is something of a manual of sacrificial practices [*manuel des sacrifices*], for the qualities that make a 'good' tragic hero are precisely those required of the sacrificial victim" (*VS* 291). The characteristic of a manual is that it sets an example. It tends to be studied so thoroughly that one might forget to mention it; still, it provides the blueprint to paint and repaint exemplary heroes that, from the ancients to the moderns to the contemporaries, continue to generate conflicting emotions.

What, then, are the characteristics of this tragic hero? Aristotle and Girard tend to agree that "he"—for the patriarchal tradition attributes this role to a man—must be both similar and different from the community, both an insider and an outsider, noble and flawed, insightful and blind, conscious and unconscious, endowed with both good intentions and bad desires, perhaps even mimetic desires that eventually lead to a reversal of fortune, a tragic downfall, and ultimately a sacrificial expulsion of a *pharmakos* (scapegoat) with cathartic effects that work as a *pharmakon* (poison/remedy) for the plagued city. The detective we are impersonating might be scratching his or her head and wondering: who could the paradigmatic example of such a tragic hero possibly be?

The Oedipal Unconscious

Let's be honest. This is not a riddle worthy of the figure under consideration. Given his obvious distinguishing characteristic, you will have immediately guessed his identity; if only because it is impossible not to have encountered his name in the context of theories of the unconscious before. Uncovering *the* paradigmatic tragic figure whose influence goes from Aristotle's theory of catharsis to Girard's theory of the "true 'unconscious'" and beyond, the latter specifies:

As we have seen, the tragic figure of Oedipus becomes the original *katharma*. Once upon a time a temple and an altar on which the victim was sacrificed were substituted for the original act of collective violence; now there is an amphitheater and a stage [*un théâtre et une scène*] on which the fate of the *katharma*, played out [*mimé*] by an actor, *will purge* [*purgera*] *the spectators of their passions and provoke a new katharsis, both individual and collective*. This katharsis will restore the health and well-being of the community. (*VS* 290; my emphasis)

We have moved from an "original" act of violence among an archaic crowd to its "sacrificial" reenactment on an altar to a "tragic" representation in a Greek theater. We are thus at three removes from the origins of violence and the "true 'unconscious'" that generates it. And yet what Girard's mirroring reflections make us see via the medium of an actor, or *mimos*, which is also the medium of *mimēsis* (*mimeisthai*, to imitate, from *mimos*, "actor" but also "performance"),⁶⁰ is the following point: fictional tragedies modeled on sacrificial rituals, which are themselves modeled on an original and unverifiable murder, may not be deprived of cathartic effects in real life, after all. What emerges from this chain of *re*-presentations, then, is not only a theory of catharsis as a ritual purification generated by a collective participation in sacrificial violence; it is also, and not less fundamentally, a theory of catharsis as a medical purgation of passions generated by tragic representations of violence whose paradigmatic model is based on "the tragic figure of Oedipus." Inscribed in a long genealogical tradition of thinkers that goes from Aristotle to Freud, when it comes to the unconscious, Girard also privileges Oedipus as the paradigmatic hero of western

knowledge, in the end. It is thus no wonder that, as he sets out to solve the riddle of the "true 'unconscious'" on the basis of such a tragic figure, he inevitably found out that, despite its different dramatic manifestations, the singular truth about this unconscious has been founded, if not manifestly at least latently, on an Oedipal hypothesis.

