Deborah Rhode writes, ‘The academic world is built on reciprocity, and positive reviews can serve as favors for friends or for colleagues who may be in a position to do unto others what has been done unto them.’ Arguably, the reverse here is also true: negative reviews can serve as opportunities for those negatively reviewed to do unto their reviewer what has been done unto them. Interestingly, Rhode also comments that ‘many feminists, myself included, do not write negative reviews of feminist work in mainstream publications.’ Deborah L. Rhode, *In Pursuit of Knowledge: Scholars, Status, and Academic Culture* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press 2006), 124.

It is interesting to note here that even if the senior scholar is fair-minded, non-territorial, intellectually generous and flexible, appreciative of differing points of view, and so on, this will not alleviate the *perception* among some that the journal editor chose this person to deliver a particular position on the book under review. A record of research and scholarly achievement establishes a fixed point of departure for a senior scholar’s book review as well as an expectation to weigh other research and scholarship against this fixed point.

Minding the Gap: Editing across Languages and Disciplines

I am the third editor of *Contagion*, the journal of the Colloquium on Violence and Religion (COV&R), having followed Judith Hepler Arias of East Carolina University (1993–1995) and Andrew McKenna of Loyola University (1996–2006). *Contagion*, which is now published by Michigan State University Press, has recently been adopted by Project MUSE’s Premium Collection and will appear, beginning in 2009, in their Humanities Collection as well. The journal and its membership are international as well as interdisciplinary. Although we publish only in English, in the last two years I have read work in Italian, Danish, French, and German by theologians, anthropologists, classicists, scholars in philosophy, scholars in biblical and Hebraic studies, professors of modern languages, and one billionaire.1
I will quickly explain where *Contagion* and COV&R come from, the variety of work included in the journal, and the special handling it needs, ending in a peroration of Midwestern-style self-exculpation and -congratulation for all of us trained in modern languages attending MLA 2008 in Chicago. The journal’s mission statement is clear and focused: the journal, like COV&R (founded in 1990), is ‘dedicated to the exploration, criticism, and development of René Girard’s mimetic model of the relationship between violence and religion in the genesis and maintenance of culture.’

So we begin in the mimetic model from Girard’s first book, *Deceit, Desire and the Novel*, which plots a common discovery of the truth of desire (mediation) by novelists from a range of linguistic and national traditions. According to Girard, the modern romantic self believes in its own autonomy, especially in what it desires, but Cervantes, Stendhal, Proust, and Dostoyevsky present the novelistic truth that deconstructs modern myth: In this truth, desires are copied from others, and where subject and model cannot share the object commonly desired, they end in rivalry that escalates to violence. This rivalry becomes metaphysical as the rivals become more obsessed with their conflict, less with the desired object, and conflict looks increasingly fraternal because rivals tend to answer each other’s violent reprisals in kind until they become nearly indistinguishable from each other, at least to an outsider.

The fraternal quality of rivalry led Girard to study ancient myths in which enemy twins are a commonplace: Eteocles and Polyneices, Romulus and Remus, Cain and Abel. His next book, *Violence and the Sacred*, required Girard to work in anthropology, classical studies, ethnology and ethology, and the history of religion. Responding to the common observation that primitive cultures seem to practise sacrifice universally, Girard proposed that culture necessarily originates in a sacrificial religion that maintains its survival. ‘Scapegoating’ is at every beginning of every culture, because the human group without it disappears.

A short explanation of Girard’s hypothesis would go like this: The rivalry and competition that characterize (and bedevil) modern relations can bring self-destruction to those primitive human groups emerging beyond the population size where dominance patterns can keep the peace, because they have no transcendent (judicial)
system such as ours to prevent the contagion of rivalry and revenge from consuming everyone. When we caution ourselves against ‘taking the law into our own hands,’ we name the only ‘discipline’ primitive cultures know; without a transcendent judicial system, payback in the hands of the ‘victim’ is likely to roll out interminably until it engulfs the whole culture. But it is fair to say that modern culture(s) do not themselves recognize a global judicial system, so our turbulent international arrangements belong here as well – and they have recently received sombre treatment in Girard’s new book, *Achever Clausewitz*.

So how does the sacred arise? If primitive human groups themselves cannot at will stop violence from spreading everywhere, it must be under the same control as other processes of expansion and recession in nature (i.e., the gods’). Where does violence itself come from, and where and when does peace come?

Human violence is the greatest threat to human survival, and the closest human can be the most dangerous. Sacrifice mimics the crisis of spontaneous violent rivalry spreading to entangle every adjacent being. Why? In order to deliver the peace that contagious violence also brings at the end, sometimes, at great cost, in the drama of the many who are polarized in violence against the last opposing ‘enemy.’ The all-against-one order of these remaining ‘many’ puts them at peace with one another, violently opposed to their last common antagonist.

Thus the gods who are thought to be responsible for everything uncontrollable by human beings are responsible for violence as well. The central sacrificed figure is sacred, *sacer,* defiled because she or he is responsible for everything that goes wrong but holy because of the peace sacrifice brings. Humans repeat in ritual what pleased the gods last time (i.e., what they were doing just before peace arrived, all united against one) and install taboos as well to prevent rivalry among those who live closest to one another (i.e., who are the most dangerous to one another).

