The Girard Effect

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When I finished graduate school in English in 1970, I had two schemes for writing about modern literature. The first was my dissertation, which was a structuralist analysis of modernism, based almost exclusively on my reading of Lévi-Strauss but alleviated providentially by encountering Edward Said, who was a visiting researcher in 1968 at the Center for Advanced Study at the University of Illinois. I depended heavily on Said's 1967 delimiting review of The Savage Mind, "The Totalitarianism of Mind." My idea was that there was a sequential, tripartite pattern traced out in the great modern writers. Joyce, Eliot, Lawrence, and Yeats first sought order as an alternative to the chaos of modern history, then rejected order for an ecstatic disorder, finally settling into some local order not to be totalized.

My second scheme was also structuralist, but in the offhand, homegrown, North American way in which Northrop Frye was a structuralist. Frye had inventoried and amalgamated the typically recurring stories of literature, which he called archetypes or myths. I was convinced that Frye's coordination of the myths of literature into one monomyth, and his concept of mode, which characterized the hero's power of action as declining from primitive to modern narratives, was defensible, even verifiable. Yet Frye's conception for modern literature seemed wrongly motivated. In the modern period, Frye's scheme surrendered mode to myth, history to fable. For Frye, myth expressed
the universally and timelessly desirable, and mode displaced that desire, in favor of an increasingly powerful reality principle as one moved from classical to modern literature. For Frye, the promise of modern literature was that its powerless ironic heroes, its bottom dogs, would cycle ineluctably back to the mythic mode, which would reenact the recurrent dream of literature and the human imagination itself: the natural world absorbed into the human world.

This led to my publishing two essays in *boundary 2: a postmodern journal*, in the 1970s. The first essay, “Toward a Redefinition of Modernism,” argued against the journal’s triumphalist celebration of postmodernism outmoding modernism. The second, “The Pharmacos of Myth: Is the Naked Lunch of Mode: Modern Literature as the Age of Frye and Borges,” was written directly against Harold Bloom’s earlier essay in *boundary 2*, which was a demoting of Frye as “already belated.” I still cringe at the title of that second essay in particular, and more generally at my “mission” of correcting *boundary 2*, which still actively booms postmodernism, although it regularly updates itself by denoting figures (even its first editor) deemed insufficiently postmodernist.

Already a reader will suspect that I am describing some likely candidate for a tent-covered faith-healing, as in Philip Larkin’s poem. The ideas above never won an audience, but they are clearly good preparation for René Girard’s work with the mimetic hypothesis, in particular, in their pertinence for modern literature, if you can survive the shock of the reordering. My first experience with Girard was like a 110-volt appliance being plugged into a 220-volt outlet, yet it got my work going in the right direction, and I never (well, almost never) cooked up any more ridiculous titles.

The “conversion” was in East Lansing, the place of my first job out of graduate school. (I am still at Michigan State University.) Two colleagues at MSU who knew Girard’s work had engineered a two-day visit to campus by Girard in 1973. Michael Koppisch was a student of Girard’s at Johns Hopkins (he indexed the English translation of *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel* while he was a graduate student). Clint Goodson had studied under Albert Cook at Buffalo when Girard was there. Girard gave two talks at MSU, and there was an evening reception between the talks at the home of Paula and Michael Koppisch. Someone in my department, whose dissertation had been vetoed by Girard at Hopkins in the ’50s, warned me that Girard was edgy and irascible. That meant that I was totally unprepared for Girard in person.

I remember the talks very well. But what I remember best was the evening reception. I cannot quite explain how it came to be that I was standing in a small circle around Girard. I certainly cannot explain how it was that, while we were talking, he held a large bowl of grapes, out of which he would
gently hand us small bunches, detonating a series of explosions in everyone’s thinking as he talked to us. I hadn’t even read *La violence* but, as we know now, Girard had the argument of his next ten years of books already worked out, so that he was prepared to race us through the advanced version of the mimetic mechanism. This inaugurated the most exhilarating experience of my intellectual life, not sealed off and sentimentally stored in memory, but lived through again whenever I hear him talk.

I spent the next year at the School of English at Leeds University, living in Headingley, a small village just outside the city, at the house of Alistair Stead, who exchanged his courses for mine at MSU. The curriculum at Leeds followed a very traditional syllabus. I relished a year of being English and traditional, and the mimetic hypothesis delivered immediately, by exorcising the guilt of Anglophilia. But I wanted to keep up with what I had just heard from Girard, so I sent away for *La violence* as well as Derrida’s *L’écriture et la différence*, and spent the year reading them carefully at the Stead family dining table. Necessarily, my ideas about these two books and their relative value and accessibility were mostly my own—no one else I met was reading what I was. Only at the end of my year did I meet a philosophy lecturer in London who had at least heard of “Derrida,” which he accentuated on the penultimate syllable, like “dorito.”