The hypothesis that Oedipal tragedies are endowed with cathartic, unconscious effects is indeed familiar. It provides, among other things, yet another confirmation that the analogies between Girard and Freud are profound, structural, and predicated on a shared Aristotelian concern with Greek tragedy in general and Sophocles's *Oedipus Rex* (429 B.C.) in particular. During our genealogical investigation, the structural similarities have, in fact, been accumulating: Girard not only relies on *Oedipus Rex* as the paradigmatic play to frame the "true" unconscious mechanisms of triangular desire and the ambivalent/rivalrous relation to the model it entails—a psychological move reminiscent of Freud's second topography in *The Ego and the Id* (psychological hypothesis); nor does he solely develop the hypothesis of a founding sacrificial murder at the origins of culture, religion, and civilization—an anthropological move that reenacts Freud's highly speculative and much-disputed claim in *Totem and Taboo* (anthropological hypothesis); though he does both of these things.⁶¹ Above all, and for us more important, Girard borrows the concept of catharsis from Aristotle's *Poetics* not to propose an aesthetic theory of the purifying effects of tragedy itself but, more generally, to articulate a psycho-anthropological theory of the therapeutic, purgative relation between violence and the unconscious in real life—a diagnostic move reminiscent of what Freud, at the dawn of psychoanalysis, in a book coauthored with Joseph Breuer titled *Studies on Hysteria*, called the "cathartic method" (cathartic hypothesis).

There is an interesting theoretical loop at play in this triangulation between Girard, Freud, and Aristotle that is in the maelstrom of our genealogy of violence and the unconscious. To my knowledge, it has never been addressed before and its implications still need to be unraveled. Much is indeed at stake. In fact, the validity of the catharsis hypothesis and the theory of the unconscious that promotes it, reaching into present discussions on (new) media violence, ultimately rests on such genealogical foundations. It is thus crucial to see more clearly in this theoretical triangulation that turns around the riddle of catharsis.

At the most general level, this loop traces the following movement: if Aristotle's theory of catharsis has its origins in archaic rituals and culminates in tragic plays, Girard—in a romantic agonism with Freud—inverts the process, overturns the telos of the theory, and maps the aesthetic concept of catharsis from Greek plays back to real life. The mirroring inversion, in turn, generates striking symmetries between the cathartic effects of violence in Greek tragedy (Aristotle), in the Oedipal unconscious (Freud), and in sacrificial rituals (Girard), mirroring symmetries that, despite differential and innovative moves characteristic of agonistic confrontations, all rest on a tendentious and highly disputed *medical* account of catharsis as purgative therapy for violent, contagious, and pathological affects. That is, a cathartic theory that, to this day, continues to inform discussions on the possible therapeutic effects of media violence in the digital age. These, at least, are the general theoretical outlines, stakes, and implications that emerge from this tableau seen from a genealogical distance.

If we now zoom in on the picture to see more clearly in the hypothesis of catharsis, we notice that the numerous layers of mediation by disciplines as diverse as ancient philosophy, classical philology, aesthetics, psychoanalysis, and mimetic theory generate complex, spiraling loops. These loops call for further genealogical disentanglement if we want to see more clearly into the strengths and limitations of both the catharsis and the affective hypothesis. In fact, over two millennia after the terms of the debate were set, when it comes to the question of the good and bad effects of fictional representations of violence on real behavior, we might still be going around in circles: some say that artificial violence keeps the city going; others insist that it makes the city sick. The agon dramatized in *Vice* with which we started is but a contemporary symptom of one of the most hotly disputed theoretical quarrels in western aesthetics. Hence the need to trace further back the genealogy of the catharsis hypothesis that contemporary thinkers like Girard convoke in theory, before even attempting a diagnostic of the good or bad effects of representations of violence in contemporary practices.

Exits Oedipus. Enter the Philosophical Physicians: birth of psychoanalysis.