More recently, beginning with *Things Hidden since the Foundation of the World,* Girard has argued that Judaeo-Christian writing tells the truth of myth and sacrifice: that (unlike Oedipus) Joseph-in-Egypt is not guilty of rivalling his Egyptian ‘father,’ that the scapegoated are innocent and their accusers know not what they do. More, that these Judaeo-Christian writings have
played a fundamental role of enlightenment in revealing scapegoating mechanisms.

So COV&R and *Contagion* follow Girard out of literary study into theology and comparative religion studies but also into neuroscience. Recent developments in scientific research on the significance of mirror neurons for human learning have, of course, beckoned scholars in mimetic theory. In 2006 *Contagion* published a ground-breaking essay by Scott Garrels— a licensed clinical psychologist in private practice and an assistant research professor in the School of Psychology at Fuller Theological Seminary—that mapped out the coordinates linking mimetic theory to new discoveries about mirror neurons and innovative research in early child psychology by Andrew Meltzoff. Among the most important elements of this research, for us, is that the same mirror neurons are excited when even very young children watch an action, perform the same action, or think about this action. In addition, even very young children are capable of recognizing the goal of such actions. If they are offered a failed action to imitate, such as taking a top off the stick, they complete the action even though they have been shown only a failed attempt.

Garrels’s subsequent Templeton Foundation Grant, which follows out the premises of his article, has brought together several principal figures in mimetic theory: Paul Dumouchel, professor in the Graduate School of Core Ethics and Frontier Sciences at Ritsumeikan University in Kyoto, Japan; Jean-Pierre Dupuy, Professor of Social and Political Philosophy at the École Polytechnique, Paris, and Director of Research at the CNRS (Philosophy), as well as director of CREA (the Centre de Recherche en Épistémologie Appliquée); Girard himself, Andrew B. Hammond Professor of French Language and Literature, Stanford University, and member of the Académie française; Robert Hamerton-Kelly, senior research scholar at the Center for International Security and Arms Control at Stanford University (1986–1997) and co-founder of COV&R; and Jean-Michel Oughourlian, Professor of Clinical Psychopathology at the University of Paris and Chief of Psychiatry at the American Hospital in Paris. They have been joined by two major figures in neuroscience: Andrew N. Meltzoff, Job and Gertrud Tamaki Endowed Chair and Co-director of the University of Washington Institute for Learning and Brain Sciences, and
Vittorio Gallese, Associate Professor of Human Physiology at the University of Parma, Italy. Gallese was one of the researchers who, in the early 1990s, pioneered work on mirror neurons.7

One can hardly overestimate the importance of this research for the integration of the human and biological sciences. The promise here is not new metaphors to spice one’s writing about culture, faux amis to science. The high standards of Girard’s own work are implacable. Girard has insisted that theory is scientific or it is nothing. We are after the truth, or we are wasting our time. The two truth disciplines he claims now are science and religion, whose common goal is to comprehend: ‘dans leur essence, la religion et la science ont toutes deux pour but de comprendre.’

The truth? Science and religion? Minding the gap between disciplines, and between what my contributors know and what little I know, is all a bit of a stretch for a mere English professor. I have found myself recently reading (in Italian) an essay on neuroscience and the origins of dance by one of the discoverers of mirror neurons, and mediating an enflamed conflict between the sectarian interpretive traditions of a reviewer and an author on the subject of the early Church Fathers.

It is heartening to report that for every subject there are good books to read. For example, there are the lucid and accessible mass-market paperbacks on recent research in neurobiology by Antonio Damasio.8 And I remind myself that Girard began all this work by comparing his favourite novels to each other.

In fact, I would be wary of over-dramatizing the difficulty of editing across the gaps between disciplines. Editing Contagion seems to follow naturally from graduate school in comparative literature and English, research, and teaching: faculty in modern languages have always spent their lives catching up, working up other disciplines as they become necessary, and, of course, studying languages. Digitization has, of course, increased the pace of self-study and altered its circumstances. What excuse is left for not learning everything?

Submissions to Contagion are by preference electronic; sometimes just opening a second window to search is enough to enable me to keep reading, and to know at the end who should be asked to review the submission. And perhaps a professor of the ‘mother tongue’ can best offer collegial assurance to an author
whose first language is not English that a contribution is accessible and free of howlers.

I remember feeling unprepared to study Dante in graduate school at the University of Illinois because I knew nothing beforehand about the Guelfs and the Ghibelines. Now I think that’s okay, that’s how it goes, at least for those of us trained in modern languages. Our greatest Midwest poet (Robert Bly) says,

… you’ve climbed so many trees to reach the nests.
It’s all right to grow your wings on the way down.9

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1 Imitatio Inc. has been formed to support and promote the integration of the human sciences through mimetic theory. See their Web site at http://imitatio.com/. Contagion’s Web page at MSU Press can be found at http://msupress.msu.edu/journals/cont/.
7 For a description of this project, bios, and specimen articles, see Imitation, Mimetic Theory, and Religious and Cultural Evolution, http://mimetictheory.net/index.html.