My belief in Frye’s verifiability and the need for remotivating modern literature within his structural analysis remained intact, but it was now super-powered by the mimetic hypothesis. The tripartite scheme for modern literature I had worked out for myself in graduate school (order growing out of disorder, a reversal of commitment to disorder, and a setting aside of both these totalizations for local organizations) would have to wait for its upgrading until the remarkable “Disorder/Order Conference” at Stanford in 1981, organized by Jean-Pierre Dupuy and Girard.

In 1975, I came back to East Lansing from England, reluctantly. Of course, I wasn’t going to wait until someone else invited Girard back, so in 1978 I invited him to lecture at our Modern Literature Conference (already at that time the longest-running conference in modern literature). Girard delivered “The Freudian Myth Demythified by Proust,” in which he shows that everyone’s favorite whipping boy for modernist escapism and effete self-referentiality is more realistic and hard-headed about desire than Freud, whose understanding of mature adjustment to reality is still locked in the fantasies of narcissistic fulfillment. The lecture was wildly successful. For me, the essay on Proust and Freud remains one of the most economic and shareable examples of the intellectual delight of reading Girard.
But countless examples of my intellectual delight in Girard’s polemics come to mind, such as his discussion of Freud in *La violence*, in which he exonerates the son from the desire for patricide, of which all the fathers since Laits, including Freud, have accused him. We have in the same book Girard’s masterful slipstreaming (in chapter 7) of Lévi-Strauss’s acknowledgment of the so-called biological facts of paternity and consanguinity within kinship structures, where Girard shows that these truths can hardly appear without the enabling circumstances of myth and prohibition to make them observable. The controversial insistence that myth can also discover truth is further elaborated in 1979 in “Rite, Traval, Science,” which contains Girard’s gentle teasing about Michel Serres’s formula that there is myth in science and science in myth, *récirocquement*. More recently, at the end of *Les origines de la culture* (2003), there is Girard’s more energetic reply to Régis Debray’s fierce and ill-considered attack.5

I recognize in my delight in Girard’s polemics that my inner life is incur rigidly masculinist. I am not ashamed to say that I loved the way Girard used Proust to “flip” Freud at our Modern Literature Conference. Perhaps it would suit me best if critical communities were organized in tribes, their champions to meet in wrestling contests as they do at the beginning of Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart*. I wonder.

Of course, his readers know that Girard’s polemical manner is good spirited. The comparison of Freud and Proust does not elevate *litteratité* over science but chides the partisans of both to connect their fields. Even Girard’s recent reply to Régis Debray’s attack is comradely, at least in comparison with Debray. And I have been especially heartened by the substantial history of friendly mutual interdevelopment over thirty years with Michel Serres, which I have written about in “*Freres amis, Not Enemies*: Serres between Frigogine and Girard.”

About the spiritual side of Girard’s writing, I cannot be so flippant. That side of my own life got left behind, in a way I hardly understand even now. I grew up in the church my father grew up in, and was confirmed by the pastor who had married my parents and most of my uncles. It was a Norwegian Lutheran Church on Chicago’s South Side, a very modest building of faux-brick asphalt shingle siding situated a block away from a larger, grander Swedish church dressed entirely in face brick. If the service was always in English, the congregation otherwise followed the old world model: it was not a fraternal organization, devoted to growth and prosperity. We had an annual church picnic, of course, but our pastor’s manner, while friendly, was sober, inheriting the demeanor, if not the authority, of the *sogneprest*. I remember him gamely serving communion to all of us (polio had crippled him); our service always closed with the same blessing (Numbers 6:24–26) and the same hymn: “God Be with You till We Meet Again.”

It was not villainy that changed all this, and as a young boy, I’m sure that I missed a good deal, involved as I was in my own complexities and unfathomable adolescent resentments. But an alert, get-ahead, modernizing clique established itself in the congregation, requiring a new building and a more entertaining service, which made Pastor Petersen unwelcome. I still regard energized congregations with wistiness and distaste.

I have learned a great deal from reading Norbrop Frye; I still read him. Even his most occasional writing is still heartening and enlightening to me. He never hid his religious commitment, his vocation. But he kept his writing on what he eventually called “the two scriptures,” secular and sacred, largely separate throughout his career. He barely had time to join them together in *The Great Code* (1982) and *Words with Power* (1990) before he could write no more. I am especially grateful to Girard for showing us his way through the disabling humanist taboo against taking religion seriously, against discussing the Bible as anything but “just” literature, at a vital moment in his own career.