CHAPTER 1. THE “TRUE” UNCONSCIOUS: GIRARD TO FREUD

1. For a recent example of an influential theorist who both echoes and furthers Girard’s insights into sacrificial violence, see Terry Eagleton, *Radical Sacrifice* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2018).
2. René Girard and Michel Serres, *Le tragique et la pitié* (Paris: Le Pommier, 2007), 63 (my transl.).
3. Adnan K. Abdulla, *Catharsis in Literature* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985), 2. I shall not reiterate discussions of the meaning of catharsis in Hegel, Cassirer, Lukács, the new critics, formalists, and reader response critics already discussed in this informed book. Instead, I start where Abdulla’s account ended by taking my genealogy of mimesis beyond traditional literary criticism in view of reconstructing, in a more critical vein than Abdulla does, the theories of the unconscious now animating debates on media violence as well.
4. René Girard, *Evolution and Conversion: Dialogues on the Origins of Culture* (with Pierpaolo Antonello and João Cezar de Castro Rocha) (London: Continuum, 2007), 59. Hereafter *EC*.
5. On Girard’s dispensation with the notion of a “collective unconscious,” see also William A. Johnsen, *Violence and Modernism: Ibsen, Joyce, and Woolf* (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 2003), ix.
6. See, respectively, René Girard, *Deceit, Desire and the Novel*, trans. Yvonne Freccero (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1965); René Girard, *Violence and the Sacred* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1977); and René Girard, *The Scapegoat*, trans. Yvonne Freccero (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986).
7. For informed introductions to Girard’s mimetic theory, see Chris Fleming, *René Girard: Violence and Mimesis* (Cambridge: Polity, 2004); Wolfgang Palaver, *René Girard’s Mimetic Theory* (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2013).
8. René Girard, *Battling to the End: Conversations with Benoît Chantre* (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2010), 30. Hereafter *BE*.
9. For an early review that recognized that “the starting point for Girard’s argument is to be found in the Hegelian analysis of the development of self-consciousness,” see Carl A. Rubino, “Review: *La Violence et le sacré*,” *Modern Language Notes* 87, no. 7 (1972): 986–98, 987. For a rigorous philosophical account of Girard’s thought that is attentive to the latter’s “(paradoxical) refusal to deal directly with Hegel,” while being obviously influenced by Hegel, see Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, *Typography: Mimesis, Philosophy, Politics*, ed. Christopher Fynsk (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1998), 105, n101; see also 102–21.
10. Konrad Lorenz, *On Aggression*, trans. Marjorie Latzke (London: Routledge, 1966).
11. The added quotation marks around “true” indicate the author’s suspicion on a single “truth” concerning the slippery concept of the unconscious.

12. For a phenomenological critique of the Freudian unconscious' entanglement in a philosophy of representation and consciousness, see also Henry, *Généalogie*, 343–86.
13. On Girard's interest in hypnosis and the unconscious, see *Des choses*, 445–56; on Girard's "demythification" and inversion of Freud's take on narcissism and the unconscious dynamic it entails, see "Narcissism: The Freudian Myth Demythified by Proust," in *Psychoanalysis, Creativity, and Literature*, ed. Alan Roland (New York: Columbia University Press, 1978), 293–311. In these and other texts, Girard seems both attracted and repelled by the Freudian unconscious, both intent in uncovering a "true" unconscious and doubtful about retaining what he calls "perhaps too equivocal a term." Girard, *Des choses*, 499 (my trans.). I shall return to this mimetic or, as I shall call it, romantic agonism.
14. On jealousy, see Jean-Pierre Dupuy, *La jalousie: Une géométrie du désir* (Paris: Seuil, 2016).
15. I trace the development of Nietzsche's thought out of a mimetic agonism with main models Schopenhauer, Plato, and Wagner, in Lawtoo, *The Phantom of the Ego: Modernism and the Mimetic Unconscious* (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2013), ch. 1.
16. As Huizinga puts it, "The function of play . . . can largely be derived from the two basic aspects under which we meet it: as a contest *for* something or a representation *of* something. These two functions can unite in such a way that the game 'represents' a contest, or else becomes a contest for the best representation of something." Johan Huizinga, *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play-Element in Culture* (Kettering, OH: Angelico Press, 2016), 13. On the role of both agon and mimetism in games, see also Roger Caillois, *Man, Play, and Games*, trans. Meyer Barash (New York: The Free Press of Glencone, 1961), 14–23. Mimesis/mimetism and the agon are thus genealogically linked, but what I call mimetic agonism concerns the specific dynamic of contestation internal to intellectual contests, as it will become clear below.
17. Friedrich Nietzsche, "Richard Wagner in Bayreuth," in *The Untimely Meditations*, ed. Daniel Breazeale, trans. R. J. Hollingdale (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 195–294, 223. For an informed account of the Greek origins of the early Nietzsche's mimetic agonism with Wagner, see also Herman Siemens, "Agonal Configurations in the *Unzeitgemässe Betrachtungen*. Identity, Mimesis and the *Übertragung* of Culture in Nietzsche's Early Thought," *Nietzsche-Studien* 30 (2001): 80–106. For two illuminating studies completely devoted to the role the agon plays in Nietzsche's thought that regrettably appeared too late to be incorporated here, see James S. Pearson, *Nietzsche's Philosophy of Conflict and the Logic of Organizational Struggle* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022); and Herman Siemens, *Agonal Perspectives on Nietzsche's Philosophy of Critical Transvaluation* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2021). What Siemens calls "agonistic mimesis" is extremely close to what I call "mimetic agonism," the only difference being perhaps that the latter stresses the centrality of a mimetic/Dionysian pathos in tying the subject to the model as a necessary affective precondition for the productive logical, or patho-logical

contestation to subsequently take place. I am grateful to Herman for inviting me to discuss my version of the mimetic agon in his Nietzsche seminar at Leiden University (where Huizinga first gave his *homo ludens* lectures) and for his warm hospitality during my stay.

18. Harold Bloom sums up his romantic theory of anxiety of influence as follows: since “every poet is belated, . . . every poem is an instance of what Freud called *Nachträglichkeit*”; and specifying the dynamic of “creative misreading” or “misprision” that ensues, he continues: the poet “strives for a selection, through repression, out of the traces of the language of poetry.” Harold Bloom, “Poetry, Revisionism, Repression,” in *Critical Theory since 1965*, ed. Hazard Adams and Leroy Searle (Tallahassee: Florida State University Press, 1989), 330–43, 332. See also Harold Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997).
19. See Jacob Burckhardt, *The Greeks and Greek Civilization* (London: HarperCollins, 1998), 160–213. Hereafter *GGC*. As Oswyn Murray puts it, speaking of Burckhardt and Nietzsche’s “joint discovery” of the agon: “undoubtedly the most significant specific idea about the Greek world that Burckhardt and Nietzsche shared was the belief in the importance of the ‘agonal’ aspect of Greek and (in Nietzsche’s case) modern culture. . . . Nietzsche seems to have realized the importance of agon or contest, even before he arrived in Basel; but Burckhardt had already formulated it independently and was busy working out in detail the consequences of this discovery for the understanding of every aspect of Greek culture” (xxxii). From a different perspective, Johan Huizinga notes: “Jacob Burckhardt coined the word ‘agonal’ and described the purport of it as one of the main characteristics of Hellenic culture. Burckhardt, however, was not equipped to perceive the widespread sociological background of the phenomenon.” Huizinga, *Homo Ludens*, 71; see also 30–31.
20. For a thorough and wide-ranging discussion of the dynamic of *Wettkampf* in Nietzsche, see Siemens, *Agonal Perspectives*, 42–88.
21. Homer, *The Odyssey*, trans. E. V. Rieu (London: Penguin Books, 1991), 8.133–55, 110. Hereafter *O*.
22. For an informed and groundbreaking theory of art from the Greeks to the present that counters the myth of originality from the angle of art understood as a “craft” and “techne” that, like mimesis, originates in Plato and Aristotle, see Henry Staten, *Techne Theory: A New Language for Art* (London: Bloomsbury, 2019), esp. 47–83.
23. Pseudo-Longinus, “On the Sublime,” in *Critical Theory since Plato*, 3rd ed., ed. Hazard Adams and Leroy Searle (Boston: Thomson Wadsworth, 2005), 94–118, 103.
24. Pseudo-Loginus, “On the Sublime,” 103.
25. As Murray notes: “The exact relation between the views of Burckhardt and Nietzsche on the agon is obscure, and would repay further investigation.” Murray, “Introduction,” n55, 369. From the comparison that follows, it is apparent that Nietzsche was much influenced by Burckhardt’s account of the Greek agon, but he put it to creative use in his practice of the modernist, mimetic agon.