Reading *Des choses cachées*, when it appeared in 1978, gave me a way back to what I had left behind, to bring forward what had remained trapped in adolescence. I remember very well what I felt reading the passages about the judgment of Solomon, the good mother, and the loving father: a release into spiritual joy, the excited and commanding call of the intellectual life to faith. For that gift, no words of gratitude are sufficient. But I am grateful as well to Girard for bearing up so well, so gracefully, under the constant charge that he was an agent for Christianity whose cover had been blown.

In my third and final essay for *boundary 2*, in 1981, “René Girard and the Boundaries of Modern Literature,” I reviewed *Des choses cachées* and proposed Stephen Crane as an example of a *boundary* writer whose work and importance were best understood by setting him in relation to the mimetic hypothesis and seeing Crane within Girard’s designation of the modern as the time of more or less constant sacrificial crisis, now manifested in the two scriptures, secular and biblical.

Placing Girard within the specialist fields I belonged to would keep me busy for the next fifteen years: the fields of theory, European comparative literature (where of course Girard was already well known), English and Irish modernism. Writing “Myth, Ritual and Literature after Girard” in 1989, for an anthology surveying recent critical theory, helped me realize how Girard
members, realizing that they provided an audience from a broad spectrum of disciplines as devoted to Girard’s work as I was.

All the authors in the present collection are trying to describe Girard’s effect on us. But he cannot help us, except indirectly, with a model for minding his own influence on us. To think about the effect of Girard, we must ourselves look for good models, among ourselves. For me, such a model has been the late, lamented Raymund Schwager. I first read Father Schwager in 1979, our essays back-to-back in MLN. Interviews with both Girard and Schwager have turned up some of their story, of how Schwager visited Girard during the 1970s, spurred by reading Girard’s work and by Schwager’s own work, Der Brauch einigen Sunderboch, which, like Des choses cachées, appeared in 1978.

Schwager had schemes far richer than mine already in hand, and in print. I could never have asked Girard such a question, directly or indirectly, but the early date (1988) of the Ehrendoktorat granted Girard by the University of Innsbruck and the public testimony by Martha and René Girard that Innsbruck has always felt like a second home to them are sufficient for me to know that Schwager allowed no time for envy. I am tempted to call Schwager an external model, existing on a different plane altogether, innocent of envy, except that this would deny him credit for his noble and invisible accomplishment of facing envy down, and it would neglect his insistence on the necessity of personal conversion in working effectively with the mimetic hypothesis, that is, by recognizing one’s own mimetic entanglements and scapegoats.

One of my favorite memories of Schwager is from the St. Denis conference in 1998. Paul Ricoeur spoke. He was, in his own mind, charitably making peace with Girard’s mimetic hypothesis, recanting previous error. We all had our chance to respond. But it was Schwager, a man of mild manner (and great personal charm), who nevertheless stood up in the audience, to say what we could see, that Ricoeur still had it wrong.

Girard has created for Schwager a singular place in his own writing as the only one to whom he has publicly conceded, on the difficult issue of whether the word sacrifice can be properly used to describe ritual killing as well as the Passion. This is Girard’s indirect assistance in identifying a good model for the Girard effect on our work, on our lives. We confirm our best model for enabling the Girard effect by reading out the terms of the Schwager effect upon Girard. Can we express its spirit more forcefully and soberly than by quoting what we heard Girard say in Innsbruck in 2003 about the subject of research in mimetic theory? “Nothing but the truth. Period. Nothing else matters.”
René Girard: The Architect of My Spiritual Home

Jozef Niewiadomski

Born in the early 1950s in Poland, I grew up in a farmer’s family in a small rural village. Just like all the other villagers, I was socialized in the Catholic parish. I experienced the safety and security of the religious environment entirely from the perspective of unbroken childlike trust. As a fourteen-year-old, I went to the big city and moved into a Communist boarding school. It was not difficult to connect the problems of puberty and the feeling of homelessness with Communist ideology. The ideal concept of home life as defined by the Church was not damaged in the slightest, thanks to the “evil Communists.” Was this my motivation for entering a seminary? Not exclusively, I suppose. The years in the seminary reinforced my Catholic identity. The front lines were well defined. The basic decision regarding which community to join and which worldview to adopt was clearly understood by the individual. The open cultural war between Communists and Catholics was responsible in part for the clear definition of home life according to Catholicism. One simply had legitimate enemies.

When I came to the West in the early 1970s to pursue my studies in Austria, I saw the homogeneous Catholic identity that had provided so much security come apart bit by bit. The outside enemies were no longer there. Painful as this process was, I needed to experience it. I came to know an open, liberal, Catholic position and discovered nuances of religiosity that actually