26. Friedrich Nietzsche, "Homer's Contest," trans. and ed. Christa Davis Acampora, *Nietzscheana* 5 (1996): 1–8. Hereafter HC.
27. See Girard, *Deceit, Desire and the Novel*. Given Nietzsche's emphasis on "resentment," "jealousy," and other rivalrous passions internal to the bad Eris, it would be interesting to know if Girard was familiar with this early Nietzschean text for two reasons: first, because it serves as precursor to the logic of mimetic rivalry; second, because it provides an alternative to it. Should Girard have been familiar with this text, this would mean he voluntarily turned away from theorizing good Eris.
28. Burckhardt, *Greeks*, 165.
29. I confronted Girard's thought in the spirit of this mimetic agonism qua duel in Nidesh Lawtoo, *Conrad's Shadow: Catastrophe, Mimesis, Theory* (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2016), ch. 1.
30. On how measure, for Nietzsche, is the product of the reciprocal dynamic of the agon, the most insightful account is again Siemens, *Agonal Perspectives*, 23–41.
31. Karl Jaspers, *General Psychopathology vol. I*, trans. J. Hoenig and Marian W. Hamilton (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997), 310.
32. I first noticed the continuities between Girard and Freud in Lawtoo, *Phantom of the Ego*, 233–47, 284–95. For a precursor that sets up a critical dialogue between Girard's mimetic theory and psychoanalysis, see Mikkel Borch-Jacobsen, *The Freudian Subject*, trans. Catherine Porter (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1988), esp. 26–52.
33. The original formulation reads: "You *ought to be* like this (like your father) . . . You *may not be* like this (like your father)—that is, you may not do all that he does; some things are his prerogative." Sigmund Freud, *The Ego and the Id*, trans. Joan Rivière, ed. James Strachey (London: W.W. Norton & Company, 1960), 30.
34. René Girard, "Tiresias and the Critic," in *The Structuralist Controversy: The Languages of Criticism and the Sciences of Man*, ed. Richard Macksey and Eugenio Donato (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1972), 15–21, 19.
35. Girard, "Tiresias and the Critic," 17.
36. Girard, "Tiresias and the Critic," 17.
37. Girard, *Deceit*, 2.
38. I am grateful to Richard (Dick) Macksey for inviting me, during my stay at the Humanities Center from 2013 to 2016, to his legendary library and sharing numerous stories about the 1966 symposium and the role Girard played in it. For a biographical account of Girard's role in the 1966 conference, see the chapter "French Invasion" in Cynthia L. Haven, *Evolution of Desire: A Life of René Girard* (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2018), 121–46.
39. Haven, *Evolution of Desire*, 121.
40. Girard qtd. in Haven, *Evolution of Desire*, 124.

41. This does not mean that violence was not a fundamental preoccupation during the linguistic turn. See, for instance, Jacques Derrida, “Violence et métaphysique,” in *L'écriture et la différence* (Paris: Seuil, 1967), 117–228.
42. On Girard and Derrida’s mimetic agonism via sameness and difference, see Lawtoo, *Homo Mimeticus: A New Theory of Imitation* (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2022), ch. 3; for a comparative study that considers Girard and Derrida “enemy brothers [frères ennemies],” see Andrew J. McKenna, *Violence and Difference: Girard, Derrida, and Deconstruction* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 1992).
43. Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, trans. R. J. Hollingdale (London: Penguin Books, 2003), 37.
44. Benoît Chantre, *Les derniers jours de René Girard* (Paris: Grasset, 2016), 50 (my trans.).
45. For an anecdotal, biographical, but theoretically revealing account of typically academic “friendly rivalry,” or mimetic agonism, concerning Girard and his former colleague at Johns Hopkins and major advocate of deconstruction, J. Hillis Miller, see Nidesh Lawtoo, “The Critic and the Mime: J. Hillis Miller in Dialogue with Nidesh Lawtoo,” *Minnesota Review* 95 (2020): 93–119, 103–4.
46. On the escalation of violence, see Girard, *Battling to the End*; on the politics of mimesis, see Lawtoo, *(New) Fascism*; on mimesis and economy, see Jean-Pierre Dupuy, *Economy and the Future: A Crisis of Faith*, trans. M. B. DeBevoise (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2014); for an insightful account of mimesis in financial markets explicitly in line with our theory of homo mimeticus, see Christian Borch, *Social Avalanche: Crowds, Cities and Financial Markets* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), 94–95.
47. See Sara Polak and Daniel Trotter, eds., *Violence and Trolling on Social Media* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2020).
48. See the special issue on “Posthuman Mimesis,” in *Journal of Posthumanism* 2, no. 2 (2022).
49. Benedict de Spinoza, *Ethics* (including *The Improvement of the Understanding*), trans. R. H. M. Elwes (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 1989), 152, 153. On the basis of this mimetic hypothesis, in Book 3, Spinoza sets out to explain envy, honor, shame, hatred, and other sad affects that diminish a body’s power of activity. On Girard and Spinoza, see also Jean-Michel Oughourlian, *The Mimetic Brain*, trans. Trevor Cribben Merrill (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2016), 17–19.
50. On the role of *homo sacer* in Roman law that is not without parallels to mimetic theorists like Girard and Bataille, see Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1998).
51. Jacques Lacan, “The Mirror Stage as Formative to the Function of the I as Revealed in Psychoanalytical Experience,” in *Écrits: A Selection*, trans. Alan Sheridan (Paris: Seuil, 1977), 1–7, 6.

52. Lacan, "Mirror Stage," 5, 6.
53. René Girard, *Des choses cachées depuis la fondation du monde: Recherches avec Jean-Michel Oughourlian et Guy Lefort* (Paris: Bernard Grasset, 1978), 422–28, 448–56.
54. For a mention to Girard's "praise [of] the imitative aspects of dramatic tragedy that he says lead to a purification of the passions of pity and fear, or the famous Aristotelian 'catharsis,'" see Palaver, *René Girard*, 45.
55. Jean-Pierre Vernant and Pierre Vidal-Naquet, *Myth and Tragedy in Ancient Greece*, trans. Janet Lloyd (New York: Zone Books, 1988), 16, 17.
56. Vernant and Vidal-Naquet immediately add: "If that is so [that representations of sacrifice were condemned], how can the tragedies be regarded as sacrificial crises, as they are by many of René Girard's disciples, or rather, how could they possibly *not* be, given that, thanks to a major distortion, the very idea of a sacrificial crisis is taken from Greek tragedy?" Vernant and Vidal-Naquet, *Myth and Tragedy*, 17.
57. See Georges Bataille, "Hegel, la mort, le sacrifice," in *Œuvres Complètes*, vol. 12 (Paris: Gallimard, 1988), 326–45, 336–37.
58. Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, in *The Birth of Tragedy and The Case of Wagner*, ed. and trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage Books, 1967), 73. Hereafter *BT*.
59. In his overview of the different interpretations of catharsis, Adnan Abdulla puts it thus: "It is not an exaggeration to say that in the history of aesthetics and criticism no other single concept has created such controversy." Abdulla, *Catharsis*, 13.
60. Gerald F. Else, "'Imitation' in the Fifth Century," *Classical Philology* 53, no. 2 (1958): 73–90, 76.
61. On Girard's engagement with Freud's Oedipal and anthropological thesis, see Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*, chs. 7 and 8.

CHAPTER 2. BIRTH OF PSYCHOANALYSIS: OUT OF THE CATHARTIC METHOD

1. See Robert J. James, *Dictionnaire universel de la médecine*, vol. 3, trans. Diderot Eidous et Toussaint (Paris: Rue St. Jacques, 1747), 151.
2. René Girard, "Perilous Balance: A Comic Hypothesis," *Modern Language Notes* 87, no. 7 (1972): 811–26, 813. This idea of purgation of humors, as Adnan Abdulla specifies, originates in "Greek medicine," with Hippocrates's theory of "four humors" and the evacuation assumed to keep them in harmonious balance. Adnan K. Abdulla, *Catharsis in Literature* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985), 14.
3. Pierre Corneille, "Discours de la tragédie," qtd. in *Dictionary of Untranslatables: A Philosophical Lexicon*, ed. Barbara Cassin, translation ed. Emily Apter, Jacques Lezra, and Michael Wood (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2014), 128; see also 127.